Abstract

This study explored high-performance athletes’ and coaches’ experiences of unexpected transitions caused by COVID-19 pandemic and the postponement of the Olympics with the aim of identifying their available resources to cope with such unexpected transitions. A total of 23 high-performance athletes ($n = 18$) and coaches ($n = 5$) who were preparing for the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games participated in the study between June and October 2020. Semi-structured interviews were conducted via both video (e.g., Microsoft Teams meeting) and phone calls. Thematic analysis of interview transcripts revealed that, participants experienced a range of negative emotions, however, they adapted to the changes and challenges experienced after accepting the uncertainty of the circumstances. The participants’ main challenges were the changes and limitations to training. To cope with the challenges that the unexpected transition led to, the athletes and coaches employed a range of coping skills and strategies including commitment to training, setting a short-term goal to focus on training, positive distraction, and seeking social support. Further, the importance of social and organisational support was highlighted as external resources. The findings extend our understanding of non-normative transitions to include explanation of the mechanisms of coping using Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) transactional theory of stressors and coping. Practical implications on what types of support (e.g., informational, emotional, and psychological support) that key stakeholders may need to consider when establishing support schemes/systems are also discussed.

**Keywords**: career transitions; coping strategies; non-normative transitions; organisational support; social support
An Exploration of the Resources of High-Performance Athletes and Coaches to Cope with Unexpected Transitions

Career transitions in sport have received increased attention over the past five decades (Stambulova et al., 2020). Schlossberg (1981) defined transition as “an event or non-event [which] results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world, and thus requires a corresponding change in one’s behaviour and relationships” (p. 5). Career transition can be categorised into normative (i.e., expected) and non-normative (i.e., unexpected). Normative transitions include progressing to a higher/senior level (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004) and transitions out of sport for personal or social reasons such as age and starting a family (Taylor et al., 2005). Research suggests that, whilst still demanding, normative transitions can be prepared for and a smoother transition facilitated (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). In contrast, non-normative transitions result from less predictable circumstances such as injury, deselection, a doping violation (e.g., Hong et al., 2020; Lavallee et al., 2014) or a pandemic. Furthermore, non-normative transitions can be more difficult to adapt to and negotiate and can lead to traumatic transitions including psychosocial distress and greater demand for support (Park et al., 2013; Stambulova, Schinke et al., 2020). COVID-19 led to unexpected changes in sport such as the postponement of the 2020 Olympic Games (Rich et al., 2020). As a result, for high-performance athletes and coaches who were preparing for Tokyo 2020, the postponement presented a non-normative transition. Much of the research on career transitions has focused on normative transitions and/or non-normative transitions out of sport with much less known about how athletes and coaches cope with non-normative transitions within their careers. Therefore, the non-normative transition resulting from COVID-19 and the postponement of the Olympic Games provided us with a valuable opportunity to further our understanding of athletes’ and coaches’ experiences and coping processes in relation to a within-career non-normative transition.
Considering the on-going situation and implications of COVID-19, future sporting mega events may also be postponed or cancelled. Therefore, athletes and other stakeholders may need to cope with greater uncertainty surrounding major events in the future. Since athletic success is positively associated with athletes’ own ability and resources available to manage transitional challenges (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007), it is crucial to better understand the experiences of athletes and coaches as they seek to cope with the challenges associated with COVID-19 and the postponed Olympics (Tomas et al., 2020). Developing our understanding in this particular case may provide useful insight to assist athletes and coaches faced with other within-career non-normative transitions. Moreover, career transition models (Schlossberg, 1981; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994) suggest that transition demands and resources should be matched to successfully overcome barriers and challenges (Stambulova et al., 2009). Therefore, examination of transition demands and resources employed to cope with challenges presented by COVID-19 and the postponement of the Olympics Games will provide key stakeholders with valuable insight into how to positively influence athletes’ career transitions.

With regards to the demands on both athletes and coaches resulting from the impact of COVID-19 and the postponed Tokyo 2020 in general, Taku and Arai (2020) suggested that some athletes might need to retire and lose an opportunity to compete in 2021 as their preparation and plans were disrupted, while others may consider this as a chance to better prepare and improve their performance. Taku and Arai (2020) were also concerned that all changes including cancellation of qualifiers and disrupted training routines would create “a sense of uncertainty, confusion, and frustration, and make it difficult to set a series of concrete goals” (p. 626). In terms of the impact on coaches, coaches might be under pressure to respond to the changes quickly and explore the most effective ways to support their athletes while managing changes and challenges they have never experienced before. In addition, Taku and Arai (2020) proposed that coaches might also struggle to invest sufficient time with their
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athletes as they need to look after themselves and families as well. Santi et al. (2021) investigated the levels of perceived stress and the emotion regulation strategies with 2,272 Italian coaches during COVID-19 lockdown and found that the coaches experienced higher levels of perceived stress and applied more emotion regulation strategies than those in the normative data. Stambulova, Schinke, et al. (2020) suggested that for athletes in high-performance sport, COVID-19 could cause changes or challenges at different levels in athletes’ career development (Wylleman, 2019; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). Affecting athletic development, the first level of the model, COVID-19 could lead to changes in access to training facilities or cancelled competitions. Effects on athletic identity, social isolation and concern for family and friends might occur at the psychological (second level) and psychosocial (third level). In a financial sense (fourth level), athletes might see changes in funding, whereas at a legal level (fifth level), there may be travel restrictions (Stambulova, Schinke, et al., 2020). As such, COVID-19 has created new stressors for high performance athletes, which implies that mental health management may be required during the period of COVID-19 (Reardon et al., 2020).

Taku and Arai (2020) and Stambulova, Schinke et al. (2020) provided overviews of the challenges and barriers athletes and coaches may have faced as a consequence of COVID-19. However, to better understand the phenomenon and provide insight for key stakeholders and practitioners about how to prepare for other unexpected transitions, empirical evidence is needed that examines athletes’ and coaches’ actual experiences and how they coped with the challenges and barriers. In this regard, Bowes et al., (2020) investigated the impact of COVID-19 lockdown on female elite athletes via an online survey. They found that the athletes indicated some issues related to limited training, less access to facilities/equipment compared to men’s sport, and financial insecurity. They also recognised that positive support was offered from their coaching network. Whilst Bowes, et al. (2020) provided some evidence on female athletes’
experiences, further research is needed to identify how athletes coped with changes and what resources were available for them to cope. In this regard, Pété et al. (2022) identified athletes’ coping profiles (i.e., self-reliant, engaged, avoidant, active and social) in response to COVID-19 with a sample of 526 French athletes via an online survey. They found that coping profiles were different depending on the factors of anxiety, stress appraisals, social support and interpersonal coping. In particular, it was found that the avoidant strategy was recognised as the least effective for coping. Nevertheless, exploring more in-depth accounts of athletes’ experiences will enable us to better understand their coping strategies during COVID-19. Furthermore, adopting a holistic perspective where the different levels of influences and effects within the transition are examined provides valuable insight for stakeholders (e.g., parents, peer, coach, sport governing body) who seek to have a positive impact on athletes’ career development and transitions.

In relation to resources to navigate the demands of transitions, researchers have found that athletes may require internal resources as well as external resources such as support from sport governing bodies to navigate transition demands (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007; Hong et al., 2020; Stambulova et al., 2009). However, research to date has tended to focus on transitions in general rather than non-normative transitions specifically. For example, Park et al. (2013) examined coping strategies that athletes employed during the career transition process out of sport – a normative transition. They found that athletes used a range of coping strategies such as finding new careers/interests, keeping busy, seeking psychosocial support, avoidance/denial, acceptance, venting emotions as well as maladaptive coping strategies such as alcohol dependence, increased smoking, committing suicide, or drug use. The extent to which these and other strategies are employed during within career non-normative transitions such as in response to the demands associated with COVID-19 and the Olympics postponement is not known. With regard to external resources to support transitions, social support from
significant others (e.g., parents, coaches, friends, teammates) has been recognised as the most
critical resource for athletes (Stambulova et al., 2009). Brown et al., (2018) also found that
athletes’ ability to seek social support can be varied and those who have difficulty asking for
social support can face a more challenging transitional experience. However, athletes also
require organisational support from sport organisations and governing bodies especially when
they compete at the highest level (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007; Hong et al, 2020). Fletcher
and Wagstaff (2009) pointed out that sport governing bodies have a duty of care to ensure
mental wellbeing of their employees and members including athletes. They also claimed that
the organisational environment has the potential to influence the wellbeing and performance of
each individual. In addition, to better prepare for and perform at major competitions such as the
Olympics can depend on how athletes effectively develop and maintain their relationships with
different key stakeholders and support networks (e.g., coaches, support staff, sport
organisations; Poucher et al., 2018; Wagstaff, 2019). In the case of coaches, Norris et al. (2020)
found in their interviews with 13 British coaches that coaches' social networks include support
from friends, family, colleagues, and other sources (e.g., media). Among support from those
significant social networks, it was identified that support from friends were the most significant.
They also demonstrated that the coaches required different type of support such as emotional,
informational, appraisal, or instrumental support. Furthermore, few studies have examined
doaches' perspectives on and experiences of transitions or examined the resources they feel they
offer or are available, focusing instead on athletes' perspectives and experiences of resources
‘received’. Therefore, examining both athletes' and coaches' perspectives provides an
opportunity to understand more about coaches' role in non-normative transitions from resource
‘provider’ and ‘receiver' viewpoints. In this regard, the present study focused on investigating
both transition demands and resources employed by athletes and coaches as they sought to cope
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with circumstances associated with COVID-19 and the postponement of the Tokyo 2020 Olympics.

To ensure we went beyond description of demands and resources and to further our understanding of the coping processes associated with non-normative transitions, Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) transactional theory of stress presented a useful framework. Lazarus and Folkman proposed that, “psychological stress is a particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 19). The theory includes two key phases: cognitive appraisal and coping. Cognitive appraisal is an assessment of a stressor that individuals face in relation to their well-being (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). It includes two different stages: primary and secondary appraisals. Primary appraisal assesses whether the stressor and resultant crisis/conflict places the individual in trouble or can be beneficial in the future (Berjot & Gillet, 2011). Researchers (e.g., Lazarus, 1999) have identified three different primary appraisal components that may affect the appraisals and emotions recognised including goal relevance, goal congruence, and type of ego involvement. Moreover, there are three different types of primary appraisals identified including irrelevant, benign-positive, and stressful (Didymus & Jones, 2022). In sport context, researchers have studied primary appraising among athletes in terms of different associations between primary appraising and psychological factors such as the relationship between stressors and appraisals. If athletes find situations relevant to their wellbeing during the primary appraisal process, they will engage in secondary appraisal (Didymus & Jones, 2022), which evaluates one’s coping resources available to address the crisis/conflict such as social support, self-esteem, and finance (Berjot & Gillet, 2011). Researchers in sport psychology have investigated the different aspects of athletes’ secondary appraisals such as the positive aspects of being able to be in control of individuals’ emotions (Kaiseler et al., 2009) and the association between threat appraisals and
less perceived control than challenge appraisals (Nicholls et al., 2012). Furthermore, researchers have identified situation (i.e., formal properties of situations) and personal factors (i.e., an individual’s characteristics that may define what is critical for his/her wellbeing) that influence appraising (for further review see Didymus & Jones, 2022). Coping is defined as the cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage internal and external demands and occurs in response to stressors which have been appraised as taxing or exceeding an individual’s resources (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). However, coping and appraisal continuously influence each other (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) proposed two different approaches to coping. Emotion-focused coping aims to regulate distresses caused by the stressful situation while problem-focused coping seeks to directly manage the problem by making some changes related to the problem (Berjot & Gillet, 2011). In the sporting context, as researchers have developed inventories to measure coping strategies, they have classified multiple coping strategies among athletes: task-oriented, distraction-oriented, and disengagement-oriented coping; problem-focused, emotion-focused, and avoidance coping (for further review, see Tamminen, 2022). Qualitative research findings on coping in sport suggest that athletes apply multiple coping strategies to cope with stressors (Tamminen & Holt, 2010). Researchers have also found that athletes’ coping skills and strategies have a significant impact on their psychological well-being (Ntoumanis & Biddle, 2000) and the use of coping skills and strategies in competitive settings can positively influence athletes’ performance and physical well-being (Cumming et al., 2012). Whether this extends to how athletes and coaches approach coping with non-normative transitions such as the postponement of a sporting mega event warrants further investigation and could prove useful in explaining how resources athletes and coaches employ assist them to cope with the demands they experience.

Therefore, the purpose of the study was to investigate high-performance athletes’ and coaches’ experiences of unexpected transitions caused by COVID-19 and the postponement of
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the Olympics. Specifically, the research questions were: 1) What transitional demands (e.g., physically, psychologically, emotionally, financially, etc.) did athletes and coaches experience? 2) What external (e.g., social/organisational support) and internal resources (e.g., coping skills/strategies) were available and how were they utilised to cope with the demands?

Methods

The present study applied an interpretive methodology, where we sought to understand athletes’ and coaches’ experiences of an unexpected transition and develop our understanding of how they coped with such transition. Research with an interpretative approach intends to deepen our understanding of a phenomenon, which can then inform other similar situations that may happen in the future (Elbardan & Kholeif, 2017). Our research project was designed and conducted in line with the interpretivist paradigm where the researchers seek to uncover how individuals make sense of their experience related to events (Mallett & Tinning, 2014). For our interpretive inquiry, we adopted a relativist ontology and a subjectivist epistemology, which advocates the perspectives that our social world is constructed within each individual’s “subjectivities, interests, emotions, and values” (Sparkes, 1992, p. 5). The interpretivist paradigm and associated philosophical approaches were deemed appropriate to explore and better understand how high-performance athletes and coaches have made sense of their experience of the unexpected transitions caused by COVID-19. Accordingly, we applied one of the meaning-oriented methodologies, semi-structured interviews, to understand our participants’ subjective experiences, which allows researchers to collect in-depth narratives of personal experience (McArdle et al., 2012). In addition, to allow us to connect participants’ experiences with existing research and theory on coping we used Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) transactional theory of stress and its key concepts: types of appraisal and forms of coping as sensitising concepts during our analysis and interpretation of the data (Patton, 1990). As a result, the analysis took an abductive approach where “researchers strive to be open and sensitive to
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the data while also allowing for the use of pre-existing theories” (Kennedy & Thornberg, 2018, p. 5).

Participants

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

Procedure

Once ethical approval was granted from the University of Stirling, the participants were contacted and invited to participate in the study between June and October 2020. Purposive sampling was applied first by utilising the first author’s network (Etikan et al., 2016) and both snowball (Noy, 2008) and convenience sampling (Etikan et al., 2016) were applied subsequently. We initially planned to recruit similar numbers of athletes and coaches across the nationalities within our network (e.g., five athletes per country and three coaches per country),
which we considered was a manageable sample size given the timeline and resources of the present study. However, we recruited more athletes from Portugal and South Korea with support from participants but recruited less coaches from Portugal and the UK due to the limited contacts compared to ones for athletes. Each participant who confirmed participation was informed about the purpose of the study, possible interview questions and signed a consent form before they were interviewed. South Korean athletes and coaches were interviewed in their own languages by the first author who is originally from South Korea. Portuguese athletes and coaches were interviewed in English. In the stage of recruiting Portuguese participants, only high-performance athletes and coaches who are fluent in English were contacted in order to minimise any possible language barriers.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were employed which enabled researchers to collect detailed narratives of research participants and their in-depth account of personal experience (McArdle et al., 2012). To maintain consistency across the interviews, we developed an interview guide. It was based on the research questions, literature review, theory (e.g., Lazarus and Folkman, 1984; Taku & Arai, 2020; Stambulova, Schinke, et al., 2020) and media articles related to COVID-19 and the postponed Olympic Games (e.g., Rich et al., 2020). The interview questions included: (a) sport background (e.g., what is your sport? When did you start your elite sport career? Which Olympics have you competed in/at?); (b) initial responses to COVID-19 and postponements of the Tokyo 2020 (e.g., how did you feel when you learned about what was happening to the world due to COVID-19? What were your responses when the postponement of the Olympics was announced?); (c) barriers and challenges they have faced (e.g., what were the key demands/challenges/barriers resulting from the restrictions due to COVID-19 and the postponement of the Olympics?); (d) coping skills/strategies to overcome barriers and challenges (e.g., how did you overcome these challenges and barriers? What was your key
cope with unexpected transitions?; and (e) external resources to cope (e.g., what support is available? What support have you received?). All interviews were conducted via either video ($n = 11$) or phone calls ($n = 12$). The interviews lasted between 26 and 91 minutes and the total time of the interviews was 994 minutes ($M = 43.21, SD = 13.97$).

Data Analysis

An abductive approach to data analysis was used, which involved a succession of inductive and deductive processes. This allowed the researchers to interpret the data as a creative process while also using theory and related concepts as sensitising concepts when examining research participants’ lived experiences (Kennedy & Thornberg, 2018; Patton, 1990; Ryba et al., 2012). Thematic analysis (TA) was applied to analyse the data, because this allows researchers to identify meaningful patterns throughout the qualitative data set such as interviews (Braun et al., 2016). Accordingly, we followed the six-step approach of TA proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, all interviews were audio/video recorded depending on the video call platforms and were transcribed by the authors to allow them to read and re-read the transcripts and listen to the recordings to become familiar with the data. The transcripts in Korean were translated to English by the first author who is bilingual, and back-translation was applied in order to meet semantic equivalence (Chen & Boore, 2010). There was no major difference between the first and the final English transcripts that demonstrated that the integrity of the narratives was maintained during the translation process. Next, we noted initial ideas focusing on the challenges and barriers participants faced, internal and external resources available and utilised, and coping processes employed in responses to COVID-19 and postponement of the Olympics. We sought to stay open to the experiences described by participants (inductive analysis) as well as identify data that corresponded with the sensitising concepts from Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) transactional theory of stress (deductive analysis). Initial codes were developed based on the initial ideas noted in the data and were categorised
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into themes. During this process, we discussed the initial codes, identified common themes that were beginning to form, and developed the themes further. Subsequently, we reviewed the themes and discussed them until consensus was reached on the main and sub-themes (e.g., names and definitions of the themes/sub-themes). Finally, each theme was clearly named and defined. Subsequently, the identified themes were examined using concepts central to Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) transactional theory of stress, which is presented in Discussion.

Methodological Rigor and Trustworthiness

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

Transparency and Openness

In compliance with the conditions of the ethical approval by the authors’ institutional ethics panel, the data are not publicly available. It contains information that could compromise the privacy of research participants. The participants are high-profile athletes in their countries.
Therefore, the authors have an obligation to ensure their anonymity. The information presented in this article complies with APA Style Journal Article Reporting Standards. This study was not preregistered.

**Results**

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

**A Matter of Uncertainty**

The participants’ initial responses to COVID-19 and the postponement of Tokyo 2020 were both negative and positive. This does not mean that some only responded positively and others only reacted negatively. Their responses were mixed and overlapped. The positive responses were mostly associated with ‘another opportunity’. Those who had been injured or had not yet qualified for the Games perceived that they had more time to better prepare for the upcoming qualification events and Tokyo 2020: “I found it a good opportunity as I have more time to recover from my injury so I believe I can perform better next year” (Athlete 4). Coaches also recognised this opportunity for their athletes. In contrast, the negative responses included being frustrated, confused, anxious, and lacking motivation: “I didn’t want to believe it. It became worse as I started feeling so concerned and scared by the pandemic itself as many people have died and been seriously ill” (Athlete 9). Most participants considered the decision to postpone Tokyo 2020 as the ‘right thing to do’. Some, however, were very concerned about Tokyo 2020 being cancelled, while others were anxious about health and safety. These reactions were predominantly associated with ‘uncertainty’.
Much of the uncertainty and negative reactions were attributed to decisions being out of participants’ control such as upcoming qualifying events, the Olympics themselves and circumstances caused by COVID-19. Athlete 4, who won a gold medal at London 2012 and considered Tokyo 2020 as his last Olympics, commented, “I am trying to accept the situation and stay positive […] but the uncertainty around the Olympics and COVID-19 made me anxious”. Athlete 6 noted, “Uncertainty is a huge issue for me … I really want to compete at the Olympics. It is my dream”. Those athletes who had not completed their qualifying events were also concerned. In addition, the uncertainty over upcoming qualifying events and the Olympics affected athletes’ motivation. All athletes mentioned that motivation was an issue, at least initially. For instance, Athlete 5 whose sport has weight categories commented, “training and competitions [qualifiers] have been cancelled … that affected my motivation a lot. It is worse for us as we need to control weight to compete”.

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

Within a relatively short period time, the negative responses of most athletes shifted to adaptation and acceptance of the uncertainty. They accepted the circumstances, including the postponement of the Olympics, were not something that they could control. Athlete 2 noted, “it is such a shame, but I accepted what it is”. The Olympic ‘first timers’ also adapted and accepted the changes and unexpected transition. For instance, Athlete 3 who had not competed at the
Olympics yet and still needed to complete qualification commented, “I will be really upset if it
is cancelled but I accepted the postponement”. Coaches, too, accepted the circumstances and
the associated uncertainty, however, they were also certain in their role and that it had not really
changed but how they fulfilled their role needed to adapt. Coach 5 commented:

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

Changes and Limitations to Training

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

I saw other people training completely normally [in her team in the U.S.], flying to
camps on altitude with the team, with 15 people around and I’m running in a parking
lot with one person to help me. Feeling that it is not fair, that was discouraging me.
The changes and limitations to training presented a considerable challenge that the athletes and coaches had to resolve which they did. They found alternative training facilities and/or developed modified training schedules suited to home training or other substitute facilities. Athlete 7, a Korean who won a gold medal at the London 2012 Olympics and whose sport requires a special training venue and equipment, commented, “I hired a local facility several times to train and keep fit. […] it is not the same”. Coach 4 used his summer house away from the city as a training centre for his athletes, where he could keep the athletes’ healthy and safe while creating a ‘proper’ training environment. Coach 5 commented that to enable athletes to train at home the coaches organised, “I would call it a care package. We managed to piece together, from the equipment that we had, … [a] bundle of equipment for each athlete.” Whilst both athletes and coaches managed to find a way to continue to train, most participants found it challenging.

**Coping with Changes and Uncertainty**

To cope with the challenges and changes that the unexpected transition led to, the athletes and coaches employed a range of coping skills and strategies. Four main coping skills and strategies were commonly discussed: commitment to and focus on training and preparation, setting a short-term goal to focus on training, and positive distraction. Once the athletes accepted the uncontrollable circumstance, they were able to focus on and (re-)commit to their training despite the limited access to facilities. Athlete 17 provided an insight into focusing more on the controllable rather than the uncontrollable: “… just making the best of… like the different options […] like just simple things like getting into a routine and making sure that I don’t just slip into bad routines”. Athlete 13 whose sport required an opponent to train with, found training alone very difficult but affirmed the commitment to training,
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If it has to be done, then it will be done and that’s it. You don’t even think about it, if you need to train, you will train, if it’s 10 hours a day, it’s 10 hours. Just do it.

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

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

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

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

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

Role of Social Support in Coping with Changes and Uncertainty

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

We’re going to try and make sure that we [coaching staff] all have a conversation with every athlete that is within the program each week… trying to engage people in that process and keep people motivated and together and feeling part of something.
The coaches also provided tangible support in the form of training content, equipment to facilitate training and access to training spaces. Some of the athletes also mentioned how their coaches helped them to improve their training environment, which made them feel supported. For instance, Athlete 11 highlighted that she was very lucky to have access to the local pool so that she could train as much as she did before with her coach. She mentioned that she was the only one who could access it with her coach: “I felt blessed because I think it’s really important for me to have contact with the water. I didn’t have to make many changes”.

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

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

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

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

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

Since the athletes in this study are all at high level, most of them have some support from their sport governing bodies such as funding and access to the professionals. While Portuguese athletes mentioned their funding from the sport governing bodies was maintained, some in South Korea and the UK experienced a funding cut. It is worth noting that the professional services were only available for some. Therefore, many athletes pointed out lack of psychological support and more need for financial support to prepare for Tokyo 2020 such as expenses to compete/train abroad for their qualifying events. For instance, Athlete 6 noted,
About 4 years ago, I had one session related to psychological support. It was good to have the session but was difficult to apply what the psychologist said to me to my practice as it was just once, not regular or ongoing sessions.

**Discussion**

The present study investigated high-performance athletes’ and coaches’ experiences of unexpected transitions caused by COVID-19 and the postponement of the Olympics and identified their available resources to cope with these unexpected transitions. The Olympics has been considered an important within-career transition as it is seen as the peak of athletes’ high-performance career that has different demands and requires different preparation (Stambulova, Ryba, et al., 2020). However, the ‘normal’ Olympic cycle and normative transition was affected in 2020 by COVID-19. In these circumstances the transition is arguably more appropriately characterised as a non-normative transition as it was unexpected (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007; Stambulova et al., 2009; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004) and yet still presented changes and challenges, that required “a corresponding change in one’s behaviour and relationship” (Schlossberg, 1981, p.5). In this regard, the findings from the present study provide valuable empirical evidence and insights into how athletes and coaches managed the within-career non-normative transitions brought about by COVID-19 and the postponement of the Olympics. The findings extend existing knowledge on non-normative transitions by: (1) examining a global within-career non-normative transition; (2) contributing empirical evidence from athletes’ and coaches’ lived experiences that supports concerns raised by researchers; (3) bringing together research on athletic transitions and theory on stressors and coping to enable deeper understanding of transitions, particularly non-normative transitions; (4) considering coaches’ experiences of athletic transitions and their role in supporting athletes.
To date researchers have focused on normative transitions such as progression in performance level (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004) and retirement (Park, et al., 2013; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994) and non-normative transitions out of sport such as due to injury, deselection, and doping (e.g., Hong et al., 2020; Lavallee et al., 2014). However, our study focused on a within-career non-normative transition which for the athletes at the time was not a transition out of sport. As such we were able to gain insight into athletes and coaches’ experiences of this within-career non-normative transition. Furthermore, by sampling across three countries we were able to explore athletes’ and coaches’ experiences of a global situation, COVID-19 and postponed Olympics, and the associated transition. In response to circumstances arising as a result of this global situation, we found considerable consistency in how athletes and coaches from three different countries managed the non-normative transitions as they sought to continue to prepare for a delayed sporting mega event. As non-normative transitions such as this may become ‘normal’, the insights gained not only extend our understanding of navigating athletic career transitions, but they also provide valuable insight for stakeholders seeking to support athletes and minimise the negative effects of non-normative transitions.

For both athletes and coaches, ‘uncertainty’ was a key factor that influenced their responses and contributed to initial negative emotions such as frustration, confusion, anxiety, and amotivation. These findings provide empirical evidence from the athletes’ and coaches’ lived experiences that confirm concerns raised by Taku and Arai (2020) following the decision to postpone Tokyo 2020. Furthermore, the findings from our study show that the participants employed different internal resources to cope with changes and challenges including committing to training, setting a short-term goal to focus on training, finding positive distraction, and seeking social support. This indicates that they are highly resourceful (Stambulova, Schinke, et al., 2020) and demonstrated key coping strategies/skills to manage a non-normative transition. With regards to external resources, participants’ main resources were social and organisational
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support. Similar to research examining normative transitions the participants in this study gained social support from significant others (Stambulova et al., 2009) and organisational support from sport organisations and governing bodies (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007) to assist them in negotiating this non-normative transition. These findings extend our knowledge of how athletes and coaches can overcome challenges and changes caused by a non-normative transition. Furthermore, our findings extend the knowledge of non-normative transition resources to include understanding of coaches’ perspectives on how they assist athletes with transitional challenges and coaches’ own experiences and resources. This highlights the importance of informational support as well as emotional support from sport governing bodies, which should be considered by sport governing bodies and relevant stakeholders as they seek to develop support services for both athletes and coaches.

In addition to identifying the resources participants employed to address transitional challenges, we were also interested in exploring how these resources assisted participants. Drawing from Lazarus and Folkman’s theory (1984) enabled us to extend our understanding of non-normative transitions by considering the stressors and coping processes occurring within the transitions. Stress is conceptualised as a process involving transactions between the person and the environment where individuals make appraisals of the circumstances they are in and make efforts to cope with issues that arise (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Athletes and coaches in our study identified environmental demands (stressors) such as uncertainty, restrictions, and changes to training and competition associated with COVID-19 and the postponement of the Olympic games. For athletes and coaches preparing for Tokyo 2020 their primary appraisal indicated the stressors were meaningful as they had potential to disrupt preparation and jeopardise performance (e.g., qualification, selection, and Olympic performance). Drawing on Lazarus and Folkman (1984)’s framework, “threat” and “challenge” are proposed as dimensions of primary appraisal. These dimensions refer to the personal importance of the
situation where threat appraisal refers to an assessment of future harm, and challenge appraisal to potential gain and enjoyment of the struggle. With regards to secondary appraisal, Peacock and Wong (1990) proposed three further dimensions related to perceptions of controllability of the stressors (i.e., controllable-by-self, controllable-by-others, uncontrollable-by-anyone). Given the athletes investment in their sporting careers to this point, participants clearly had a stake in the outcomes of the COVID-19 situation and associated demands of the non-normative transition. For many, at least initially, this led to appraisal of threat which were most evident where participants felt their ‘Olympic dream’ was in jeopardy. At first, primary threat appraisals appeared to be accompanied by uncontrollable-by-anyone secondary appraisals. That was, due to the global nature of the pandemic, associated travel and training restrictions imposed by governments, and decisions about sporting events being made by others (e.g., international and national sport federations). As a result, the athletes’ and coaches’ appraisals were that no one, at least no one within their more immediate social environment, could control the stressful situation. Perhaps unsurprisingly and consistent with previous research (Nicholls et al., 2012), the threat and uncontrollable-by-anyone appraisals led athletes to experience unpleasant emotions such as frustration and anxiety. In contrast, for some athletes, there was evidence of primary challenge appraisal where athletes and coaches recognised the opportunity that a delay in the Olympics presented for those returning from injury or who had not yet qualified, where they could ‘fill the gap’ in their preparation for the Olympics (Schinke et al., 2020). For these athletes, the greater stressor seemed to have been the prominence of the Olympics games, only months away, and whether they had sufficient resources to be ‘ready in time’. With postponement of the Olympics, these athletes’ secondary appraisals shifted towards a greater sense of controllable-by-self and perhaps -by-others such as coaches and physiotherapists, in that they now had time, a key resource, to re(commit) to their Olympic dream.
As Lazarus and Folkman (1984) indicated, stressors and coping are dynamic processes and not a single event. Our findings indicated that athletes moved through a number of ‘iterations’ of stress appraisal and coping as a result of the non-normative transition. Initial primary appraisals triggered coping, which led to cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage the situations as they emerged and developed. Furthermore, whilst initially appraisals were oriented towards threat and uncontrollable-by-anyone, subsequent appraisals were more often oriented towards challenge and controllable-by-self. As Kaiseler et al (2009) demonstrated, it is beneficial for individuals to be in control of their emotions and situations to cope with stressors. Seeking information and adapting plans and goals reduced uncertainty which for many was also accompanied by acceptance. These cognitive and behavioural efforts enabled athletes and coaches to re-appraise the situation and demands towards challenge and controllable-by-self and -by-others. For example, one of the coaches reported enjoying having a ‘new’ problem to solve and participants reported focusing attention on what they could control. These secondary appraisals led participants to believe that the necessary resources (internal and external) were available and therefore they could cope with the demands of this non-normative transition. Throughout, participants employed emotion-focused (e.g., acceptance, distraction) and problem-focused (e.g., short-term goals, adapting daily routines) coping strategies. Social and organisational support were important influencers on these appraisal processes. The influence of others on coping processes has been recognised previously (Poucher et al., 2018), however, by understanding more about the actions of coaches and organisations our research provides insight into interpersonal as well as intrapersonal coping (Crocker et al., 2015) and contributes to understanding non-normative transitions. Athletes and coaches adapted and addressed the issues by arranging alternative training facilities and modifying training plans. This finding confirms Taku and Arai’s (2020) proposal that coaches are likely to be under pressure to adapt to the circumstance quickly to provide a modified and effective training
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schedule/plan for their athletes. This was also recognised as critical in Bowes et al.’s (2020) study of support for elite female athletes. Coaches’ communication with athletes on a regular, often daily basis, was critical to athletes’ coping.

An important cognitive effort to reduce or tolerate the demands created by the circumstances was acceptance of the uncertainty surrounding, at first, whether the Games and preceding events would take place and then regarding where and how they could train and continue their preparations. This acceptance was paired with setting short-term goals that were realistic for the given circumstances and focusing attention on what the athletes could control such as (re)commitment to training, adapting daily training routines and lifestyle schedules.

Whilst acceptance is an emotion-focused coping strategy, commitment to training, goal setting and adapting daily routines are problem-focused coping strategies (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). This shows that athletes and coaches can apply multiple coping strategies to cope with stressors in line with the previous findings (Norris et al., 2017; Potts et al., 2019; Tamminen & Holt, 2010). It should be noted that the participants in this study did not apply avoidance coping (Lazarus, 1999), which indicates that they were proactive in their coping, seeking to deal with stressors and modify their circumstances/events. Since proactive coping regards how individuals reflect on and develop their coping ability over time, it will be beneficial to examine the development of coping resources among athletes and coaches longitudinally (Tamminen, 2022). Through these strategies, athletes and coaches deliberately sought to address the challenges by taking action to resolve issues where they could. However, as they could not resolve the larger problem (i.e., COVID-19 and Olympics postponement) they also employed another emotion-focused coping strategy - distractions - to regulate their emotional response. This is consistent with the evidence in Park et al. (2013)’s study that athletes seek new interests to focus on and keep them busy to cope with transitional challenges.
An important additional coping resource for participants was the social and organisational support available from significant others and their organisations. The participants in this study had available informational, tangible, and emotional and to a lesser extent esteem support. All of which assisted athletes to focus on what they could control and to (re)commit to training. As COVID-19 and postponement of the Olympics was unprecedented and indeed a non-normative transition, informational social support was highly valued. This finding emphasises the importance of social support during this non-normative transitional period and supports the contention that social support is a critical resource to cope with transitional demands and challenges (Stambulova et al., 2009). The social support available and provided by sport organisations/governing bodies was valued by participants and included informational, tangible, and emotional support. This highlights the importance of a duty of care of sport governing bodies, which can considerably impact on athletes’ wellbeing and performance (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009). Furthermore, the findings also support the evidence in literature (e.g., Wagstaff, 2019) that it is important for athletes, in particular, to build and maintain a good relationship with their coaches and sport governing bodies/organisations to be prepared for and better perform at major international competitions. However, the need for and importance of informational and tangible support from sport organisations were recognised as critical to manage uncertainty and transitional demands to enable athletes (and coaches) to keep pursuing their goals to compete at the Olympics. This also supports the evidence from the previous studies that athletes require organisational support when they compete at the highest level such as competing at the Olympics (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007). Furthermore, most previous research in career development and transitions related to social and organisational support has focused on athletes but the evidence in the present study demonstrates that coaches also required external resources to cope with this non-normative transition and enable them to continue to do their job and provide the social support athletes needed.
Our findings suggest that sport governing bodies and coaches should seek to provide different types of social support to athletes during a non-normative transition. In particular, informational and emotional support were found to play a critical role in athletes’ motivation and coping process. However, such support is needed not only for athletes but also for coaches. Coaches also valued external resources (e.g., informational and financial support) from relevant authorities such as sport governing bodies and sport organisations to enable them to better support athletes in unexpected transitions. This evidence extends our knowledge and understanding of coaches’ needs and supports findings of Norris et al. (2020) that highlighted the main social networks and social support resources that coaches required were from friends, family, colleagues, and other sources (e.g., media). Therefore, sport organisations and governing bodies should consider how they provide different type of support (e.g., emotional, informational, financial, esteem, etc.) to both athletes and coaches during non-normative transitions to help them successfully adapt to changes and cope with transitional challenges.

For athletes coping with a non-normative transition, our findings indicated the importance of adapting to circumstances and challenges and staying motivated with goals. It should be also noted that good communication with sport governing bodies as well as coaches and teammates played an important role in managing daily challenges during a non-normative transition. The findings in this study demonstrated that participants actively engaged with messaging and video calling apps (e.g., WhatsApp), therefore sport governing bodies could use them as a key channel to communicate with athletes and coaches to provide informational and emotional support. This is particularly important when athletes are isolated as was evident in the study. Such communication strategies can be also facilitated when athletes are injured and isolated from the team and normal training schedule, for instance (Park et al., 2013). Furthermore, the findings show how participants used positive distractions as part of coping process/strategies such as socialising with families and friends, shopping, playing other sports,
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video games, camping, and cooking. Therefore, other athletes and coaches might consider the types of positive distractions they may be able to utilise during transitional challenges. In addition, many participants claimed a lack of psychological support was available, which should also be addressed by sport governing bodies and practitioners in high-performance sport. For example, psychological support can be delivered via career assistance programmes as a form of bespoke support to help athletes and coaches develop their psychological skills as well as coping skills (Hong et al., 2020; Stambulova et al., 2009; Stambulova, Ryba, et al., 2020).

While the findings show shared experiences, future research could consider the implications of different cultural context (Schinke et al., 2019), in particular, the funding system and support provision from sport organisations/governing bodies in each country. Furthermore, the interviews took place at one point in time during COVID-19 and not long after the Olympics had been postponed. Future research might also examine the longer-term effects of this non-normative transition on athletes’ performance, careers, and well-being (Pété et al., 2022; Santi et al., 2021).

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

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