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## Sport psychology services to high performance athletes during COVID-19

These are trying times for us all. COVID-19 has altered our lives as citizens. The changes associated with the current pandemic have presented sport and exercise psychologists with many challenges and opportunities related to sport performance, physical activity and health. Here, we focus on what was, and is presently, being encountered by mental performance consultants in relation to the aspiring Olympic athletes they are supporting.

Within recent weeks, mental performance consultants working with Olympic aspirants have evidenced a growing number of suggestions how aspiring athletes might proceed in their sports and in their broader lives, based on their national conditions and regional responses to the pandemic. Each national funding agency, Olympic committee, federal government, and sport organisation, is rolling out strategies of how mental performance consultants can work effectively with clients in what for many, but not all, is a socially distanced world.

Discussions have varied from the challenges that athletes are encountering to issues associated with social isolation, career disruption, qualification process uncertainty, and unconventional and limited access to effective training environments and training partners. Underpinning these considerations is the health and wellbeing of athletes in their pursuits toward excellence.

Historically, editorials within the International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology were paired with special issues, such as the one focused on international approaches to Olympic athlete performance, published in 2016. Within the current editorial, however, there is a deviation in approach, caused by a global circumstance – sport is not being experienced as usual; the challenges posed for those engaging in sport, region by region, are uncharted.

The focus we have set, in what should have been the 2020 Olympic year, is placed on the shared challenges and the emergence of solutions that mental performance consultants are presently undertaking in their work with athletes. The co-authors of this editorial are from Asia, Europe, and North America. We have published on the topic of Olympic performance and we are currently immersed in work with Olympic athletes in our respective countries. What follows is a synthesised commentary.

The reader might posit that embedded in each author's work, approaches are idiosyncratic and driven partly by culture and context, which is a correct assumption. For example, some of us are working from a distance, where others are consulting face-to-face. However, what we share in common is astounding, despite our respective locations and circumstances. We present this editorial, structured into three temporal stages: (a) before the 2020 Olympics were postponed, (b) once the Olympics were postponed, and (c) the path being re-set toward Tokyo, 2021.

### Before Olympic postponement

Life tends to be normal before crisis transitions are experienced, within and outside of high-performance sport. Within high-performance sport, there were initial murmurings of a potential

virus in several countries, as the contributing authors helped prepare and accompany aspirants to qualification events. Progressively, there were increasing numbers of people identified with COVID-19; these heightening numbers were found across continents to the point where athletes experienced cancellations of Olympic qualification events. Initial postponements, became indefinite postponements.

Athletes were puzzled, and near the centre of these discussions, their mental performance consultants were seeking to support agile mindsets in their clients. Calendars were changing and for some countries, centralised programmes began to experience positive cases of athletes with COVID-19. Within some countries, programmes were temporarily closed. Within other cases, the athletes were experiencing a much tighter world, comprised of their centralised lives, though diminishing direct contact with the world outside their national sport centres. What the athletes from these particular nations shared was a reality of being stifled and apart from their local communities, including their cities, with limited physical access to family members and friends. What became apparent for such athletes through social media was that while they were distancing, competitors from some foreign countries were still able to train in more normal formats, serving to advantage some and disadvantage others.

National sport organisations and Olympic committees then began to express concerns regarding the scheduling of the Olympics. Within a fluid global environment, practitioners were in contact with athletes, many of whom made plans, not only for the Olympics, but also for after the Olympics. Some planned a continuation into the next Olympic cycle, especially those in the earlier stages of their national team careers, where others planned to begin families, return to universities or colleges, or enter into a professional career. Life plans were in flux, and these extended beyond sport to a broader holistic existence. The stress responses in the moment included decreased sleep, decreased appetite, increased rumination, loneliness, and fear that present uncertainty could parlay into the loss of their Olympic moment, altogether.

Underpinning our collective approaches were strategies that fostered openness in terms of the concerns the athletes were thinking and feeling. Some of this work varied from in-person to socially distanced consulting, though our approaches often converged. Openness was in part a matter of encouraging athletes to express their challenges, fears, frustrations, and uncertainties, first to vent these, and then, to begin to prepare for problem solving as more information emerged. Openness also meant encouraging a clear flow of communication among the athletes and those who worked with them in their sport organisations. Our belief was that moments of challenge served to fortify relationships and unify each team's membership. Openness was especially cathartic when discussions were constructive. This openness was encouraged beyond work with the mental performance consultants, onward to support seeking from close friends and family members. Openness meant much more than sport focused discussions, onward to those about the basic human conditions, such as healthy living, eating, sleeping, and thinking in one's general life.

## **Formal Olympic postponement**

Within only a few weeks, Olympic committees were withdrawing from the Games. The domino effect of these decisions on the part of nations then transitioned to the International Olympic Committee and the host nation's decision to cancel the existing date for the 2020 Olympics.

The athletes' emotional responses varied from relief to questioning of whether a re-scheduled event would take place. Aspiring Olympic athletes are known for their fortitude and resilience. Their visions are set well in advance, whilst technical, tactical, physiological, and psychological gaps are filled. The athletes then seek to be in their prime to compete on the

world stage during their Olympic moment. However, suddenly, years of hard work, diligence, and commitment were placed in question – one immediate unknown was whether there would be a tangible Olympic Games or equivalent at the culmination of the Olympic quadrennia? Further questions followed. What about athletes who were already or nearly qualified for 2020 – would their qualifications remain valid into the future should a new date be calendared? What should they do in the meantime, while the event was being re-scheduled? How could they fill their days, typically consumed by training that was built around a time-based goal of either qualification or Olympic engagement?

Not all responses were negative. Some athletes recognised gaps in their development toward their Olympic birth or their potential Olympic performance. When athletes train at high intensity, there is a particular time in a quadrennia, during the final year of the cycle and associated qualification, where they and those who support them, commit to capitalising on existing strengths and minimising existing limitations. Gaps always exist in every athlete's preparation, and many of the athletes began to reflect upon their current status and pondered about their existing gaps. Several of us posed the question to these athletes "that if time were allowed to slow down during the Olympic year, what would they focus on and seek to enhance?". These gaps were technical, tactical, analytical, psychological, or physiological. Several of the athletes also had lingering injuries that compromised their ability to perform at their best. Such has always been the nature of pushing one's physical limits.

When the athletes began to compile a list of "gaps" in their current developmental status, openings were created to explore opportunities not previously available to the athletes. These opportunities necessitated creativity, as typical training access for some athletes was not immediately available. For the athletes who remained centralised, more time became available to delve into gaps and begin to explore these with their coaches, with support from mental performance consultants. The shift for these athletes was from a feeling of being halted in their progress, to a yet undefined period of time where constructive problem solving could ensue. The athletes and those who worked with them could channel energy and strengthen existing weaknesses, that could in turn, reinforce existing strengths when competition activities resumed. Hence, if there were ever moments for interventions such as mindfulness, goal-setting, and re-framing, regardless whether these were from video and tele-consulting or in-person, that moment had arrived.

The scenarios focused on "gap searches" above exemplified effective responses to a trying moment in time; one not all athletes would have capitalised on. Without constructive guidance and support, athletes finding themselves unforeseeably inactive, or without direction, tend to suffer from substantive psychological stress and potential mental ill health. What is known about athletes during crisis transitions from both mental health and career transition scholarship, and in relation to the latter, particularly the injury and retirement scholarship, suggests that lacking a career direction after years of immersing oneself in an intrinsic high-performance goal, places athletes in peril. Some of these athletes have also been challenged by burnout syndrome. Personal feelings of alienation and poor coping responses, in this case, compounded by social isolation, have resulted for some in compromised mental health. Never has there been a more important moment for mental performance consultants to be accessible to their clients, and to validate the multitude of mixed thoughts and emotions experienced by Olympic aspirants. Access needed to transcend availability; to the type of encouragement that could best serve each high-performance athlete.

## Paths ahead to Tokyo 2021

As schedules begin to shift and readjust toward the recently scheduled Olympics, now in 2021, there remains much uncertainty in terms of what Olympic pathways will look like by sport. Will events become viable in the latter months of 2020, or will formal competitions and qualifications resume, early in 2021? Without a crystal ball, it has become nearly impossible to predict intermediate steps of a now visible culmination to the current Olympic quadrennia.

There has never been a time when athletes and those who worked with them needed to be more flexible and creative. The current pandemic offers opportunities that athletes and their providers must find – they are right under our noses. Lessons gained through autonomy, ingenuity, resilience, life balance, mindfulness, and many more possible skillsets, can, and will, forge modified, strengthened athletes and enhanced service provisions. Moments of quietness present openings to reflect, re-evaluate, revise, and reform plans. These plans will undoubtedly be roads less travelled, but highly valued. The pervasiveness of these life lessons can serve athletes extremely well, as lives are never linear; paths often are meandering, and even circuitous. Retrospectively, we can all agree that even when one believes one is standing still due to uncertainties, one never is. The human condition is such that people learn from their circumstances, and they do adapt. The days ahead will provide fascinating data, dialogues, and interventions, built as a result of what could easily be dismissed as an isolated and unfortunate moment in human, and also, Olympic history. However, one cannot underestimate the strength of the human spirit. As for Olympians, they are, and will continue to be forged in (and through) adversities.

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