

# Transitioning from Junior to Senior: A Case Study on Elite Judokas In South Korea

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7 **Keywords:** athletes' career development<sup>1</sup>, athletes' career transition<sup>2</sup>, judo<sup>3</sup>, junior-to-senior  
8 transition<sup>4</sup>, student-athletes<sup>5</sup>.

## 9 Abstract

10 This study explores the experiences of Korean elite judokas during their junior to senior transition  
11 (JST), including both male and female participants, to provide empirical evidence for the  
12 development of tailored support services or programs for this target population. We recruited 12 elite  
13 judokas for our study, comprising eight males and four females, all in their first year of university.  
14 Given their preferences and availability at the time of data collection, participants were divided into  
15 three focus groups: Focus Group 1 (FG1; four male participants), Focus Group 2 (FG2; four female  
16 participants), and Focus Group 3 (FG3; four male participants). Thematic analysis was applied to  
17 analyze the data from the focus group interviews. Five main themes were identified: (a) COVID-19-  
18 Induced Frustration, (b) From Big Fish in a Small Pond to Small Fish in a Big Pond, (c) Challenges  
19 in Academic Commitment, (d) Adapting to Transitions in Living Arrangements, and (e) Recognizing  
20 Support Needs for the JST. The findings of this study provide both theoretical and practical  
21 implications that could improve judokas' experiences during the challenging physical and mental  
22 phase of JST, as well as inform the establishment of tailored support programs and schemes for  
23 successful and smooth JSTs for athletes.

## 24 1 Introduction

25 Over the past ten years, there has been a notable increase in empirical studies focused on the  
26 transition from junior to senior levels in sports. The shift, often referred to as the junior-to-senior  
27 transition (JST), is regarded as one of the most challenging periods in an athlete's career  
28 (Stambulova, 2009). Athletes perceive the JST as a significant leap, one that involves a substantial  
29 increase in practice and performance standards compared to their previous experience. Athletes are  
30 required to manage non-sport related issues, with academic commitments and social factors often  
31 being the most demanding (e.g., Pummell et al., 2008; Stambulova, 2009). The desire to excel during  
32 this transition, along with the pressure to meet the expectations of significant others like coaches,  
33 teammates, and family, can lead to high stress levels. The uncertainty regarding their ability to  
34 manage these pressures can also heighten their sensitivity to social influences (Stambulova et al.,  
35 2012). In this respect, social support, particularly from coaches, is critical during the transition phase.  
36 Coaches' perspectives suggest that coping strategies like problem-solving, acceptance of  
37 responsibility, self-control, and positive reappraisal can significantly contribute to a successful

38 transition (Finn and McKenna, 2010). Achieving a successful transition often relate to the athlete's  
39 identity evolution and personality development (e.g., Bruner et al., 2008; Pummell et al., 2008;  
40 Stambulova, 2009). Thus, JST is a critical phase in an athlete's career, one that requires careful  
41 management and targeted support.

42 The JST typically occurs as athletes advance from junior competitions (under 20 years old) to senior  
43 competitions encompassing all ages (Drew et al., 2019). The age range for this transition is usually  
44 between 18 and 24 (Bennie and O'Connor, 2006), although this can differ depending on the sport.  
45 For instance, in sports like gymnastics where peak performance often occurs during teenage years,  
46 the transition might occur earlier (Law et al., 2007). On the other hand, in a sport like golf that  
47 emphasizes skill and mental strength over physical demands, the peak performance age is relatively  
48 higher, around 35 years (Allen and Hopkins, 2015). It is worth noting that JST can present unique  
49 challenges. Young athletes must navigate a number of difficulties across athletic and non-athletic  
50 domains (Morris, 2013). For example, they may face intensified competition and a more demanding  
51 training schedule, adding physical and mental pressure. Simultaneously, they might be transitioning  
52 from adolescence to young adulthood, a phase associated with significant cognitive, social,  
53 psychological, and physical development (Wylleman and Lavallee, 2004; Wylleman, 2019). In  
54 addition to these sporting and personal transitions, athletes might also be managing academic  
55 transitions, such as the shift from secondary to higher education (Pummell et al., 2008). This added  
56 layer presents another challenge requiring adjustments and effective coping strategies.

57 Research has consistently shown that athletes find the JST physically and mentally demanding  
58 (Debois et al., 2012; Hollings et al., 2014; Lundell et al., 2014; Rosier et al., 2015). Physically, they  
59 are challenged by elevated performance and practice standards, while mentally, they face the pressure  
60 of high expectations and limited knowledge of the demands at the senior level (Franck et al., 2018).  
61 The JST can span multiple years, subjecting athletes to prolonged periods of uncertainty and constant  
62 challenge (Stambulova, 2009). Such complexities render the JST as one of the most daunting phases  
63 of an athletic career, with many athletes struggling to manage its multifaceted demands (Vanden  
64 Auweele et al., 2004). Athletes also face the challenge of balancing their sport with other aspects of  
65 life, such as academic pursuits and social obligations (Lorenzo et al., 2009; Van Yperen, 2009;  
66 Wylleman and Reints, 2010). The path through JST is hardly linear; athletes encounter a series of  
67 highs and lows and require a variety of resources to successfully manage this transition (Baron-  
68 Thiene and Alfermann, 2015; Morris et al., 2014). Influencing the outcome of the JST are athletes'  
69 internal resources, including personal traits such as athletic identity, motivation, optimism,  
70 competitiveness, and self-confidence (Poczwardowski et al., 2014). These attributes, combined with  
71 the ability to effectively achieve their objectives, play a crucial role in managing the JST.

72 Recognizing the challenging nature of the JST in sports, there has been a significant increase in  
73 research focused on this area, especially within diverse sporting cultures and contexts. The goal of  
74 these studies is to provide enhanced support for athletes undergoing this demanding phase (Hollings,  
75 2014). Research on the JST has been conducted globally, with key contributions emerging from  
76 countries such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Russia, and the U.K (Drew et al., 2019;  
77 Stambulova et al., 2012). Notably, a range of studies have examined the JST in both individual and  
78 team sports, focusing specifically on Russian and Swedish cohorts (e.g., Stambulova, 1994;  
79 Stambulova et al., 2012). However, it is important to acknowledge that much of this research is  
80 centered on Western countries. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of the JST, there is a  
81 need for further exploration within other geographical contexts, such as Asia (Park et al., 2013). As  
82 such, a more globally inclusive perspective on this critical transition in athletes' careers can be  
83 achieved.

84 Various theories and methodologies, including qualitative approaches, have been employed in  
85 research studies to examine the JST in sport. These approaches aim to identify the key elements and  
86 factors influencing successful and unsuccessful transitions (Drew et al., 2019). Prominent theoretical  
87 models referenced in the literature include the Athletic Career Transition Model (Stambulova, 2003),  
88 the Developmental Perspective on Transitions (which examines transitions at athletic, individual,  
89 psychosocial, and academic/vocational levels; Wylleman and Lavallee, 2004), and the Holistic  
90 Athletic Career (HAC) model (Wylleman et al., 2013). The latter, which includes a ‘financial’ level,  
91 has underpinned 19 studies (Drew et al., 2019). The HAC model was further modified by the  
92 addition of a ‘legal’ level (Wylleman, 2019) and serves as the theoretical foundation for the present  
93 study (see Figure 1). The model highlights the importance of a holistic perspective in athlete support,  
94 emphasizing the need to understand athletes’ career development from a multi-faceted perspective  
95 (Stambulova et al., 2009; Stambulova et al., 2021). This understanding is crucial in the creation and  
96 implementation of support services and programs. For instance, psychological difficulties (such as  
97 anxiety, depression, eating disorders) experienced by athletes due to the demands of the JST could be  
98 linked to issues at the psychosocial level (such as conflicts with coaches, bullying by teammates, loss  
99 of significant relationships), possibly leading to diminished athletic performance (Wylleman, 2019).  
100 Therefore, adopting a holistic approach to explore the JST is critical for comprehending specific  
101 career development and transition needs of athletes.

102 [Figure 1 near here]

103 In their systematic review of literature concerning the JST, Drew et al. (2019) suggested several key  
104 points. Firstly, athletes who receive adequate financial, social, and material assistance before the  
105 transition tend to have more successful JST experiences. Secondly, support at either an individual or  
106 external level, or in an environment where the organization’s values align with those of the youth  
107 development culture, increases the likelihood of a successful JST compared to scenarios where such  
108 support is absent. Thirdly, a combined approach—where support is simultaneously provided at  
109 individual, external, and cultural levels—tends to lead to more positive outcomes than focusing on  
110 any one of these levels in isolation. Lastly, they also pointed out that athletes who encounter negative  
111 performance transitions are likely to face adverse effects on their mental health and wellbeing, and on  
112 the other hand, those with positive performance transitions generally experience an improvement in  
113 their mental health and wellbeing. Drew et al. (2019) also emphasized the value of diversifying  
114 research samples. By incorporating a variety of cultures and including female athletes in studies, the  
115 impact of different environmental contexts on the quality of athletes’ JST could be better understood.

116 This insight could be significant in fostering the specific knowledge related to sport, culture, and  
117 gender that is required to offer personalized support to athletes transitioning between stages. Drawing  
118 from their meta-study findings, Drew et al. (2019) proposed that future research might consider  
119 investigating the specific facilitators and barriers to the JST within individual sports. This could help  
120 to broaden our understanding of the unique demands athletes face in their respective sports. Such  
121 findings could then aid in the development and implementation of sport-specific interventions to  
122 support athletes throughout the JST. While various sports such as football, ice hockey, equestrian,  
123 track and field, basketball, and rugby have been the subjects of JST studies (see Alge, 2008; Bennie  
124 and O’Connor, 2006; Bruner et al., 2008; Čačija, 2007; Finn and McKenna, 2010; Hollings et al.,  
125 2014; Jones et al., 2014; Morris, 2013; Pummell et al., 2008), further investigations are needed across  
126 a broader range of sports. This is because each sport has unique demands, cultural factors, and  
127 characteristics. In light of this, the present study aims to explore the experiences of elite Korean  
128 judokas (both male and female) during their JST. The decision to focus on judo in this study is  
129 influenced by both investigators’ personal involvement with the sport. The lead author competed in

130 judo until the start of secondary school, while the co-author, as a former elite judoka, currently  
131 coaches the sport. We chose Korean athletes because of Korea's strong history and reputation in  
132 judo, and the fact that both investigators are originally from Korea. We believed investigating Korean  
133 judokas during the JST would provide unique insights, different from athletes in other countries. This  
134 responds to the previously highlighted research gap, suggesting that broader examinations are  
135 required across diverse sports due to the distinct requirements, cultural contexts, and traits each sport  
136 presents. Such understanding will help in developing evidence-based support strategies tailored for  
137 this group during their transition. Tailored strategies are critical as they address the specific needs  
138 and challenges faced by the athletes, ensuring more effective and targeted interventions for their  
139 well-being and performance.

## 140 **2 Materials and Methods**

### 141 **2.1 Design**

142 This study adopted a case study design to gain in-depth insight into the experiences of elite Korean  
143 judokas transitioning from secondary school to higher education institutions, a process also known as  
144 the Junior to Senior Transition (JST; Stake, 2005). This approach facilitated a detailed exploration of  
145 this particular case, with a strong focus on the individuals' personal experiences. Given that our goal  
146 was to understand the participants' perspectives concerning their experiences (Smith, 1996), we  
147 employed an interpretive phenomenological philosophy. The research is grounded in an interpretivist  
148 paradigm (Mallett and Tinning, 2014) and guided by a relativist ontology along with a subjectivist  
149 epistemology, allowing the researchers to interpret the ways individuals make sense of their  
150 experiences (Mallett and Tinning, 2014; Sparkes, 1992). Interpretive phenomenological research  
151 seeks to describe, comprehend, and interpret phenomena (Tuohy et al., 2013), which can capture the  
152 essence of the lived experience (Creswell, 2007). From a phenomenological perspective, 'essence'  
153 refers to the fundamental structure of meaning, wherein direct instances help construct a  
154 comprehensive understanding of an experience (Merriam and Greiner, 2019). "This form of inquiry  
155 is an attempt to deal with inner experience unexamined in everyday life" (Merriam & Greiner, 2019,  
156 p. 8).

157 To explore the subjective experiences of the participants, we employed focus group interviews as a  
158 means to capture the richness of their experiences (McArdle et al., 2012). Since the participants were  
159 united by a shared experience and circumstance, the researcher concentrated on the meanings these  
160 individuals associated with the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). The synergistic utilization of focus  
161 group data collection and interpretive phenomenology can provide valuable insights in a range of  
162 studies (Bush et al., 2019). This approach was deemed fitting for the present study as the participants  
163 were undergoing the shared experience of transitioning from junior to senior level at the time of data  
164 collection.

### 165 **2.2 Participants**

166 We recruited 12 participants in our study, eight of whom were males and four were females, all in  
167 their first year at university. These participants, all elite judokas with international competition  
168 experience, were attending the same sports-friendly university in South Korea. This university,  
169 distinguished for its commitment to sports (Morris et al., 2021), fosters an environment conducive to  
170 the growth of elite athletes, providing tailored educational support to promote their success both  
171 academically and athletically. During the data collection phase, the participants' ages ranged between  
172 18 to 19 years, with a mean age of 18.33 (SD = 0.41). Detailed participant information is presented in  
173 Table 1.

175 The participants typically adhered to a training schedule comprising three distinct sessions per  
176 weekday. Although this schedule might vary based on different factors such as upcoming  
177 competitions, injuries, off-campus training, or training camps, both the male and female teams  
178 generally followed this routine. They began with an early morning session from 6:20 am to 7:30 am,  
179 followed by an afternoon session from 2:30 pm to 5:00 pm. First-year students arrived earlier than  
180 2:30 pm to prepare the judo gym for the training session. The day concluded with an evening session  
181 from 8:00 pm to 9:30 pm.

## 182 **2.3 Data Collection**

183 After obtaining institutional ethical approval, the second author's contacts were used to recruit a  
184 purposive sample (Noy, 2008). Considering participants' preferences and availability during the data  
185 collection period, three focus groups were arranged: Focus Group 1 (FG1; four male participants),  
186 Focus Group 2 (FG2; four female participants), and Focus Group 3 (FG3; four male participants).  
187 We grouped the participants by gender, as even though they were from the same university, their  
188 training sessions were separate. Our intention was that by doing so, participants would be more open  
189 to discussing and reflecting upon their shared training experiences. For the male participants, group  
190 selection was based on their availability between the two offered timeslots. We used semi-structured  
191 interview questions, which were shared with the participants beforehand. This allowed them the  
192 opportunity to review and decide which questions they were comfortable answering, in line with  
193 ethical considerations. Both authors conducted all focus group interviews, with the lead author  
194 participating via online video calls on Microsoft Teams from the U.K., while the second author was  
195 present in person. All focus group interviews were recorded for audio and video via Microsoft  
196 Teams, and a voice recorder was used as a backup. With the semi-structured nature of the interviews,  
197 we maintained flexibility, allowing participants to share meaningful experiences that were not  
198 addressed in the interview guide (McArdle et al., 2012). The data collection took place in May (for  
199 FG1 and FG2) and June (for FG3) 2021. Given that students began their first year in March 2021,  
200 this enabled us to capture their immediate and evolving experiences and perspectives rather than  
201 retrospective narratives. It is also worth noting that these students experienced the COVID-19  
202 outbreak during their final year of secondary school, and it continued to impact them during data  
203 collection when they were attending their first semester at university.

204 To ensure consistency across interviews, an interview guide was established, drawing from our  
205 research questions and existing literature (e.g., Drew et al., 2019; Franck et al., 2018; Pummell and  
206 Lavalley, 2019; Stambulova et al., 2012). The interview guide included (a) sport background (e.g.,  
207 When did you start your elite judo career? What drove your interest in elite judo?); (b) experiences  
208 during secondary school (e.g., What was your overall experience like in secondary school? Were  
209 there significant events that influenced your judo career? Did these events pose any challenges? How  
210 did you cope with these challenges? How did you balance sport commitments, academic  
211 responsibilities, and personal life?); and (c) experiences of transitioning from secondary school to a  
212 higher education institution (e.g., What changes have you noticed since transitioning from high  
213 school to university? What challenges have you encountered during this transition and how are you  
214 managing them? Have your strategies for balancing academics, sports, and personal life changed  
215 since this transition?). Both authors conducted a pilot interview each, using the same interview guide.  
216 While there were minor adjustments, such as the use of alternate Korean vocabulary, no significant  
217 changes were made.

218 Prior to participating in the study, each participant was given an information sheet detailing the  
219 purpose, methodology, potential risks, and benefits of the research. After going through this  
220 information, they were requested to sign a consent form to indicate their agreement to participate.  
221 Upon receipt of the signed consent form, we scheduled their participation in the focus group  
222 interviews. We provided the participants with the information sheet and secured their consent to  
223 ensure they had a comprehensive understanding of the study and their rights as research subjects.  
224 This strategy highlighted our commitment to ethical principles in research, which include informed  
225 consent and respect for participant autonomy. We believe that these measures contributed to the  
226 integrity and credibility of our study. The interviews lasted for approximately 82 (FG1), 76 (FG2),  
227 and 83 (FG3) minutes, with an average duration of 80.33 minutes (SD = 3.09). The interviews were  
228 transcribed verbatim, and to ensure confidentiality, participants' names were replaced with codes,  
229 such as Judoka 1, 2, 3, and so forth (see Table 1).

## 230 **2.4 Data Analysis and Rigor**

231 In our analysis, we followed the six-step thematic analysis technique proposed by Braun and Clarke  
232 (2006). This process begins with familiarizing oneself with the data (Step 1) and ends with reporting  
233 the identified themes (Step 6; see Results). After thoroughly reading the transcripts and listening to  
234 the recorded interviews (Step 1), we identified initial codes related to the participants' experiences of  
235 JST (Step 2). To ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, the authors held four different  
236 meetings to discuss the initial codes and common themes identified from the data (Step 3). Our  
237 discussions, conducted via video and phone calls, played a crucial role in refining and agreeing upon  
238 the themes, ensuring a clear and consistent interpretation of the data. This rigorous approach to data  
239 analysis was employed by the authors with the goal of fostering trust in their findings, presenting a  
240 reliable narrative of the participants' experiences. In subsequent stages, to enhance the accuracy and  
241 transparency of the findings, the identified themes were further reviewed, defined, and named by the  
242 authors (Steps 4 and 5). While analytical software such as NVivo offers advanced coding  
243 capabilities, we chose a more traditional method to maintain a close connection with the raw data.  
244 We used Microsoft Word's 'New comment' function, allowing us to annotate the transcript similarly  
245 to a manual 'pen and paper' technique. This method ensured a direct engagement with the data and  
246 allowed for continuous refinement as themes became clearer. In addition, the authors thoroughly  
247 reviewed Braun and Clarke's (2006) 15-point "checklist" for quality thematic analysis to maintain  
248 the analytic process' quality across the six steps.

249 Ensuring rigor and trustworthiness stands as a critical component in qualitative studies, despite  
250 varying research methods and strategies for implementing and evaluating the data analysis process  
251 (Johnson et al., 2020). To enhance the rigor of our investigation, we implemented several steps. First,  
252 we carefully reviewed each phase of data analysis and the results for each theme via a series of team  
253 discussions (Anney, 2014). This helped ensure consistency and alignment between the analysis and  
254 the aim of our study. Second, we developed an 'audit trail' of analytical procedures to enhance the  
255 transparency and coherence of our analysis process, aligning with recommendations by Brown et al.  
256 (2018). This included a comprehensive account of the methodologies we employed and the reasoning  
257 behind each decision, in line with suggestions by Finfgeld-Connett (2014). Third, to strengthen the  
258 credibility and dependability of our findings, we engaged in independent primary analyses, adopting  
259 the role of 'critical friends' by sharing and critiquing each other's work, as suggested by Marshall  
260 and Rossman (2006). By implementing these measures, we ensured the reliability and validity of our  
261 findings, thereby meeting the requisite standards of rigor and trustworthiness for qualitative research.

## 262 **3 Results**

263 Five themes were identified from the thematic analysis (for further details, see Table 2).

264 [Table 2 near here]

### 265 3.1 COVID-19-Induced Frustration

266 All participants expressed frustration from the cancellations of key competitions in their final  
267 secondary school year due to COVID-19. These events were important for obtaining performance  
268 records (i.e., medals) for university admissions as elite judokas. Their aim was to join South Korea's  
269 leading sports university, making performance in these events crucial. However, the frequent  
270 competition cancellations increased their anxiety. As a result, the participants lost their motivation  
271 and goals, leading to feelings of frustration and even depression: "I wanted to have clear information  
272 on whether or not there were competitions, so that I can prepare for the next competition" (Judoka 3).

273 The absence of competitions led to uncertainty, causing frustration among participants. They were  
274 left uncertain about university applications based on their second-year records. Judoka 5 shared her  
275 feelings regarding this challenging period, "Because the dormitory was closed, I had to train  
276 separately... I did go to the gym but I wasn't able to do it properly... If it wasn't for COVID-19, I  
277 could have done better, I could have improved more... I feel like I lost a lot of my senses, it was hard  
278 to get back in shape. [...] I was so stressed because of university, I heard a lot of talk like, 'You can't  
279 go to university like this.' My coach told me that I looked too stressed. It was really hard  
280 psychologically. Can I go to university without competing? I just kept working hard. I thought I  
281 would have to show them if I ever competed again".

282 While awaiting confirmation of their eligibility for their target university, Judoka 3 and 6 attempted  
283 to prepare for the national university entrance exam because they were uncertain whether their  
284 second-year medal records would be sufficient for university admission: "Due to COVID-19, the  
285 sudden cancellation of matches left me feeling somewhat lost... I couldn't seem to get a grip on  
286 things. Although I was exercising on my own, it didn't feel like I was... In the first semester, I felt  
287 anxious, so I did study a bit... but still, I think I was fortunate compared to others, I believe my case  
288 turned out well" (Judoka 6).

289 Judoka 2, 9, 10, and 11 encountered difficulties with weight control due to the cancellation of  
290 competitions, reduced training loads, and associated stress. These factors not only affected their  
291 preparation for competitions but also their transition to university. The following is an excerpt from  
292 the FG3 conversation:

293 Judoka 11: I had lost weight but when they said [the competition] was cancelled, all the effort to lose  
294 weight was in vain.

295 Judoka 12: When the competition was cancelled... I first thought 'I need to go to university...' [...] I  
296 didn't want to do anything...

297 Judoka 11: I was scared...

298 Judoka 10: After taking some time off, my weight went up from 60 to 78, I even wondered if I was  
299 pregnant [laugh]. When a competition was announced, I tried to lose 12 kilograms in 3 weeks, but I  
300 got injured and was wondering whether I should compete or not. I was starving and weighed around  
301 71-72 kilograms, I felt like I was going to faint [...] I ended up competing and lost up to 17  
302 kilograms.

303 Judoka 9: I also gained 15 kilograms and when I lost all of it, I received a lot of help from [the name  
304 of one of Judokas]. Now I have lost all the weight and can keep up with everyone.

305 Faced with challenges due to COVID-19, the judokas adopted various coping strategies. They sought  
306 support and guidance from parents, peers, and coaches, remained focused on university admission  
307 goals, and maintained a determined mindset, prioritizing training over concerns outside the judo  
308 gym: “I think I relied a lot on those around me. I sought a lot of advice from my mother and my  
309 teacher. When I said, ‘I don’t know what to do now, please advise me,’ my mother comforted me  
310 saying, ‘Don’t worry. You may want to go to the university of your choice, but that’s not the only  
311 path. Prepare at your own pace, and if you have to give up unavoidably, there are other paths, so  
312 don’t put all your energy into this one.’ I really wanted to go to [the name of the university], so I kept  
313 looking into it, and seeing that, I think my mother encouraged me and tried hard to ease my mind”  
314 (Judoka 3).

315 Other participants also shared their experiences regarding coping strategies, such as: “My father  
316 helped me... he said I could go to a good university at my level... There was no special method... I  
317 thought about it on my own... No... It wasn’t set in stone... (Judoka 12); “I like eating... So, with  
318 food... when there were no matches, I ate a lot... I think my coach consoled me from time to time”  
319 (Judoka 11); “Without being influenced by others, just me alone... it was tough, then... it got better...  
320 I think it was like that” (Judoka 7). Interestingly, one participant (Judoka 3) noted that he kept a diary  
321 as part of his coping strategy during the pandemic, in addition to managing his daily routine: “When I  
322 entered high school, I kept a daily diary. I wanted to see how I changed day by day. While the diaries  
323 from my first and second years were training logs, in my third year, I wrote down everything I felt  
324 during the day. Looking at it, I remember making a resolution that even though yesterday was like  
325 that, I should make today more meaningful”.

326 Despite successfully navigating through this difficult period and gaining admission to their desired  
327 university, they continued to be affected by the COVID-19 restrictions, such as confinement  
328 measures, which led to further frustration: “I don’t think it’s so much the difference between high  
329 school and university, but in high school, I could come and go freely. After coming to university, I  
330 find it hard being confined in the dormitory even on weekends. I can’t go out often and thinking that  
331 I’m locked up makes me depressed. I have nowhere to release my stress about exercise” (Judoka 4).  
332 Judoka 4’s concerns about strict campus restrictions were echoed by others in FG1. These rules,  
333 aimed at pandemic protection, confined them mainly to their dormitory rooms. They occupied  
334 themselves with smartphone activities and video calls. Their frustrations persisted when they  
335 returned to competitions, now changed significantly—lacking audiences, requiring masks, and  
336 prohibiting food and drink, among other adjustments—leading to discomfort and frustration: “The  
337 matches proceeded rapidly without breaks, and with nobody in the audience, the atmosphere was  
338 quite chaotic. We couldn’t bring in drinks, nothing was allowed inside” (Judoka 7); “After not doing  
339 anything during the hiatus and then suddenly having a match, I didn’t feel real about the match, and  
340 my competitive spirit diminished whether I won or lost... In high school, I cried when I lost in a  
341 match, but this time, there was none of that, it was weird because it didn’t feel real” (Judoka 5).

342 The participants navigated pandemic challenges using different coping strategies during what should  
343 have been a critical final year of secondary school. This time is typically crucial for enhancing  
344 performance and motivation before university transition. However, even after entering university, the  
345 pandemic’s effects lingered on their athletic careers and daily lives, posing challenges they were still  
346 addressing during data collection.



### 347 **3.2 From Big Fish in a Small Pond to Small Fish in a Big Pond**

348 All participants noted the heightened level of other athletes' performance and the increased demands  
349 of training. However, male and female participants perceived this difference distinctly. While male  
350 participants felt daunted and intimidated, female participants viewed it as a significant opportunity to  
351 enhance their skills and performance, even enjoying the challenges. The following excerpt is part of  
352 the conversation from FG1:

353 Judoka 1: There are a lot of people who are stronger than me, so I had many experiences of being  
354 defeated, which was hard. The techniques that I was good at didn't work well on people who were  
355 better than me, and it was completely different from high school, so I had many experiences of  
356 feeling deflated. As a result, I think I got mentally stressed.

357 Judoka 4: Until high school, the sports atmosphere was more about being forced to do things while  
358 being mindful of the coach's gaze rather than encouraging each other. While others were doing it  
359 reluctantly, I worked hard on my own, but at university, everyone was working hard together, which  
360 was good, but... There were many cases where I felt intimidated because there were many people  
361 stronger than me.

362 Judoka 2: When I train here and see others doing well, I don't feel like I'm doing exceptionally  
363 well... As a result, I feel like my self-esteem is falling.

364 On the other hand, the female judokas from FG2 appreciated others' high performance and advanced  
365 skills, considering these aspects as catalysts for their own improvement. For instance, Judoka 7  
366 noted, "I feel like I'm working harder here than I did in high school. Everyone here is good, so it's  
367 fun to practice, and I feel like I'm improving because I'm with people who are at a higher level. In  
368 high school, I didn't have many partners who were at my level. I think it's great that everyone here is  
369 good."

370 Participants felt a stronger sense of autonomy and responsibility when they started university. This  
371 transition also brought about a change in coaching style. Unlike their secondary school days, coaches  
372 now provided more autonomy and supportive guidance, and this shift, which focused on  
373 acknowledging achievements, was well-received by the participants. Judoka 3 noted, "It feels good to  
374 get rewarded for the effort I put in. In high school, it felt like I had to meet the coach's targets, but at  
375 university, it feels even better to achieve my own goals. The coach plays a supportive role." Judoka 6  
376 also shared the similar view, "In high school, I practiced and competed while being conscious of the  
377 coach's gaze, but at university, I have to manage my own practices, and I think the biggest difference  
378 is that the competition is for myself. Well... I feel like... In high school, the coach used to watch from  
379 the outside and I just did as instructed without thinking, but at university, I think and do a lot more. I  
380 find myself contemplating a lot on how to go about the competitions."

381 While the participants appreciated the autonomy they were given, some also felt pressure to excel  
382 and demonstrate high performance to their peers and coaches, understanding that their skills and  
383 performance were now largely up to them. For instance, Judoka 7 highlighted, "To be honest, I think  
384 I felt more burdened in some ways. Since high school, I was consistently coming in first place, and I  
385 felt a sense of pressure that I had to keep beating the older girls who I had previously defeated. This  
386 sense of pressure that I had to keep coming in first, starting from my first year at university...  
387 Because of the mental burden, my performance in the matches wasn't good. In fact, I lost in this  
388 competition to an older girl whom I had beaten before..."

389 The participants adopted coping strategies similar to those used during the COVID-19 challenges,  
390 which included seeking support from parents, peers, and coaches, maintaining focus on skill  
391 improvement, and accepting the situation. Notably, there was a difference in support-seeking  
392 behavior between genders. Male participants often turned to senior judokas in their later university  
393 years, while female participants typically sought help from peers or tried to handle challenges on  
394 their own. One of the male participants, Judoka 11, remarked, “When I first started, I couldn’t adapt  
395 well to the training and could barely keep up with the intensity of the training. However, I think I was  
396 able to adapt to how to do it during training time as the older boys next to me helped and guided me.  
397 Thanks to the seniors around me, I think I was able to focus more on the training. Because they run  
398 with me, encourage me... I now have the confidence that I can do it to some extent on my own”.

399 One the other hand, one of the female participants, Judoka 8, noted, “Even when it’s too hard during  
400 training and I think, ‘Ah, I really can’t do this anymore’, I feel better after the workout is over and I  
401 relieve stress by talking and playing with my peers. When something doesn’t work, I ask the coach  
402 and seem to gain strength from a single word of praise from the coach.” The following excerpt is part  
403 of the conversation from FG2:

404 Judoka 7: I try not to be influenced by others and rather than asking for help, I try to struggle and  
405 solve problems by myself, and I think things get better that way. Since I have to do it anyway, I just  
406 accept it and proceed. When it’s really hard, I analyze my past matches by watching the videos, and  
407 that seems to make me forget about the difficulties.

408 Judoka 6: I think...I think... I feel like I’ve lost the sense of burden because I think I have nothing to  
409 lose. Thinking that there’s only progress ahead, I just keep overcoming and focusing on training.

410 Judoka 5: I just think I have to do it anyway, and I just do it. Since I have to do it anyway, I think  
411 there’s no need to think that it’s hard like this every day... I seem to be encouraging myself.

412 Although all participants faced the same situation of being surrounded by judokas at a higher level, it  
413 was interesting to observe the gender differences in their perceptions. The same applied to their  
414 coping strategies. Male participants actively sought and received support from their senior judokas,  
415 whereas female participants did not mention any support from seniors, instead relying on their peers  
416 or managing by themselves.

### 417 **3.3 Challenges in Academic Commitment**

418 Most participants, except for Judoka 1, 6, and 7, struggled with academic responsibilities at the  
419 university. In South Korea, many elite athletes, like them, are often exempted from rigorous  
420 academic work in secondary school to focus on their sport. Thus, they were unprepared for the  
421 academic expectations at the university level. However, Judoka 6 and 7, having balanced both  
422 academics and sports during their secondary school, were more at ease with the university’s  
423 academic demands. Their experiences are reflected in the following conversation excerpts:  
424

425 Judoka 6: When I was in high school, because of COVID, the competitions were cancelled, and I  
426 wasn’t sure if I could enter university through judo. So, I thought that if it didn’t work out, I should at  
427 least go to university through studying. So, I studied a bit and tried to do the same at university, so I  
428 didn’t find it particularly difficult. I’ve been busily following along with what’s given and  
429 accomplishing it, and before I know it, the first semester is almost over. So, I don’t think I’ve had  
430 any major difficulties so far.  
431

432 Judoka 7: I'm working hard without feeling any particular difficulty. It's the same as when I was in  
433 high school.

434  
435 On the other hand, Judoka 8 in the same focus group as Judoka 6 and 7 noted, "In high school, I only  
436 attended morning classes. Even then, since I went to early morning training before class, I ended up  
437 falling asleep during the class time. When it came to tests, I mostly just guessed the answers... When  
438 I first received an assignment at university, I really didn't understand anything... It felt  
439 overwhelming. I managed to do it by asking other friends little by little... Now that I've adapted, I  
440 think it's okay." As noted by Judoka 7, and similarly stated by Judoka 5 in the same focus group  
441 (FG2), these female participants confirmed that, despite initial struggles, they now manage their  
442 academic commitments effectively. However, for the male participants in FG1 and FG3, dealing with  
443 academic responsibilities seems to be an ongoing challenge. For instance, Judoka 3 from FG1  
444 mentioned, "Doing assignments is tough. [...] If I have to prepare for training in the afternoon, I need  
445 to rest in the morning, but due to worrying about assignments, I can't rest in the morning, which  
446 affects the efficiency of my afternoon training. Even if it's not in the morning, I've just finished a  
447 tough training session in the afternoon, and I have to do assignments before going for evening  
448 training, or if I can't, I have to do assignments after evening training, which is very hard."

449  
450 While it is evident that Judoka 3 was still striving to adapt to the new arrangements, interestingly, the  
451 male participants from both FG1 and FG3 explicitly mentioned seeking help from Judoka 3. They  
452 perceived him to be the most academically adept among them and appreciated his supportive  
453 demeanor towards his peers. For instance, Judoka 10 noted, "We get together as a group and try to  
454 solve things. Among us, [the name of Judoka 3] studies well and he knows how to write, he's smart,  
455 even among regular students, he's a smart kid. We ask [the name of Judoka 3] for help and ask him  
456 to help us graduate [laughs]. As long as we don't get an F, we can graduate, so we're currently trying  
457 to avoid getting Fs. But it's still very hard." In this regard, the common coping strategy for all  
458 participants was to seek peer support. However, a minor difference emerged between male and  
459 female participants: while the male participants also sought help from their senior judokas, who had  
460 gone through similar experiences in their 2nd, 3rd, or 4th years, the female participants did not seek  
461 support from their female senior judokas at all, preferring to manage amongst themselves instead.

### 462 **3.4 Adapting to Transitions in Living Arrangement**

463 Most participants, except for Judoka 11, had experienced dormitory life during their secondary  
464 school years. Transitioning to university dormitories was not a significant challenge for them.  
465 However, they did appreciate the improved facilities at the university. They noted the benefits of  
466 two-person rooms with private bathrooms and air conditioning, as well as the availability of a sauna.  
467 This contrasted with their secondary school accommodation where rooms accommodated more than  
468 two people and coaches could enter freely: "Coming to university, the facilities are much better and  
469 more comfortable than they were in high school. It's great not just because the facilities are good, but  
470 also because I live in a double room, with air conditioning, a bed, and a balcony. All these things are  
471 great. In high school, we had to share a room with several people, and sometimes four or five of us  
472 would share a large room, which had many inconveniences. But now that I'm at university, I have  
473 my own space, so I can do whatever I want after training, which is just so good" (Judoka 2). In  
474 addition to improved facilities and living conditions, the female participants from FG2 discussed  
475 having more freedom in their daily lives. Below is an excerpt from the conversation in FG2:

476 Judoka 8: The biggest changes since moving to a university dormitory are that the coach doesn't take  
477 our mobile phones away and we have more time to sleep. When I was in high school, the coach

478 would enter the room without any notice... Because of that, I was always on edge, even when  
479 sleeping. Now that's no longer a problem, I feel really comfortable. It's improved a lot. The facilities  
480 have also gotten better.

481 Judoka 7: [the name of her high school] really has strict rules. We weren't even allowed to bring a  
482 single piece of candy into the dormitory. We couldn't even wear slippers inside. There were so many  
483 restrictions, but coming to university, all those restrictions are gone, and I feel really comfortable.

484 Judoka 11, who did not have previous experience of staying at a dormitory during his high school,  
485 was also satisfied with the facilities and living condition but it took some time for him to adjust  
486 himself to the new environment especially his hometown is far away from the university where is  
487 situated in Seoul, the capital city of South Korea: "Before entering university, I had never  
488 experienced dormitory life. Having my own room and space was nice, but when I went back to [the  
489 name of the city where he is from] for a holiday and returned, it took about 1-2 weeks to adjust. I  
490 wanted to go back to [the name of the city where he is from] ... I missed living with my family".  
491 However, he noted that he eventually adapted well to the new environment and settled down.

492 All participants expressed satisfaction with their dormitory life, but they faced stressors related to  
493 certain aspects related to their sport. A notable concern was the daily washing of their thick uniforms.  
494 The team's hierarchy, which allowed fourth-year students to have laundry priority, often left the first-  
495 year students, including our participants, waiting late into the night to wash their uniforms.  
496 Additional laundry machines for both male and female judo teams could help address this challenge:  
497 "Laundry! There are only two washing machines, so since we're freshmen, by the time it's our turn  
498 to do laundry it's already late at night... I wish there were more washing machines. We do need to  
499 wash our judo uniforms quite frequently" (Judoka 7). Judoka 9 also shared the view, "There's  
500 nothing particularly difficult about living in the dormitory, but if I had to choose something, it would  
501 be that the seniors do their laundry first and we have to do ours later, which can be a bit tiring". In  
502 addition to the issue of laundry machine usage, some of the male participants discussed the need for  
503 support with water supply and cleaning supplies. As first-year students, they were responsible for  
504 providing water for training sessions and purchasing new cleaning supplies, a burden they suggested  
505 could be reduced with additional support: "One inconvenient thing is... we have to buy items like  
506 water bottles ourselves. Every time we train, we have to run around carrying 1 liter in each hand,  
507 which is quite hard... It would be nice if we had something like a portable ice box to carry around  
508 easily, but every time we train, since there are 8 first-year students, we have to carry 16 bottles, 2  
509 bottles each... It feels like we're exhausted and tired even before we start training [...] And also things  
510 like brooms... we have to buy all those cleaning supplies ourselves. It would be nice if the school  
511 could provide us with good stuff... It's too much trouble to have to keep replacing them as we use  
512 them... It's also a cost" (Judoka 10).

513 While it is positive that all participants were content with their dormitory life and appreciated the  
514 high-quality facilities and living conditions, it appears that some minor adjustments and support  
515 could further improve their dormitory life. Based on their recommendations, considerations such as  
516 providing more laundry machines and carriers for water bottles (considering the sport-specific  
517 context) would be beneficial.

### 518 **3.5 Recognizing Support Needs for the JST**

519 The participants discussed some support needed for their JST in order to better adapt to university  
520 life: (a) providing an induction session, (b) supplying devices for studying, (c) granting access to  
521 psychological/counselling support. As presented in the previous section of 'Challenges in Academic

522 Commitment', to reduce their pressure and overwhelming experience in relation to academic  
523 commitment, the participants requested induction sessions at the start of the very first semester.  
524 These sessions would provide clear and sufficient information about developing their timetable,  
525 expectations for each module, and sources of support (e.g., contact points): "I wish there had been an  
526 opportunity to receive more detailed information about the basics before the semester started, and a  
527 chance to ask questions. It would be nice to have a class or session that explains the importance of  
528 grades, how to efficiently plan your timetable, how to do assignments well, and other basic things  
529 that you need to know" (Judoka 8). During the data collection period, COVID-19 restrictions meant  
530 participants attended classes via Zoom. Some highlighted the importance of having reliable devices  
531 like laptops or webcams for these virtual lectures. Although most had the required devices,  
532 malfunctions led to them borrowing from peers. Given the shift towards online or hybrid teaching,  
533 having dependable devices is essential for the learning process.

534 Lastly, while the male participants did not discuss the need or importance of psychological or  
535 counselling support, the female participants highlighted this aspect. In particular, Judoka 6 and 7,  
536 who attended the same high school, discussed how they greatly benefited from such support at their  
537 high school, finding it very helpful for their performance and daily life: "I'm quite open about  
538 receiving counselling. In high school, we had a dedicated professional counsellor. Since all the  
539 students at our school were athletes, I think we all needed some kind of psychological counselling to  
540 some extent. We had a good counsellor who gave us a lot of counselling. There were also many  
541 boys" (Judoka 6); "The counsellor listened to us and gave us a lot of good advice. At that time, many  
542 boys also received counselling. Although you had to make a reservation, you could still get enough  
543 psychological support. When you went and came back, you felt relieved" (Judoka 7). While both  
544 mentioned that many male athletes at their high school sought such psychological support, the male  
545 participants in the present study did not discuss any such experiences, indicating that they might not  
546 have had this opportunity during secondary school. Judoka 5 and 8 recognized the availability of  
547 support in high school but did not use it although they stressed its importance for adjusting to  
548 university life.

#### 549 **4 Discussion**

550 The aim of the present study was to explore Korean elite judokas' experiences of junior to senior  
551 transition (JST), with the goal of providing empirical evidence to aid in the development of a tailored  
552 support service or program for this target population. The findings offer both theoretical and practical  
553 implications that can contribute to improving judokas' experiences during the JST, a period  
554 recognized as challenging both physically and mentally (Franck et al., 2018). Previous studies have  
555 suggested that the JST can be one of the most daunting stages for athletes, with many failing to cope  
556 with the associated demands (Vanden Auweele et al., 2004), particularly when it comes to balancing  
557 sport with other activities, such as academic studies and social life (e.g., Lorenzo et al., 2009; Van  
558 Yperen, 2009; Wylleman and Reints, 2010). In line with this, the participants in our study discussed  
559 the challenges associated with JST, as well as their coping skills and strategies.

560 Since they experienced the COVID-19 pandemic during the last year of their secondary schools, their  
561 challenges were not only limited to the JST itself but also associated with the pandemic. The most  
562 notable challenges all participants experienced were frustrations resulting from the cancellations of  
563 all competitions and qualifiers in their final year of secondary school due to COVID-19. Stambulova  
564 et al. (2022) suggested that for athletes in high-performance sport, COVID-19 could introduce  
565 changes or challenges at different levels in athletes' career development (Wylleman, 2019; Wylleman  
566 and Lavallee, 2004). In relation to the HAC model (Wylleman, 2019) that served as a theoretical

567 framework for the present study, COVID-19 could impact athletic development, the first level of the  
568 model, leading to changes in access to training facilities or cancelled competitions. Effects on athletic  
569 identity, social isolation, and concern for family and friends might occur at the psychological (second  
570 level) and psychosocial (third level) stages. Financially (fourth level), athletes might see changes in  
571 funding, whereas at a legal level (fifth level), there may be travel restrictions (Hong and Allen, 2022;  
572 Stambulova et al., 2022). For our participants, the athletic level was closely tied with the academic  
573 level, as their eligibility to enter the sports university of their choice depended on their athletic  
574 performance during the final year of secondary school. This dependency created significant tension  
575 and anxiety due to the cancellation of all competitions. As a result, issues at the athletic level were  
576 also associated with the psychological level, where participants had to deal with the resulting tension,  
577 anxiety, and frustration, as evidenced by their narratives.

578 In response to these unique challenges, participants utilized three main coping strategies: seeking  
579 support and advice from parents, peers, and coaches; focusing on their goals; and merely carrying on,  
580 concentrating on training and putting the issue out of mind when outside the judo gym. These coping  
581 mechanisms are akin to those employed by Olympians preparing for the postponed Tokyo Olympic  
582 Games, which included commitment to training, setting short-term goals, seeking positive  
583 distractions, and securing social support (Hong and Allen, 2022). Armed with these strategies,  
584 participants managed to overcome the challenges posed by COVID-19, and eventually achieved their  
585 primary goal of entering their chosen sports university. However, even with successful coping  
586 mechanisms in place, they continue to face the ongoing impacts of COVID-19, such as restrictions  
587 on going out, the absence of audience at competitions, mandatory mask-wearing, and alterations in  
588 competition arrangements due to pandemic mitigation measures, all of which have created additional  
589 frustrations. Clearly, COVID-19 has introduced new stressors for high-performance athletes,  
590 suggesting the need for mental health management during this period (Reardon et al., 2020).

591 As the participants managed the JST, they strongly perceived an increase in the high performance  
592 and competition power of other athletes, as well as increased training demands. Both aspects posed  
593 significant physical and mental challenges (Franck et al., 2018). Interestingly, the findings from the  
594 present study provide unique evidence of a gender difference in perception. While the male  
595 participants felt daunted and intimidated by these changes, the female participants saw them as an  
596 excellent opportunity to improve their skills and performance, and even enjoyed the challenges. Their  
597 coping strategies echoed those they utilized to address challenges imposed by COVID-19: (a)  
598 seeking support from parents, peers, and coaches, (b) focusing on their goals, especially enhancing  
599 their skills and matching superior players, and (c) accepting the situation and moving forward.  
600 However, there was a gender difference in how they coped with these challenges. Male participants  
601 actively sought and received support from senior judokas, while female participants did not mention  
602 support from seniors, indicating that they relied more on peer support or their own resilience.  
603 Identifying the reasons behind these distinct perceptions is beyond the scope of this study, but it  
604 would be worthwhile for future research to explore these gender differences. In terms of the training  
605 environment, it is noteworthy that all participants expressed a feeling of increased autonomy and  
606 responsibility since entering the university, which might be a culture-specific finding. The  
607 participants were predominantly exposed to a controlled coaching style during secondary school,  
608 leaving them with less autonomy and responsibility for their performance (Park et al., 2012).  
609 However, the newfound autonomy and responsibility positively influenced their training,  
610 performance, and relationships with their coaches. This highlights the importance of fostering a  
611 supportive environment that boosts athletes' performance.

612 Many participants struggled with academic commitment, largely because they did not prioritize it  
613 during secondary school. A commonly written response by Korean student-athletes to exam  
614 questions they cannot answer is “I am sorry. I am a student-athlete” (KBS, 2007), a phrase that  
615 completely describes the problematic reality they face. young, talented athletes frequently prioritize  
616 their athletic ambitions over academic pursuits, with instances of school absenteeism commonly  
617 starting at secondary school level. This highlights a pervasive problem within the educational  
618 administration system and the experience of student-athletes. A significant contributing factor to this  
619 issue is the intense focus on athletic achievement by educational institutions and coaches, which is  
620 consequently adopted by the athletes themselves. However, the root of the problem can be traced  
621 back to the government’s strategy, which places triumph in international sports above educational  
622 advancement. The rigorous demands of heavy training and regular competitions hinder athletes from  
623 allocating sufficient time and energy to their studies, causing many to drop out of their education  
624 (Park et al., 2012). The findings in this study echo societal issues highlighted in Park et al.’s (2012)  
625 study, showing that sports success continues to be prioritized over education in elite sports. However,  
626 the focus should shift towards supporting these elite athletes as they adapt to new academic  
627 commitments at university. Although the study identified some coping strategies for overcoming  
628 challenges associated with academic commitment, such as peer support, the participants suggested  
629 that structured and clear induction sessions during the first semester at university, tailored to the  
630 specific needs of the target population, could empower them to take responsibility for their studies. In  
631 terms of seeking peer support to overcome academic challenges, there was a minor gender difference  
632 observed. While male participants sought help from senior judokas—who had similar experiences in  
633 their 2nd, 3rd, or 4th year—female participants did not seek support from their senior judokas at all  
634 and preferred to manage issues among themselves. The reason for this gender difference could be  
635 further explored in future studies.

636 All participants highlighted the improved facilities and living conditions, which enhanced the quality  
637 of their daily life in the dormitory. The female participants also appreciated having more freedom.  
638 Increased autonomy and responsibility, along with improved facilities and living conditions,  
639 positively impacted their JST experience. This needs to be reflected in the HAC model (Wylleman,  
640 2019), although currently, such a level is missing. At least in the South Korean context—where it is  
641 common for elite athletes to live and train together at the same accommodation—an additional  
642 ‘living arrangements and conditions’ level could be added to the development model to provide a  
643 more holistic perspective. However, this may not be limited to the Korean context, as athletes  
644 elsewhere may also need to change their living arrangements as they progress. For instance, they  
645 might transition from living with parents during secondary school to living in a dormitory at  
646 university, and then to a dormitory within a national training center. Therefore, this factor could be  
647 considered for addition to the HAC model based on the evidence provided in this study. While all  
648 participants appeared satisfied with their dormitory life, they expressed the need for additional  
649 material support, such as more laundry machines, cleaning kits, and carriers for heavy water bottles.  
650 These requirements may be specific to judo teams, suggesting that the provision of support needs to  
651 consider the sport-specific context to improve athletes’ experiences (Drew et al., 2019; Hollings,  
652 2014).

653 The participants expressed a need for specific support mechanisms to facilitate their JST and to adapt  
654 more effectively to university life. As noted earlier, the implementation of induction sessions can be  
655 a beneficial addition to future support initiatives. The participants suggested that providing suitable  
656 devices for academic pursuits would be appreciated and could motivate them to engage more actively  
657 in the learning process. Finally, access to psychological or counselling support was recommended by  
658 the participants, particularly the female judokas. The significance of such support in an elite sports

659 setting has been underscored in various studies (e.g., Hong and Allen, 2022; Stambulova et al.,  
660 2022). As the present study indicates, young athletes value the positive impact of psychological or  
661 counselling support on both their athletic performance and daily life as elite athletes. This aspect  
662 should be emphasized when establishing a support scheme to aid in the JST.

663 We demonstrate both theoretical and practical implications of the findings, and we hope they  
664 contribute to the existing literature on the JST in a unique cultural context (Drew et al., 2019;  
665 Hollings, 2014; Park et al., 2013). We also aim to provide empirical evidence supporting the creation  
666 of tailored support programs and schemes. However, while our study presents a range of significant  
667 implications and contributions, it also carries some limitations. Given that all participants were from  
668 the same university, the findings may not encompass the full context of other universities in South  
669 Korea. Although the participants in our study represent a high level of student-athletes who  
670 experience the JST, future research could expand to include elite athletes from other universities or  
671 those involved in different sports. While our study examined judo, an individual sport, filling the  
672 research gap identified by Drew et al. (2019), future research may wish to explore the JST of elite  
673 athletes involved in other individual sports, as their experiences may differ from those in judo.  
674 Although our study included participants of both genders, future research might further investigate  
675 gender-specific factors relating to the JST. While we did not specifically aim to analyze differences  
676 between the experiences of male and female judoka in this study, we identified some differences  
677 across our findings as presented in the Results section. Thus, future research could explore the  
678 different factors that affect the JST based on gender.

## 679 **5 Conflict of Interest**

680 The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial  
681 relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

## 682 **6 Author Contributions**

683 **Hee Jung Hong:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Data Curation,  
684 Writing - Original Draft, Writing - Review & Editing, Visualization, Project administration.

685 **Seung Han Hong:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Data Curation,  
686 Writing - Review & Editing.

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## 695 **9 Data Availability Statement**



696 The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding  
697 author. The data are not publicly available due to their containing information that could compromise  
698 the privacy of research participants.

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853 Table 1. Participant Information

Focus Groups	Codes	Gender	Age	Career length (years)	Best Performance at the time of the data collection
1	Judoka 1	Male	18	1 – 5	National Team Substitute (Reserve Team)
	Judoka 2	Male	18	5 – 10	National Team Substitute (Reserve Team)
	Judoka 3	Male	19	5 – 10	3 <sup>rd</sup> place at the major national competition
	Judoka 4	Male	18	5 – 10	National Team Substitute (Reserve Team)
2	Judoka 5	Female	18	5 – 10	National Team Substitute (Reserve Team)

	Judoka 6	Female	18	1 – 5	3 <sup>rd</sup> place at the major national competition
	Judoka 7	Female	19	5 – 10	National Team Substitute (Reserve Team)
	Judoka 8	Female	18	1 – 5	1 <sup>st</sup> place at the major national competition
3	Judoka 9	Male	19	1 – 5	3 <sup>rd</sup> place at the major national competition
	Judoka 10	Male	19	10 – 15	1 <sup>st</sup> place at the major national competition
	Judoka 11	Male	18	5 – 10	1 <sup>st</sup> place at the major national competition
	Judoka 12	Male	18	5 – 10	1 <sup>st</sup> place at the major national competition

854 **Note:** For the protection of participants' privacy, specific career lengths have been presented as ranges.  
855 This approach ensures confidentiality while preserving the context and significance of the data.

856 Table 2. Themes identified by Thematic Analysis

Theme	Sub-themes
COVID-19-Induced Frustration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Challenges Associated with the Final Year of Secondary School</li> <li>▪ Challenges Experienced After University Admission</li> <li>▪ Coping Skills and Strategies to Overcome these Challenges</li> </ul>
From Big Fish in a Small Pond to Small Fish in a Big Pond	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Differences in Competitors' Performance and Competitive Strength</li> <li>▪ Increased Training Demands</li> <li>▪ Emergence of Greater Autonomy and Responsibility</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Coping Skills and Strategies to Overcome these Challenges</li> </ul>
Challenges in Academic Commitment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Adjusting to New Academic Expectations</li> <li>▪ Overwhelmed by Academic Commitments</li> <li>▪ Coping Skills and Strategies to Overcome these Challenges</li> </ul>
Adapting to Transitions in Living Arrangement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Transition to New Dormitory Life: Improved Facilities and Living Conditions</li> <li>▪ Increased Freedom in Daily Life</li> <li>▪ Minor Difficulties in Dormitory Living</li> </ul>
Recognizing Support Needs for the JST	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The Need for Induction Sessions</li> <li>▪ The Need for Study Aids or Tools</li> <li>▪ Access to Psychological/Counselling Support</li> </ul>