

1

## Abstract

2 This study explored high-performance athletes' and coaches' experiences of unexpected  
3 transitions caused by COVID-19 pandemic and the postponement of the Olympics with  
4 the aim of identifying their available resources to cope with such unexpected transitions.

5 A total of 23 high-performance athletes ( $n = 18$ ) and coaches ( $n = 5$ ) who were preparing  
6 for the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games participated in the study between June and October  
7 2020. Semi-structured interviews were conducted via both video (e.g., Microsoft Teams  
8 meeting) and phone calls. Thematic analysis of interview transcripts revealed that,  
9 participants experienced a range of negative emotions, however, they adapted to the  
10 changes and challenges experienced after accepting the uncertainty of the circumstances.

11 The participants' main challenges were the changes and limitations to training. To cope  
12 with the challenges that the unexpected transition led to, the athletes and coaches  
13 employed a range of coping skills and strategies including commitment to training, setting  
14 a short-term goal to focus on training, positive distraction, and seeking social support.  
15 Further, the importance of social and organisational support was highlighted as external  
16 resources. The findings extend our understanding of non-normative transitions to include  
17 explanation of the mechanisms of coping using Lazarus and Folkman's (1984)  
18 transactional theory of stressors and coping. Practical implications on what types of  
19 support (e.g., informational, emotional, and psychological support) that key stakeholders  
20 may need to consider when establishing support schemes/systems are also discussed.

21 *Keywords:* career transitions; coping strategies; non-normative transitions;  
22 organisational support; social support

23



49           Considering the on-going situation and implications of COVID-19, future sporting  
50 mega events may also be postponed or cancelled. Therefore, athletes and other stakeholders  
51 may need to cope with greater uncertainty surrounding major events in the future. Since athletic  
52 success is positively associated with athletes' own ability and resources available to manage  
53 transitional challenges (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007), it is crucial to better understand the  
54 experiences of athletes and coaches as they seek to cope with the challenges associated with  
55 COVID-19 and the postponed Olympics (Tomas et al., 2020). Developing our understanding  
56 in this particular case may provide useful insight to assist athletes and coaches faced with other  
57 within-career non-normative transitions. Moreover, career transition models (Schlossberg,  
58 1981; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994) suggest that transition demands and resources should be matched  
59 to successfully overcome barriers and challenges (Stambulova et al., 2009). Therefore,  
60 examination of transition demands and resources employed to cope with challenges presented  
61 by COVID-19 and the postponement of the Olympics Games will provide key stakeholders  
62 with valuable insight into how to positively influence athletes' career transitions.

63           With regards to the demands on both athletes and coaches resulting from the impact of  
64 COVID-19 and the postponed Tokyo 2020 in general, Taku and Arai (2020) suggested that  
65 some athletes might need to retire and lose an opportunity to compete in 2021 as their  
66 preparation and plans were disrupted, while others may consider this as a chance to better  
67 prepare and improve their performance. Taku and Arai (2020) were also concerned that all  
68 changes including cancellation of qualifiers and disrupted training routines would create "a  
69 sense of uncertainty, confusion, and frustration, and make it difficult to set a series of concrete  
70 goals" (p. 626). In terms of the impact on coaches, coaches might be under pressure to respond  
71 to the changes quickly and explore the most effective ways to support their athletes while  
72 managing changes and challenges they have never experienced before. In addition, Taku and  
73 Arai (2020) proposed that coaches might also struggle to invest sufficient time with their

74 athletes as they need to look after themselves and families as well. Santi et al. (2021)  
75 investigated the levels of perceived stress and the emotion regulation strategies with 2,272  
76 Italian coaches during COVID-19 lockdown and found that the coaches experienced higher  
77 levels of perceived stress and applied more emotion regulation strategies than those in the  
78 normative data. Stambulova, Schinke, et al. (2020) suggested that for athletes in high-  
79 performance sport, COVID-19 could cause changes or challenges at different levels in athletes'  
80 career development (Wylleman, 2019; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). Affecting athletic  
81 development, the first level of the model, COVID-19 could lead to changes in access to training  
82 facilities or cancelled competitions. Effects on athletic identity, social isolation and concern for  
83 family and friends might occur at the psychological (second level) and psychosocial (third  
84 level). In a financial sense (fourth level), athletes might see changes in funding, whereas at a  
85 legal level (fifth level), there may be travel restrictions (Stambulova, Schinke, et al., 2020). As  
86 such, COVID-19 has created new stressors for high performance athletes, which implies that  
87 mental health management may be required during the period of COVID-19 (Reardon et al.,  
88 2020).

89 Taku and Arai (2020) and Stambulova, Schinke et al. (2020) provided overviews of the  
90 challenges and barriers athletes and coaches may have faced as a consequence of COVID-19.  
91 However, to better understand the phenomenon and provide insight for key stakeholders and  
92 practitioners about how to prepare for other unexpected transitions, empirical evidence is  
93 needed that examines athletes' and coaches' actual experiences and how they coped with the  
94 challenges and barriers. In this regard, Bowes et al., (2020) investigated the impact of COVID-  
95 19 lockdown on female elite athletes via an online survey. They found that the athletes indicated  
96 some issues related to limited training, less access to facilities/equipment compared to men's  
97 sport, and financial insecurity. They also recognised that positive support was offered from their  
98 coaching network. Whilst Bowes, et al. (2020) provided some evidence on female athletes'

99 experiences, further research is needed to identify how athletes coped with changes and what  
100 resources were available for them to cope. In this regard, Pété et al. (2022) identified athletes'  
101 coping profiles (i.e., self-reliant, engaged, avoidant, active and social) in response to COVID-  
102 19 with a sample of 526 French athletes via an online survey. They found that coping profiles  
103 were different depending on the factors of anxiety, stress appraisals, social support and  
104 interpersonal coping. In particular, it was found that the avoidant strategy was recognised as  
105 the least effective for coping. Nevertheless, exploring more in-depth accounts of athletes'  
106 experiences will enable us to better understand their coping strategies during COVID-19.  
107 Furthermore, adopting a holistic perspective where the different levels of influences and effects  
108 within the transition are examined provides valuable insight for stakeholders (e.g., parents, peer,  
109 coach, sport governing body) who seek to have a positive impact on athletes' career  
110 development and transitions.

111 In relation to resources to navigate the demands of transitions, researchers have found  
112 that athletes may require internal resources as well as external resources such as support from  
113 sport governing bodies to navigate transition demands (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007; Hong  
114 et al, 2020; Stambulova et al., 2009). However, research to date has tended to focus on  
115 transitions in general rather than non-normative transitions specifically. For example, Park et  
116 al. (2013) examined coping strategies that athletes employed during the career transition  
117 process out of sport – a normative transition. They found that athletes used a range of coping  
118 strategies such as finding new careers/interests, keeping busy, seeking psychosocial support,  
119 avoidance/denial, acceptance, venting emotions as well as maladaptive coping strategies such  
120 as alcohol dependence, increased smoking, committing suicide, or drug use. The extent to  
121 which these and other strategies are employed during within career non-normative transitions  
122 such as in response to the demands associated with COVID-19 and the Olympics postponement  
123 is not known. With regard to external resources to support transitions, social support from

124 significant others (e.g., parents, coaches, friends, teammates) has been recognised as the most  
125 critical resource for athletes (Stambulova et al., 2009). Brown et al., (2018) also found that  
126 athletes' ability to seek social support can be varied and those who have difficulty asking for  
127 social support can face a more challenging transitional experience. However, athletes also  
128 require organisational support from sport organisations and governing bodies especially when  
129 they compete at the highest level (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007; Hong et al, 2020). Fletcher  
130 and Wagstaff (2009) pointed out that sport governing bodies have a duty of care to ensure  
131 mental wellbeing of their employees and members including athletes. They also claimed that  
132 the organisational environment has the potential to influence the wellbeing and performance of  
133 each individual. In addition, to better prepare for and perform at major competitions such as the  
134 Olympics can depend on how athletes effectively develop and maintain their relationships with  
135 different key stakeholders and support networks (e.g., coaches, support staff, sport  
136 organisations; Poucher et al., 2018; Wagstaff, 2019). In the case of coaches, Norris et al. (2020)  
137 found in their interviews with 13 British coaches that coaches' social networks include support  
138 from friends, family, colleagues, and other sources (e.g., media). Among support from those  
139 significant social networks, it was identified that support from friends were the most significant.  
140 They also demonstrated that the coaches required different type of support such as emotional,  
141 informational, appraisal, or instrumental support. Furthermore, few studies have examined  
142 coaches' perspectives on and experiences of transitions or examined the resources they feel they  
143 offer or are available, focusing instead on athletes' perspectives and experiences of resources  
144 'received'. Therefore, examining both athletes' and coaches' perspectives provides an  
145 opportunity to understand more about coaches' role in non-normative transitions from resource  
146 'provider' and 'receiver' viewpoints. In this regard, the present study focused on investigating  
147 both transition demands and resources employed by athletes and coaches as they sought to cope

148 with circumstances associated with COVID-19 and the postponement of the Tokyo 2020  
149 Olympics.

150 To ensure we went beyond description of demands and resources and to further our  
151 understanding of the coping processes associated with non-normative transitions, Lazarus and  
152 Folkman's (1984) transactional theory of stress presented a useful framework. Lazarus and  
153 Folkman proposed that, "psychological stress is a particular relationship between the person  
154 and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources  
155 and endangering his or her well-being" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 19). The theory includes  
156 two key phases: cognitive appraisal and coping. Cognitive appraisal is an assessment of a  
157 stressor that individuals face in relation to their well-being (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). It  
158 includes two different stages: primary and secondary appraisals. Primary appraisal assesses  
159 whether the stressor and resultant crisis/conflict places the individual in trouble or can be  
160 beneficial in the future (Berjot & Gillet, 2011). Researchers (e.g., Lazarus, 1999) have  
161 identified three different primary appraisal components that may affect the appraisals and  
162 emotions recognised including goal relevance, goal congruence, and type of ego involvement.  
163 Moreover, there are three different types of primary appraisals identified including irrelevant,  
164 benign-positive, and stressful (Didymus & Jones, 2022). In sport context, researchers have  
165 studied primary appraising among athletes in terms of different associations between primary  
166 appraising and psychological factors such as the relationship between stressors and appraisals.  
167 If athletes find situations relevant to their wellbeing during the primary appraisal process, they  
168 will engage in secondary appraisal (Didymus & Jones, 2022), which evaluates one's coping  
169 resources available to address the crisis/conflict such as social support, self-esteem, and finance  
170 (Berjot & Gillet, 2011). Researchers in sport psychology have investigated the different aspects  
171 of athletes' secondary appraisals such as the positive aspects of being able to be in control of  
172 individuals' emotions (Kaiseler et al., 2009) and the association between threat appraisals and

173 less perceived control than challenge appraisals (Nicholls et al., 2012). Furthermore,  
174 researchers have identified situation (i.e., formal properties of situations) and personal factors  
175 (i.e., an individual's characteristics that may define what is critical for his/her wellbeing) that  
176 influence appraising (for further review see Didymus & Jones, 2022). Coping is defined as the  
177 cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage internal and external demands and occurs in  
178 response to stressors which have been appraised as taxing or exceeding an individual's  
179 resources (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). However, coping and appraisal continuously influence  
180 each other (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) proposed two different  
181 approaches to coping. Emotion-focussed coping aims to regulate distresses caused by the  
182 stressful situation while problem-focussed coping seeks to directly manage the problem by  
183 making some changes related to the problem (Berjot & Gillet, 2011). In the sporting context,  
184 as researchers have developed inventories to measure coping strategies, they have classified  
185 multiple coping strategies among athletes: task-oriented, distraction-oriented, and  
186 disengagement-oriented coping; problem-focused, emotion-focused, and avoidance coping (for  
187 further review, see Tamminen, 2022). Qualitative research findings on coping in sport suggest  
188 that athletes apply multiple coping strategies to cope with stressors (Tamminen & Holt, 2010).  
189 Researchers have also found that athletes' coping skills and strategies have a significant impact  
190 on their psychological well-being (Ntoumanis & Biddle, 2000) and the use of coping skills and  
191 strategies in competitive settings can positively influence athletes' performance and physical  
192 well-being (Cumming et al., 2012). Whether this extends to how athletes and coaches approach  
193 coping with non-normative transitions such as the postponement of a sporting mega event  
194 warrants further investigation and could prove useful in explaining how resources athletes and  
195 coaches employ assist them to cope with the demands they experience.

196           Therefore, the purpose of the study was to investigate high-performance athletes' and  
197 coaches' experiences of unexpected transitions caused by COVID-19 and the postponement of

198 the Olympics. Specifically, the research questions were: 1) What transitional demands (e.g.,  
199 physically, psychologically, emotionally, financially, etc.) did athletes and coaches experience?  
200 2) What external (e.g., social/organisational support) and internal resources (e.g., coping  
201 skills/strategies) were available and how were they utilised to cope with the demands?

## 202 **Methods**

203 The present study applied an interpretive methodology, where we sought to understand  
204 athletes' and coaches' experiences of an unexpected transition and develop our understanding  
205 of how they coped with such transition. Research with an interpretative approach intends to  
206 deepen our understanding of a phenomenon, which can then inform other similar situations that  
207 may happen in the future (Elbardan & Kholeif, 2017). Our research project was designed and  
208 conducted in line with the interpretivist paradigm where the researchers seek to uncover how  
209 individuals make sense of their experience related to events (Mallett & Tinning, 2014). For our  
210 interpretive inquiry, we adopted a relativist ontology and a subjectivist epistemology, which  
211 advocates the perspectives that our social world is constructed within each individual's  
212 "subjectivities, interests, emotions, and values" (Sparkes, 1992, p. 5). The interpretivist  
213 paradigm and associated philosophical approaches were deemed appropriate to explore and  
214 better understand how high-performance athletes and coaches have made sense of their  
215 experience of the unexpected transitions caused by COVID-19. Accordingly, we applied one  
216 of the meaning-oriented methodologies, semi-structured interviews, to understand our  
217 participants' subjective experiences, which allows researchers to collect in-depth narratives of  
218 personal experience (McArdle et al., 2012). In addition, to allow us to connect participants'  
219 experiences with existing research and theory on coping we used Lazarus and Folkman's (1984)  
220 transactional theory of stress and its key concepts: types of appraisal and forms of coping as  
221 sensitising concepts during our analysis and interpretation of the data (Patton, 1990). As a result,  
222 the analysis took an abductive approach where "researchers strive to be open and sensitive to

223 the data while also allowing for the use of pre-existing theories” (Kennedy & Thornberg, 2018,  
224 p. 5).

## 225 **Participants**

226 Participants were 23 high-performance athletes ( $n = 18$ ; 9 males, 9 females) and coaches  
227 ( $n = 5$ ; all male) who were preparing for the Tokyo 2020 Olympics. The criteria for selection  
228 were individuals who had qualified for Tokyo 2020 or were due to complete qualifying events  
229 postponed due to COVID-19. The athletes were aged between 21 and 36 years ( $M = 27.50$ ,  $SD$   
230  $= 4.89$ ) with competitive athletic careers between 6 and 24 years ( $M = 14.39$ ,  $SD = 5.46$ ). Tokyo  
231 was to be the first Olympics for eight participants, six competed at Rio, three at London and  
232 Rio, and one at London. Four athletes had medalled at previous Olympics (2 Gold, 1 Silver, 2  
233 Bronze). Sports ( $n = 11$ ) represented were athletics, boxing, cycling, fencing, gymnastics, judo,  
234 rowing, sailing, swimming, taekwondo, and wrestling. Three nationalities were included:  
235 Portugal ( $n = 5$ ), South Korea ( $n = 9$ ), and the UK ( $n = 4$ ). All coaches in this study coached a  
236 national team athlete at the time of the data collection. They were aged between 35 and 40 years  
237 ( $M = 36.80$ ,  $SD = 1.94$ ) with length of time coaching between 3 and 6 years ( $M = 5.20$ ,  $SD =$   
238  $1.17$ ). Sports ( $n = 4$ ) that they coached were Cycling, Gymnastics, Judo, and Wrestling. Three  
239 nationalities were included: Portugal ( $n = 1$ ), South Korea ( $n = 3$ ), and the UK ( $n = 1$ ).

## 240 **Procedure**

241 Once ethical approval was granted from the University of Stirling, the participants were  
242 contacted and invited to participate in the study between June and October 2020. Purposive  
243 sampling was applied first by utilising the first author’s network (Etikan et al., 2016) and both  
244 snowball (Noy, 2008) and convenience sampling (Etikan et al., 2016) were applied  
245 subsequently. We initially planned to recruit similar numbers of athletes and coaches across the  
246 nationalities within our network (e.g., five athletes per country and three coaches per country),

247 which we considered was a manageable sample size given the timeline and resources of the  
248 present study. However, we recruited more athletes from Portugal and South Korea with  
249 support from participants but recruited less coaches from Portugal and the UK due to the limited  
250 contacts compared to ones for athletes. Each participant who confirmed participation was  
251 informed about the purpose of the study, possible interview questions and signed a consent  
252 form before they were interviewed. South Korean athletes and coaches were interviewed in  
253 their own languages by the first author who is originally from South Korea. Portuguese athletes  
254 and coaches were interviewed in English. In the stage of recruiting Portuguese participants,  
255 only high-performance athletes and coaches who are fluent in English were contacted in order  
256 to minimise any possible language barriers.

### 257 **Data Collection**

258         Semi-structured interviews were employed which enabled researchers to collect detailed  
259 narratives of research participants and their in-depth account of personal experience (McArdle  
260 et al., 2012). To maintain consistency across the interviews, we developed an interview guide.  
261 It was based on the research questions, literature review, theory (e.g., Lazarus and Folkman,  
262 1984; Taku & Arai, 2020; Stambulova, Schinke, et al., 2020) and media articles related to  
263 COVID-19 and the postponed Olympic Games (e.g., Rich et al., 2020). The interview questions  
264 included: (a) sport background (e.g., what is your sport? When did you start your elite sport  
265 career? Which Olympics have you competed in/at?); (b) initial responses to COVID-19 and  
266 postponements of the Tokyo 2020 (e.g., how did you feel when you learned about what was  
267 happening to the world due to COVID-19? What were your responses when the postponement  
268 of the Olympics was announced?); (c) barriers and challenges they have faced (e.g., what were  
269 the key demands/challenges/barriers resulting from the restrictions due to COVID-19 and the  
270 postponement of the Olympics?); (d) coping skills/strategies to overcome barriers and  
271 challenges (e.g., how did you overcome these challenges and barriers? What was your key

272 coping skill/strategy?); and (e) external resources to cope (e.g., what support is available? What  
273 support have you received?). All interviews were conducted via either video ( $n = 11$ ) or phone  
274 calls ( $n = 12$ ). The interviews lasted between 26 and 91 minutes and the total time of the  
275 interviews was 994 minutes ( $M = 43.21$ ,  $SD = 13.97$ ).

## 276 **Data Analysis**

277 An abductive approach to data analysis was used, which involved a succession of  
278 inductive and deductive processes. This allowed the researchers to interpret the data as a  
279 creative process while also using theory and related concepts as sensitising concepts when  
280 examining research participants' lived experiences (Kennedy & Thornberg, 2018; Patton, 1990;  
281 Ryba et al., 2012). Thematic analysis (TA) was applied to analyse the data, because this allows  
282 researchers to identify meaningful patterns throughout the qualitative data set such as  
283 interviews (Braun et al., 2016). Accordingly, we followed the six-step approach of TA proposed  
284 by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, all interviews were audio/video recorded depending on the  
285 video call platforms and were transcribed by the authors to allow them to read and re-read the  
286 transcripts and listen to the recordings to become familiar with the data. The transcripts in  
287 Korean were translated to English by the first author who is bilingual, and back-translation was  
288 applied in order to meet semantic equivalence (Chen & Boore, 2010). There was no major  
289 difference between the first and the final English transcripts that demonstrated that the integrity  
290 of the narratives was maintained during the translation process. Next, we noted initial ideas  
291 focusing on the challenges and barriers participants faced, internal and external resources  
292 available and utilised, and coping processes employed in responses to COVID-19 and  
293 postponement of the Olympics. We sought to stay open to the experiences described by  
294 participants (inductive analysis) as well as identify data that corresponded with the sensitising  
295 concepts from Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional theory of stress (deductive analysis).  
296 Initial codes were developed based on the initial ideas noted in the data and were categorised

297 into themes. During this process, we discussed the initial codes, identified common themes that  
298 were beginning to form, and developed the themes further. Subsequently, we reviewed the  
299 themes and discussed them until consensus was reached on the main and sub-themes (e.g.,  
300 names and definitions of the themes/sub-themes). Finally, each theme was clearly named and  
301 defined. Subsequently, the identified themes were examined using concepts central to Lazarus  
302 and Folkman's (1984) transactional theory of stress, which is presented in Discussion.

### 303 **Methodological Rigor and Trustworthiness**

304 Whilst qualitative studies have their own research techniques to conduct and evaluate  
305 each data analysis process, it is critical that qualitative researchers confirm rigor and  
306 trustworthiness of their qualitative research. We reviewed each phase and the findings for each  
307 theme via a series of meetings to ensure the credibility of the data analysis. To further ensure  
308 the rigor of the research, we documented the analytical procedures that were used forming an  
309 'audit trail' held in a SharePoint site. In this regard, we conducted the primary analysis as well  
310 as acted as critical friends for each other (Marshall & Rossman, 2006) by reviewing each other's  
311 documentations and meeting to discuss them to ensure the quality of analytic process. The audit  
312 trail allowed us to increase the transparency and coherence of the analysis process while  
313 illustrating the methods applied and each decision that we made throughout the research project  
314 (Brown et al., 2018). Subsequently we agreed and finalised the themes and the organisation of  
315 the themes using Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional theory of stress. This team  
316 consensus on the finalised themes was also deemed as a mean of ensuring trustworthiness.

### 317 **Transparency and Openness**

318 In compliance with the conditions of the ethical approval by the authors' institutional ethics  
319 panel, the data are not publicly available. It contains information that could compromise the  
320 privacy of research participants. The participants are high-profile athletes in their countries.

321 Therefore, the authors have an obligation to ensure their anonymity. The information presented  
322 in this article complies with APA Style Journal Article Reporting Standards. This study was  
323 not preregistered.

## 324 **Results**

325 Five themes were identified from the data: (1) A matter of uncertainty; (2) Changes and  
326 limitations to training; (3) Coping with changes and uncertainty; (4) Role of social support in  
327 coping; and (5) Role of organisational support in coping (for further details, see the  
328 supplemental material).

### 329 **A Matter of Uncertainty**

330 The participants' initial responses to COVID-19 and the postponement of Tokyo 2020  
331 were both negative and positive. This does not mean that some only responded positively and  
332 others only reacted negatively. Their responses were mixed and overlapped. The positive  
333 responses were mostly associated with 'another opportunity'. Those who had been injured or  
334 had not yet qualified for the Games perceived that they had more time to better prepare for the  
335 upcoming qualification events and Tokyo 2020: "I found it a good opportunity as I have more  
336 time to recover from my injury so I believe I can perform better next year" (Athlete 4). Coaches  
337 also recognised this opportunity for their athletes. In contrast, the negative responses included  
338 being frustrated, confused, anxious, and lacking motivation: "I didn't want to believe it. It  
339 became worse as I started feeling so concerned and scared by the pandemic itself as many  
340 people have died and been seriously ill" (Athlete 9). Most participants considered the decision  
341 to postpone Tokyo 2020 as the 'right thing to do'. Some, however, were very concerned about  
342 Tokyo 2020 being cancelled, while others were anxious about health and safety. These reactions  
343 were predominantly associated with 'uncertainty'.

344 Much of the uncertainty and negative reactions were attributed to decisions being out  
345 of participants' control such as upcoming qualifying events, the Olympics themselves and  
346 circumstances caused by COVID-19. Athlete 4, who won a gold medal at London 2012 and  
347 considered Tokyo 2020 as his last Olympics, commented, "I am trying to accept the situation  
348 and stay positive [...] but the uncertainty around the Olympics and COVID-19 made me  
349 anxious". Athlete 6 noted, "Uncertainty is a huge issue for me ... I really want to compete at  
350 the Olympics. It is my dream". Those athletes who had not completed their qualifying events  
351 were also concerned. In addition, the uncertainty over upcoming qualifying events and the  
352 Olympics affected athletes' motivation. All athletes mentioned that motivation was an issue, at  
353 least initially. For instance, Athlete 5 whose sport has weight categories commented, "training  
354 and competitions [qualifiers] have been cancelled ... that affected my motivation a lot. It is  
355 worse for us as we need to control weight to compete".

356 Responses from coaches also highlighted the unsettling nature of this uncertainty. In the  
357 cases of the coaches in South Korea, there was uncertainty about their fixed term employment  
358 contracts. Their contracts were due to end after Tokyo 2020 and they were unsure if the  
359 contracts would be extended, or they would need to re-apply. At the time of the interviews,  
360 nothing had been decided. One coach saw the uncertainty as a problem to solve and somewhat  
361 relished the opportunity: "People that are involved in high performance sport essentially like  
362 solutioning problems, so the fact that there was a kind of unique problem, it was almost quite  
363 exciting There was a novelty factor... that people were quite engaged with" (Coach 5).

364 Within a relatively short period time, the negative responses of most athletes shifted to  
365 adaptation and acceptance of the uncertainty. They accepted the circumstances, including the  
366 postponement of the Olympics, were not something that they could control. Athlete 2 noted, "it  
367 is such a shame, but I accepted what it is". The Olympic 'first timers' also adapted and accepted  
368 the changes and unexpected transition. For instance, Athlete 3 who had not competed at the

369 Olympics yet and still needed to complete qualification commented, “I will be really upset if it  
370 is cancelled but I accepted the postponement”. Coaches, too, accepted the circumstances and  
371 the associated uncertainty, however, they were also certain in their role and that it had not really  
372 changed but how they fulfilled their role needed to adapt. Coach 5 commented:

373 I think in essence my job has stayed fairly similar. My role, I think, is to provide the  
374 environment and the opportunities for athletes to achieve high performance in [sport] so  
375 that environment for a good part of the last 16 to 20 weeks has been their own home.

### 376 **Changes and Limitations to Training**

377 The participants’ key challenges and barriers were in relation to the changes and  
378 limitations to training. Due to the restrictions imposed such as lockdown and social distancing,  
379 athletes lost access to their training facilities, which resulted in changes to training routines and  
380 schedules and some frustrations. In the case of South Korea, the national team athletes were  
381 training in the central national training centre and rather than losing access to the facility they  
382 went into full lockdown for two months. The lockdown only applied to them, not the rest of  
383 population. While the Korean athletes and coaches felt frustrated and anxious during this period  
384 of lockdown at the national training centre, they were even more frustrated and confused when  
385 then were sent home following the closure of the centre after the first two months. Like many  
386 of the athletes, with no access to their normal facilities, they were unable to do ‘proper’ training.  
387 For instance, Athlete 12, who could not go back to her own team in the U.S due to the lockdown  
388 in her own country, Portugal, had no access to a proper facility and could not train as much as  
389 her teammates:

390 I saw other people training completely normally [in her team in the U.S.], flying to  
391 camps on altitude with the team, with 15 people around and I’m running in a parking  
392 lot with one person to help me. Feeling that it is not fair, that was discouraging me.

393           The changes and limitations to training presented a considerable challenge that the  
394 athletes and coaches had to resolve which they did. They found alternative training facilities  
395 and/or developed modified training schedules suited to home training or other substitute  
396 facilities. Athlete 7, a Korean who won a gold medal at the London 2012 Olympics and whose  
397 sport requires a special training venue and equipment, commented, “I hired a local facility  
398 several times to train and keep fit. [...] it is not the same”. Coach 4 used his summer house  
399 away from the city as a training centre for his athletes, where he could keep the athletes’ healthy  
400 and safe while creating a ‘proper’ training environment. Coach 5 commented that to enable  
401 athletes to train at home the coaches organised, “I would call it a care package. We managed to  
402 piece together, from the equipment that we had, ... [a] bundle of equipment for each athlete.”  
403 Whilst both athletes and coaches managed to find a way to continue to train, most participants  
404 found it challenging.

#### 405 **Coping with Changes and Uncertainty**

406           To cope with the challenges and changes that the unexpected transition led to, the  
407 athletes and coaches employed a range of coping skills and strategies. Four main coping skills  
408 and strategies were commonly discussed: commitment to and focus on training and preparation,  
409 setting a short-term goal to focus on training, and positive distraction.

410           Once the athletes accepted the uncontrollable circumstance, they were able to focus on  
411 and (re-)commit to their training despite the limited access to facilities. Athlete 17 provided an  
412 insight into focusing more on the controllable rather than the uncontrollable: “... just making  
413 the best of... like the different options [...] like just simple things like getting into a routine and  
414 making sure that I don’t just slip into bad routines”. Athlete 13 whose sport required an  
415 opponent to train with, found training alone very difficult but affirmed the commitment to  
416 training,

417 If it has to be done, then it will be done and that's it. You don't even think about it, if  
418 you need to train, you will train, if it's 10 hours a day, it's 10 hours. Just do it.

419 Coaches supported their athletes to stay motivated and focused on competing at the  
420 Olympics. For instance, Coaches 1, 3, and 6 all mentioned that the coaching staff developed  
421 adapted training programmes that their athletes could follow while they were training outside  
422 of the national training centre or sessions. They considered and planned for training that would  
423 sustain the athletes over a longer period of time. Coach 5 commented:

424 There was a lot of planning for the first week for us as a coaching staff to think about  
425 what kind of content are we going to deliver? How are we going to deliver it? We don't  
426 want to have delivered everything and in every way that we can in the first four weeks  
427 because it will then become pretty boring for the guys as we go forward.

428 This was due to coaches continued commitment to provide for the athletes. Coach 5 commented:  
429 "Actually, I still see my job is to try and provide the opportunity for those people to have  
430 experiences in environments that they can."

431 Athletes' (re)commitment was facilitated by setting short-term goals including day-by-  
432 day plans to focus their training and motivate themselves. Most athletes highlighted that they  
433 were goal-driven in general as athletes and were familiar with working towards the goals they  
434 set. For many the postponement of Tokyo 2020 was viewed as an opportunity. Therefore, they  
435 set goals to stay fit as much as they could, recover from injuries, and practice skills they had  
436 not completely mastered, with the aim to better prepare themselves for the upcoming events  
437 when or if they were able to go ahead. Athlete 15 highlighted the importance of staying focused  
438 on herself, "one competition, one fight [...] you need to focus on yourself" and that it was  
439 crucial for her to set daily goals to keep focused and motivated. It is also worth noting that  
440 Coach 4 and Athlete 17 highlighted that it was important for athletes to monitor and take more

441 responsibility for themselves, in particular how they were managing their training and daily  
442 routine.

443 Athletes and coaches also coped with the changes and challenges by using some positive  
444 distractions, which included socialising with families and friends, shopping, playing other  
445 sports, video games, camping, and cooking. They used these positive distractions to minimise  
446 the negative feelings associated with the uncertainty and uncontrollable situation. For instance,  
447 Athletes 8 noted, “I started cooking and have cooked more often than before, which helped me  
448 focus and forget about the situation”. Athlete 9 also discussed a positive distraction, “I tried to  
449 do different sports with my teammates just to avoid thinking about the corona virus, personally  
450 I also tried to do something like writing a diary, making a bucket list or something for my  
451 personal development”.

#### 452 **Role of Social Support in Coping with Changes and Uncertainty**

453 Social support, mainly informational, emotional, and tangible support (e.g., financial  
454 support, training facilities), played a crucial role in helping athletes and coaches cope with the  
455 unexpected transition. The main social support providers included coaches, families, friends,  
456 and partners. Most athletes appreciated the regular communication with their coaches and  
457 teammates via a chatting app such as WhatsApp in Portugal and the UK and KakaoTalk in  
458 South Korea. Through these platforms, or other means such as email, zoom calls and phone  
459 calls, coaches provided informational and emotional support such as providing updates and  
460 clarifications on competitions, timelines, and training restrictions and generally checking in  
461 with individuals. Coach 5 commented:

462 We’re going to try and make sure that we [coaching staff] all have a conversation with  
463 every athlete that is within the program each week... trying to engage people in that  
464 process and keep people motivated and together and feeling part of something.

465 The coaches also provided tangible support in the form of training content, equipment to  
466 facilitate training and access to training spaces. Some of the athletes also mentioned how their  
467 coaches helped them to improve their training environment, which made them feel supported.  
468 For instance, Athlete 11 highlighted that she was very lucky to have access to the local pool so  
469 that she could train as much as she did before with her coach. She mentioned that she was the  
470 only one who could access it with her coach: “I felt blessed because I think it’s really important  
471 for me to have contact with the water. I didn’t have to make many changes”.

472 While the significance of social support, which includes informational, emotional, and  
473 tangible support, from coaches was highlighted, all athletes and coaches also emphasised the  
474 importance of social support from their families, friends, teammates, and partners: “My family  
475 has always been supportive of me. They always believed in me, they told me you can do it”  
476 (Athlete 14).

477 Unfortunately, most participants were separated from their key social support  
478 providers and were not able to meet them due to the restrictions and guidelines at the time of  
479 the interviews. Athlete 16 remarked, “nothing is easy because of COVID. Not easy to go to  
480 supermarket, café, etc. [...] you can’t visit others or have someone over”. Only some of the  
481 participants lived with their families. Therefore, the majority also used messaging and video  
482 calling apps (e.g., WhatsApp) as a key channel to receive social support. For coaches, the other  
483 coaches they worked with were important providers of support. Coach 5 commented:

484 ...the [sport] coaching staff. Those are the main people we’re having those conversations  
485 with... actually talking about people, so it's not all the work or making sure you've done  
486 this, that and the next thing, actually consistently the reference has been to make sure  
487 that your safe and well and healthy and looking after your family and our focus has been  
488 put on people, ... that’s probably helped us to filter that down to the athletes as well.

**489 Roles of Organisational Support in Coping with Changes and Uncertainty**

490 Athletes and coaches who were supported by their sport governing bodies appreciated  
491 the organisational support which included information about developments, arranging an  
492 alternative training facility, on-going financial support, access to professional services such as  
493 sport psychologists, counsellors, strength and conditioning coaches, and physios. For instance,  
494 Athletes 15 and 16 appreciated the access they had to sport psychologists who they could talk  
495 to during the lockdown. Athlete 12 highlighted, “I have my personal trainer, psychologist, and  
496 physio. I have a good team”. Specifically, Portuguese athletes also received informational  
497 support from their sport governing bodies via a chatting app. Athlete 12 noted that the “Olympic  
498 committee did a good job, we had WhatsApp group and they shared some information, my club  
499 did that too”. For one coach, it was helpful that the governing body had realistic expectations  
500 for the coaches and athletes, at least initially:

501 I think that in reality the expectation from employers was just to try and become used to  
502 being at home, working at home, staying safe. [...] I think in terms of my job, there was  
503 very little expectation in terms of the work to be done. (Coach 5).

504 Since the athletes in this study are all at high level, most of them have some support  
505 from their sport governing bodies such as funding and access to the professionals. While  
506 Portuguese athletes mentioned their funding from the sport governing bodies was maintained,  
507 some in South Korea and the UK experienced a funding cut. It is worth noting that the  
508 professional services were only available for some. Therefore, many athletes pointed out lack  
509 of psychological support and more need for financial support to prepare for Tokyo 2020 such  
510 as expenses to compete/train abroad for their qualifying events. For instance, Athlete 6 noted,

511 About 4 years ago, I had one session related to psychological support. It was good to  
512 have the session but was difficult to apply what the psychologist said to me to my  
513 practice as it was just once, not regular or ongoing sessions.

#### 514 **Discussion**

515 The present study investigated high-performance athletes' and coaches' experiences of  
516 unexpected transitions caused by COVID-19 and the postponement of the Olympics and  
517 identified their available resources to cope with these unexpected transitions. The Olympics has  
518 been considered an important within-career transition as it is seen as the peak of athletes' high-  
519 performance career that has different demands and requires different preparation (Stambulova,  
520 Ryba, et al., 2020). However, the 'normal' Olympic cycle and normative transition was affected  
521 in 2020 by COVID-19. In these circumstances the transition is arguably more appropriately  
522 characterised as a non-normative transition as it was unexpected (Alfermann & Stambulova,  
523 2007; Stambulova et al., 2009; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004) and yet still presented changes  
524 and challenges, that required "a corresponding change in one's behaviour and relationship"  
525 (Schlossberg, 1981, p.5). In this regard, the findings from the present study provide valuable  
526 empirical evidence and insights into how athletes and coaches managed the within-career non-  
527 normative transitions brought about by COVID-19 and the postponement of the Olympics. The  
528 findings extend existing knowledge on non-normative transitions by: (1) examining a global  
529 within-career non-normative transition; (2) contributing empirical evidence from athletes' and  
530 coaches' lived experiences that supports concerns raised by researchers; (3) bringing together  
531 research on athletic transitions and theory on stressors and coping to enable deeper  
532 understanding of transitions, particularly non-normative transitions; (4) considering coaches'  
533 experiences of athletic transitions and their role in supporting athletes.

534 To date researchers have focused on normative transitions such as progression in  
535 performance level (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004) and retirement (Park, et al., 2013; Taylor &  
536 Ogilvie, 1994) and non-normative transitions out of sport such as due to injury, deselection,  
537 and doping (e.g., Hong et al., 2020; Lavallee et al., 2014). However, our study focused on a  
538 within-career non-normative transition which for the athletes at the time was not a transition  
539 out of sport. As such we were able to gain insight into athletes and coaches' experiences of this  
540 within-career non-normative transition. Furthermore, by sampling across three countries we  
541 were able to explore athletes' and coaches' experiences of a global situation, COVID-19 and  
542 postponed Olympics, and the associated transition. In response to circumstances arising as a  
543 result of this global situation, we found considerable consistency in how athletes and coaches  
544 from three different countries managed the non-normative transitions as they sought to continue  
545 to prepare for a delayed sporting mega event. As non-normative transitions such as this may  
546 become 'normal', the insights gained not only extend our understanding of navigating athletic  
547 career transitions, but they also provide valuable insight for stakeholders seeking to support  
548 athletes and minimise the negative effects of non-normative transitions.

549 For both athletes and coaches, 'uncertainty' was a key factor that influenced their  
550 responses and contributed to initial negative emotions such as frustration, confusion, anxiety,  
551 and amotivation. These findings provide empirical evidence from the athletes' and coaches'  
552 lived experiences that confirm concerns raised by Taku and Arai (2020) following the decision  
553 to postpone Tokyo 2020. Furthermore, the findings from our study show that the participants  
554 employed different internal resources to cope with changes and challenges including  
555 committing to training, setting a short-term goal to focus on training, finding positive distraction,  
556 and seeking social support. This indicates that they are highly resourceful (Stambulova, Schinke,  
557 et al., 2020) and demonstrated key coping strategies/skills to manage a non-normative transition.  
558 With regards to external resources, participants' main resources were social and organisational

559 support. Similar to research examining normative transitions the participants in this study  
560 gained social support from significant others (Stambulova et al., 2009) and organisational  
561 support from sport organisations and governing bodies (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007) to  
562 assist them in negotiating this non-normative transition. These findings extend our knowledge  
563 of how athletes and coaches can overcome challenges and changes caused by a non-normative  
564 transition. Furthermore, our findings extend the knowledge of non-normative transition  
565 resources to include understanding of coaches' perspectives on how they assist athletes with  
566 transitional challenges and coaches' own experiences and resources. This highlights the  
567 importance of informational support as well as emotional support from sport governing bodies,  
568 which should be considered by sport governing bodies and relevant stakeholders as they seek  
569 to develop support services for both athletes and coaches.

570         In addition to identifying the resources participants employed to address transitional  
571 challenges, we were also interested in exploring how these resources assisted participants.  
572 Drawing from Lazarus and Folkman's theory (1984) enabled us to extend our understanding of  
573 non-normative transitions by considering the stressors and coping processes occurring within  
574 the transitions. Stress is conceptualised as a process involving transactions between the person  
575 and the environment where individuals make appraisals of the circumstances they are in and  
576 make efforts to cope with issues that arise (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Athletes and coaches in  
577 our study identified environmental demands (stressors) such as uncertainty, restrictions, and  
578 changes to training and competition associated with COVID-19 and the postponement of the  
579 Olympic games. For athletes and coaches preparing for Tokyo 2020 their primary appraisal  
580 indicated the stressors were meaningful as they had potential to disrupt preparation and  
581 jeopardise performance (e.g., qualification, selection, and Olympic performance). Drawing on  
582 Lazarus and Folkman (1984)'s framework, "threat" and "challenge" are proposed as  
583 dimensions of primary appraisal. These dimensions refer to the personal importance of the

584 situation where threat appraisal refers to an assessment of future harm, and challenge appraisal  
585 to potential gain and enjoyment of the struggle. With regards to secondary appraisal, Peacock  
586 and Wong (1990) proposed three further dimensions related to perceptions of controllability of  
587 the stressors (i.e., controllable-by-self, controllable-by-others, uncontrollable-by-anyone).  
588 Given the athletes investment in their sporting careers to this point, participants clearly had a  
589 stake in the outcomes of the COVID-19 situation and associated demands of the non-normative  
590 transition. For many, at least initially, this led to appraisal of threat which were most evident  
591 where participants felt their ‘Olympic dream’ was in jeopardy. At first, primary threat appraisals  
592 appeared to be accompanied by uncontrollable-by-anyone secondary appraisals. That was, due  
593 to the global nature of the pandemic, associated travel and training restrictions imposed by  
594 governments, and decisions about sporting events being made by others (e.g., international and  
595 national sport federations). As a result, the athletes’ and coaches’ appraisals were that no one,  
596 at least no one within their more immediate social environment, could control the stressful  
597 situation. Perhaps unsurprisingly and consistent with previous research (Nicholls et al., 2012),  
598 the threat and uncontrollable-by-anyone appraisals led athletes to experience unpleasant  
599 emotions such as frustration and anxiety. In contrast, for some athletes, there was evidence of  
600 primary challenge appraisal where athletes and coaches recognised the opportunity that a delay  
601 in the Olympics presented for those returning from injury or who had not yet qualified, where  
602 they could ‘fill the gap’ in their preparation for the Olympics (Schinke et al., 2020). For these  
603 athletes, the greater stressor seemed to have been the prominence of the Olympics games, only  
604 months away, and whether they had sufficient resources to be ‘ready in time’. With  
605 postponement of the Olympics, these athletes’ secondary appraisals shifted towards a greater  
606 sense of controllable-by-self and perhaps -by-others such as coaches and physiotherapists, in  
607 that they now had time, a key resource, to re(commit) to their Olympic dream.

608           As Lazarus and Folkman (1984) indicated stressors and coping are dynamic processes  
609 and not a single event. Our findings indicated that athletes moved through a number of  
610 ‘iterations’ of stress appraisal and coping as a result of the non-normative transition. Initial  
611 primary appraisals triggered coping, which led to cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage  
612 the situations as they emerged and developed. Furthermore, whilst initially appraisals were  
613 oriented towards threat and uncontrollable-by-anyone, subsequent appraisals were more often  
614 oriented towards challenge and controllable-by-self. As Kaiseler et al (2009) demonstrated, it  
615 is beneficial for individuals to be in control of their emotions and situations to cope with  
616 stressors. Seeking information and adapting plans and goals reduced uncertainty which for  
617 many was also accompanied by acceptance. These cognitive and behavioural efforts enabled  
618 athletes and coaches to re-appraise the situation and demands towards challenge and  
619 controllable-by-self and -by-others. For example, one of the coaches reported enjoying having  
620 a ‘new’ problem to solve and participants reported focusing attention on what they could control.  
621 These secondary appraisals led participants to believe that the necessary resources (internal and  
622 external) were available and therefore they could cope with the demands of this non-normative  
623 transition. Throughout, participants employed emotion-focused (e.g., acceptance, distraction)  
624 and problem-focused (e.g., short-term goals, adapting daily routines) coping strategies. Social  
625 and organisational support were important influencers on these appraisal processes. The  
626 influence of others on coping processes has been recognised previously (Poucher et al., 2018),  
627 however, by understanding more about the actions of coaches and organisations our research  
628 provides insight into interpersonal as well as intrapersonal coping (Crocker et al., 2015) and  
629 contributes to understanding non-normative transitions. Athletes and coaches adapted and  
630 addressed the issues by arranging alternative training facilities and modifying training plans.  
631 This finding confirms Taku and Arai’s (2020) proposal that coaches are likely to be under  
632 pressure to adapt to the circumstance quickly to provide a modified and effective training

633 schedule/plan for their athletes. This was also recognised as critical in Bowes et al.'s (2020)  
634 study of support for elite female athletes. Coaches' communication with athletes on a regular,  
635 often daily basis, was critical to athletes' coping.

636 An important cognitive effort to reduce or tolerate the demands created by the  
637 circumstances was acceptance of the uncertainty surrounding, at first, whether the Games and  
638 preceding events would take place and then regarding where and how they could train and  
639 continue their preparations. This acceptance was paired with setting short-term goals that were  
640 realistic for the given circumstances and focusing attention on what the athletes could control  
641 such as (re)commitment to training, adapting daily training routines and lifestyle schedules.  
642 Whilst acceptance is an emotion-focused coping strategy, commitment to training, goal setting  
643 and adapting daily routines are problem-focused coping strategies (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).  
644 This shows that athletes and coaches can apply multiple coping strategies to cope with stressors  
645 in line with the previous findings (Norris et al., 2017; Potts et al., 2019; Tamminen & Holt,  
646 2010). It should be noted that the participants in this study did not apply avoidance coping  
647 (Lazarus, 1999), which indicates that they were proactive in their coping, seeking to deal with  
648 stressors and modify their circumstances/events. Since proactive coping regards how  
649 individuals reflect on and develop their coping ability over time, it will be beneficial to examine  
650 the development of coping resources among athletes and coaches longitudinally (Tamminen,  
651 2022). Through these strategies, athletes and coaches deliberately sought to address the  
652 challenges by taking action to resolve issues where they could. However, as they could not  
653 resolve the larger problem (i.e., COVID-19 and Olympics postponement) they also employed  
654 another emotion-focused coping strategy - distractions - to regulate their emotional response.  
655 This is consistent with the evidence in Park et al. (2013)'s study that athletes seek new interests  
656 to focus on and keep them busy to cope with transitional challenges.

657 An important additional coping resource for participants was the social and  
658 organisational support available from significant others and their organisations. The  
659 participants in this study had available informational, tangible, and emotional and to a lesser  
660 extent esteem support. All of which assisted athletes to focus on what they could control and to  
661 (re)commit to training. As COVID-19 and postponement of the Olympics was unprecedented  
662 and indeed a non-normative transition, informational social support was highly valued. This  
663 finding emphasises the importance of social support during this non-normative transitional  
664 period and supports the contention that social support is a critical resource to cope with  
665 transitional demands and challenges (Stambulova et al., 2009). The social support available and  
666 provided by sport organisations/governing bodies was valued by participants and included  
667 informational, tangible, and emotional support. This highlights the importance of a duty of care  
668 of sport governing bodies, which can considerably impact on athletes' wellbeing and  
669 performance (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009). Furthermore, the findings also support the evidence  
670 in literature (e.g., Wagstaff, 2019) that it is important for athletes, in particular, to build and  
671 maintain a good relationship with their coaches and sport governing bodies/organisations to be  
672 prepared for and better perform at major international competitions. However, the need for and  
673 importance of informational and tangible support from sport organisations were recognised as  
674 critical to manage uncertainty and transitional demands to enable athletes (and coaches) to keep  
675 pursuing their goals to compete at the Olympics. This also supports the evidence from the  
676 previous studies that athletes require organisational support when they compete at the highest  
677 level such as competing at the Olympics (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007). Furthermore, most  
678 previous research in career development and transitions related to social and organisational  
679 support has focused on athletes but the evidence in the present study demonstrates that coaches  
680 also required external resources to cope with this non-normative transition and enable them to  
681 continue to do their job and provide the social support athletes needed.

682 Our findings suggest that sport governing bodies and coaches should seek to provide  
683 different types of social support to athletes during a non-normative transition. In particular,  
684 informational and emotional support were found to play a critical role in athletes' motivation  
685 and coping process. However, such support is needed not only for athletes but also for coaches.  
686 Coaches also valued external resources (e.g., informational and financial support) from relevant  
687 authorities such as sport governing bodies and sport organisations to enable them to better  
688 support athletes in unexpected transitions. This evidence extends our knowledge and  
689 understanding of coaches' needs and supports findings of Norris et al. (2020) that highlighted  
690 the main social networks and social support resources that coaches required were from friends,  
691 family, colleagues, and other sources (e.g., media). Therefore, sport organisations and  
692 governing bodies should consider how they provide different type of support (e.g., emotional,  
693 informational, financial, esteem, etc.) to both athletes and coaches during non-normative  
694 transitions to help them successfully adapt to changes and cope with transitional challenges.

695 For athletes coping with a non-normative transition, our findings indicated the  
696 importance of adapting to circumstances and challenges and staying motivated with goals. It  
697 should be also noted that good communication with sport governing bodies as well as coaches  
698 and teammates played an important role in managing daily challenges during a non-normative  
699 transition. The findings in this study demonstrated that participants actively engaged with  
700 messaging and video calling apps (e.g., WhatsApp), therefore sport governing bodies could use  
701 them as a key channel to communicate with athletes and coaches to provide informational and  
702 emotional support. This is particularly important when athletes are isolated as was evident in  
703 the study. Such communication strategies can be also facilitated when athletes are injured and  
704 isolated from the team and normal training schedule, for instance (Park et al., 2013).  
705 Furthermore, the findings show how participants used positive distractions as part of coping  
706 process/strategies such as socialising with families and friends, shopping, playing other sports,

707 video games, camping, and cooking. Therefore, other athletes and coaches might consider the  
708 types of positive distractions they may be able to utilise during transitional challenges. In  
709 addition, many participants claimed a lack of psychological support was available, which  
710 should also be addressed by sport governing bodies and practitioners in high-performance sport.  
711 For example, psychological support can be delivered via career assistance programmes as a  
712 form of bespoke support to help athletes and coaches develop their psychological skills as well  
713 as coping skills (Hong et al., 2020; Stambulova et al., 2009; Stambulova, Ryba, et al., 2020).  
714 While the findings show shared experiences, future research could consider the implications of  
715 different cultural context (Schinke et al., 2019), in particular, the funding system and support  
716 provision from sport organisations/governing bodies in each country. Furthermore, the  
717 interviews took place at one point in time during COVID-19 and not long after the Olympics  
718 had been postponed. Future research might also examine the longer-term effects of this non-  
719 normative transition on athletes' performance, careers, and well-being (Pété et al., 2022; Santi  
720 et al., 2021).

721 By interviewing both high-performance athletes and coaches in the middle of the period  
722 significantly impacted by COVID-19 (between June and October 2020), the findings provide  
723 the accounts of both athletes' and coaches' lived experience at that time. This enabled us to  
724 better understand their experiences of an unexpected within-in career non-normative transition  
725 and how they negotiated the transition. With a deeper understanding of the phenomenon, the  
726 findings can then inform other similar situations that might occur in the future. Furthermore,  
727 the present study demonstrates how Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional theory of  
728 stressors and coping can provide additional insight into how athletes and coaches experience  
729 and cope with non-normative transitions. Thereby extending the transition models' descriptions  
730 of important resources to include explanation of how internal and external resources are useful  
731 during non-normative transitions. It is hoped that both theoretical and practical implications of

732 the present study can contribute to athletes' and coaches' better coping with unexpected  
733 circumstances that may affect their performance in the future.

734 **References**

735 Alfermann, D., & Stambulova, N. (2007). Career transitions and career termination. In G.  
736 Tenenbaum and R. C. Eklund (Eds.), *Handbook of sport psychology* (3rd ed., pp. 712–  
737 736). New York, NY: Wiley.

738 Bowes, A., Lomax, L., & Piasecki, J. (2020). The Impact of the COVID-19 Lockdown on Elite  
739 Sportswomen. *Managing Sport and Leisure*, 1–17.  
740 doi:10.1080/23750472.2020.1825988.

741 Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research*  
742 *in Psychology*, 3, 77-101.

743 Braun, V., Clarke, V. & Weate, P. (2016). Using thematic analysis in sport and exercise  
744 research. In B. Smith & A. C. Sparkes (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of qualitative*  
745 *research in sport and exercise* (pp. 191-205). London: Routledge.

746 Brown, C. J., Webb, T. L., Robinson, M. A., & Cotgreave, R. (2018). Athletes' experiences of  
747 social support during their transition out of elite sport: An interpretive  
748 phenomenological analysis. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 36, 71–80.  
749 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2018.01.003>.

750 Berjot, S., & Gillet, N. (2011). Stress and coping with discrimination and stigmatization.  
751 *Frontiers in Psychology*, 1(2), 33. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2011.00033.eCollection

752 Chen, H. Y., & Boore, J. R. (2010). Translation and backtranslation in qualitative nursing  
753 research: Methodological review. *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, 19(1–2), 234–239.  
754 doi:10.1111/j.1365-2702.2009.02896.x

- 755 Crocker, P.R.E., Tamminen, K. A., & Gaudreau, P. (2015). Coping in sport. In S. Hanton & S.  
756 Mellalieu (Eds.), *Contemporary advances in sport psychology: A review* (pp.28-67).  
757 New York: Routledge.
- 758 Cumming, S. P., Smith, R. E., Grossbard, J. R., Smoll, F. L., & Malina, R. M. (2012). Body  
759 size, coping strategies, and mental health in adolescent female athletes. *International*  
760 *Journal of Sports Science & Coaching*, 7(3), 515-526.
- 761 Didymus, F. F., & Jones, M. V. (2022). Cognitive Appraisals. In R. Arnold & D. Fletcher (Ed.),  
762 *Stress, Well-being, and Performance in Sport* (pp.63 - 77). London, UK: Routledge
- 763 Elbardan, H., & Kholeif, A.O. (2017) An Interpretive Approach for Data Collection and  
764 Analysis. In *Enterprise Resource Planning, Corporate Governance and Internal*  
765 *Auditing* (pp. 111-165). Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-54990-3_5)  
766 [54990-3\\_5](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-54990-3_5)
- 767 Etikan, I., Abubakar Musa, S., & Sunusi Alkassim, R. (2016). Comparison of convenience  
768 sampling and purposive sampling. *American Journal of Theoretical and Applied*  
769 *Statistics*, 5(1), 1–4. <https://doi.org/10.11648/j.ajta.s.20160501.1>.
- 770 Fletcher, D., & Wagstaff, C. R. D. (2009). Organizational psychology in elite sport: Its  
771 emergence, application and future. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 10(4), 427-434.
- 772 Hong, H. J., Henning, A., & Dimeo, P. (2020). Life after doping — A cross-country analysis  
773 of organisational support for sanctioned athletes. *Performance Enhancement & Health*,  
774 8(1), 100161.
- 775 Kaiseler, M., Polman, R. C. J., & Nicholls, A. R. (2009). Mental toughness, stress, stress  
776 appraisal, coping, and coping effectiveness in sport. *Personality and Individual*  
777 *Differences*, 47, 728 - 733. Doi:10.1016/j.paid.2009.06.012

- 778 Kennedy, B. L., & Thornburg, R. (2018). Deduction, induction, and abduction. In U. Flick (Ed.),  
779 *The SAGE handbook of qualitative data collection* (pp. 49–64). Sage Publications.
- 780 Lazarus, R. S. (1999). *Stress and emotion: A new synthesis*. London, UK: Springer.
- 781 Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, Appraisal and Coping*. New York: Springer.
- 782 McArdle, S., McGale, N., & Gaffney, P. (2012). A qualitative exploration of men's experiences  
783 of an integrated exercise/CBT mental health promotion programme. *International*  
784 *Journal of Men's Health*, 11(3), 240-257. doi. 10.3149/jmh.1103.240
- 785 Nicholls, A. R., Polman, R. C. J., & Levy, A. R. (2012). A path analysis of stress appraisals,  
786 emotions, coping, and performance satisfaction among athletes. *Psychology of Sport*  
787 *and Exercise*, 13(3), 263-270. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2011.12.003>
- 788 Norris, L. A., Didymus F. F., & Kaiseler M. (2017). Stressors, Coping, and Well-Being among  
789 Sports Coaches: A Systematic Review. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 33, 93–112.
- 790 Norris, L. A., Didymus, F. F., & Kaiseler, M. (2020). Understanding social networks and social  
791 support resources with sports coaches. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 48, 101665.  
792 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2020.101665>
- 793 Noy, C. (2008). Sampling knowledge: The hermeneutics of snowball sampling in qualitative  
794 research. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 11, 327–344.
- 795 Ntoumanis, N., & Biddle, S. J. H. (2000). Relationship of intensity and direction of competitive  
796 anxiety with coping strategies. *The Sport Psychologist*, 14, 360 – 371.
- 797 Park, S., Lavalley, D., & Tod, D. (2013). Athletes' career transition out of sport: A systematic  
798 review. *International Review of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 6(1), 22–53.

- 799 Patton, M. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (2nd ed.). Newbury Park, CA:  
800 Sage.
- 801 Peacock, E. J., & Wong, P. T. P. (1990). The Stress Appraisal Measure (SAM): a  
802 multidimensional approach to cognitive appraisal. *Stress Medicine*, 6, 227-236.  
803 doi:10.1002/smi.2460060308
- 804 Pété, E., Leprince, C., Lienhart, N., & Doron, J. (2022). Dealing with the impact of the COVID-  
805 19 outbreak: Are some athletes' coping profiles more adaptive than others? *European*  
806 *Journal of Sport Science*, 1–27. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17461391.2021.1873422>.
- 807 Potts, A. J., Didymus, F. F., & Kaiseler, M. (2019). Exploring stressors and coping among  
808 volunteer, part-time and full-time sports coaches. *Qualitative Research in Sport,*  
809 *Exercise and Health*, 11(1), 46–68. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2018.1457562>
- 810 Poucher, Z. A., Tamminen, K. A., & Kerr, G. (2018). Providing social support to female 18  
811 Olympic athletes. *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology*, 40(4), 217-228. 19  
812 <https://doi.org/10.1123/jsep.2018-00>
- 813 Reardon, C. L., Bindra, A., Blauwet, C., Budgett, R., Campriani, N., Currie, A., Gouttebauge,  
814 V., McDuff, D., Mountjoy, M., Purcell, R., et al. (2020). Mental health management of  
815 elite athletes during COVID-19: a narrative review and recommendations. *British*  
816 *journal of sports medicine*, 53(11), 667–699.
- 817 Rich, M., Futterman, M., & Panja, T. (March 24, 2020). *I.O.C. and Japan Agree to Postpone*  
818 *Tokyo Olympics.* The New York Times.  
819 [https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/24/sports/olympics/coronavirus-summer-olympics-](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/24/sports/olympics/coronavirus-summer-olympics-postponed.html)  
820 [postponed.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/24/sports/olympics/coronavirus-summer-olympics-postponed.html)

- 821 Ryba, T. V., Haapanen, S., Mosek, S., & Ng, K. (2012). Towards a conceptual understanding  
822 of acute cultural adaptation: A preliminary examination of ACA in female swimming.  
823 *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 4, 80–97.  
824 doi:10.1080/2159676X.2011.653498
- 825 Santi, G., Quartiroli, A., Costa, S., di Fronso, S., Montesano, C., di Gruttola, F., Ciofi, E. G.,  
826 Morgilli, L., & Bertollo, M. (2021). The impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on coaches’  
827 perception of stress and emotion regulation strategies. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11,  
828 601743. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.601743>
- 829 Schinke, R. J., Blodgett, A. T., Ryba, T. V., Kao, S. F., & Middleton, T. (2019). Cultural sport  
830 psychology as a pathway to advances in identity and settlement research to practice.  
831 *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 42, 58–65. doi:10.1016/j.psychsport.2018.09.004
- 832 Schinke, R., Papaioannou, A., Henriksen, K., Si, G., Zhang, L., & Haberl, P. (2020). Sport  
833 psychology services to high performance athletes during COVID-19. *International*  
834 *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 18(3), 269–272.  
835 <https://doi.org/10.1080/1612197X.2020.1754616>
- 836 Schlossberg, N. K. (1981). A model for analyzing human adaptation to transition. *The*  
837 *Counseling Psychologist*, 9(2), 2-18.
- 838 Stambulova, N., Alfermann, D., Statler, T., & Côte, J. (2009). ISSP Position stand: Career 1056  
839 development and transitions of athletes. *International Journal of Sport and Exercise*  
840 *Psychology*, 7, 395-412. doi: 10.1080/1612197X.2009.9671916
- 841 Stambulova, N., Ryba, T. V., & Henriksen, K. (2020). Career development and transitions of  
842 athletes: ISSP position Stand revisited. *International Journal of Sport and Exercise*  
843 *Psychology*. Advanced online publication:  
844 <https://doi.org/10.1080/1612197X.2020.1737836>

- 845 Stambulova, N. B., Schinke, R. J., Lavalley, D., & Wylleman, P. (2020). The COVID-19  
846 pandemic and olympic/paralympic athletes' developmental challenges and possibilities  
847 in times of a global crisis-transition. *International Journal of Sport and Exercise*  
848 *Psychology*. *Advanced Online Publication*.  
849 <https://doi.org/10.1080/1612197X.2020.1810865>.
- 850 Taku, K., & Arai, H. (2020). Impact of COVID-19 on athletes and coaches, and their values in  
851 Japan: repercussions of postponing the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic games.  
852 *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, 25, 623–650. doi: 10.1080/15325024.2020.1777762
- 853 Taylor, J., & Ogilvie, B. C. (1994). A conceptual model of adaptation to retirement among  
854 athletes. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 6, 1-20.
- 855 Taylor, J., Ogilvie, B., & Lavalley, D. (2005). Career transition among elite athletes: Is there  
856 life after sports? In J. M. Williams (Ed.), *Applied sport psychology: Personal growth to*  
857 *peak performance* (pp. 595–615). Columbus, OH: McGraw-Hill.
- 858 Tamminen, K. (2022). Coping. In R. Arnold & D. Fletcher (Ed.), *Stress, Well-being, and*  
859 *Performance in Sport* (pp.78 - 94). London, UK: Routledge.
- 860 Tamminen, K.A., & Holt, N.K., (2010). A meta-study of qualitative research examining stressor  
861 appraisals and coping among adolescents in sport. *Journal of sports sciences*, 28(14),  
862 1563–1580.
- 863 Tomas, F., Whyatt, K., & McElwee, M. (2020). *Special report: As men's sport clamours to*  
864 *restart, how women's sport is being abandoned*. The Telegraph.  
865 [https://www.telegraph.co.uk/womens-sport/2020/05/29/special-report-will-see-game-](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/womens-sport/2020/05/29/special-report-will-see-game-womensteam-sport-will-damage/)  
866 [womensteam-sport-will-damage/](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/womens-sport/2020/05/29/special-report-will-see-game-womensteam-sport-will-damage/)

- 867 Wagstaff, C.R.D. (2019). A commentary and reflections on the field of organizational sport  
868 psychology. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, *31*, 134–146.  
869 doi:10.1080/10413200.2018.1539885
- 870 WHO. (March 28, 2016). *WHO public health advice regarding the Olympics and Zika virus*.  
871 [https://www.who.int/news/item/28-05-2016-who-public-health-advice-regarding-the-](https://www.who.int/news/item/28-05-2016-who-public-health-advice-regarding-the-olympics-and-zika-virus)  
872 [olympics-and-zika-virus](https://www.who.int/news/item/28-05-2016-who-public-health-advice-regarding-the-olympics-and-zika-virus)
- 873 Wylleman, P. (2019). A developmental and holistic perspective on transitioning out of elite  
874 sport. In M. H. Anshel (Ed.), *APA handbook of sport and exercise psychology: Vol. 1. Sport psychology* (pp. 201–216). Washington, DC: American Psychological  
875 Association.  
876
- 877 Wylleman, P., & Lavallee, D. (2004). A developmental perspective on transitions faced by  
878 athletes. In M. Weis (Ed.), *Developmental sport and exercise psychology: A lifespan perspective* (pp. 507–527). Morgantown, WV: Fitness International Technology.  
879