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Abandoned to manage the post-Olympic blues: Olympians reflect on their experiences and the need for a change

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ABSTRACT

The post-Olympic period is complex and distressing for many Olympic athletes; preparing for the likely impacts of the Olympic Games amongst returning athletes is fundamental in managing the negative responses articulated as the *post-Olympic blues*. Mindful of the need for the development of interventions that can support athletes, this study engaged Olympic athletes in: (a) discussing their experiences relating to the Olympic and post-Olympic periods and, (b) informing the researchers on Olympians' opinions on the management of the post-Olympic blues. Fourteen Olympic athletes from the United Kingdom took part in focus groups which were analysed using Thematic Analysis. The analysis produced six mutually exclusive themes, *The Olympic Dream*, *The Olympic Nightmare*, *Commodification*, *Perceptions of Social Support*, *Limited Preparation*, and *Managing and Overcoming*. Through these themes the Olympians provided suggestions into how the content and potential facilitation of future interventions could better support athletes through their experiences. The findings were clear, Olympic athletes irrespective of whether they had previously competed in an Olympic Games expressed a desire for support in preparing for the post-Olympic experience. They expressed that this should be delivered primarily after the Olympic Games, with several athletes highlighting the value of an awareness raising session beforehand. Athletes proposed a shift away from expert sport psychology delivery of interventions in favour of a programme which was pragmatic in terms of content and delivered by former Olympians.

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'The reason why I am doing this is I don't want an 18-year-old kid to go to their first Olympic Games and feel the way that I did. I want everyone, the media, the NGBs [National Governing Bodies] to learn and have some support there' Holly Bradshaw, Olympian and researcher as participant.

Representing one's country at an Olympic Games and potentially winning a gold medal represents the pinnacle of an elite athlete's career; for many, it is the realisation of a lifetime dream fulfilled. On her selection for her third Olympic Games in Tokyo in 2021, Holly recalled feeling 'Just pure elation. I was so stoked [very excited] ... that I can pull on the strip again [wear the Team GB uniform] at the Olympics for myself and the people who matter to me'. However, she is acutely aware, even in light of her excitement to represent her nation for a third time, that the experience has a darker side. Although contemporary research indicates that Olympic and Paralympic athletes

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are no more at risk from clinically significant mental health symptoms and conditions than the general population (e.g. Ranson et al. 2020), there are critical transitions in athletes' lives when the risk of mental distress is increased (Cosh, McNeil, and Tully 2020). A key transition is that of the Olympic to post-Olympic period which can be characterised as a 'crisis transition' (Stambulova 2017, 62). Athletes' experiences of the aftermath of participation at the Olympic Games have been well documented in the media and resonate with Holly's first comment above. The anecdotal stories of depression and the compromised mental health of athletes in the aftermath of an Olympic Games, have become a focus of academic interest (Gahwiler 2016; Gordin and Henschen 2012; Howells and Lucassen 2018; McArdle, Moore, and Lyons 2014; Samuel, Tenenbaum, and Bar-Mecher 2016). Collectively, this body of research has reported that the post-Olympic transition period (see Samuel, Tenenbaum, and Bar-Mecher 2016), irrespective of whether an athlete retires from their sport or not, is a complex, distressing period that is characterised by cognitive and emotional responses that have been articulated as the *post-Olympic blues* (Howells and Lucassen 2018). Acceptance of this phenomena as an authentic and worthy research focus is acknowledged by a recent consensus statement on athletes' mental health in the Olympic/Paralympic quadrennium which states: 'The Games and mental health are interrelated, because athletes committing wholeheartedly to an Olympic/Paralympic pursuit are at increased risk of disappointment, identity foreclosure, and high life stress' (Henriksen et al. 2020, 391). Beyond the Olympic Games research on the post-Olympic blues is now being applied to understanding an athlete's experience in other world-class events, such as the Invictus Games (e.g. Roberts et al. 2020).

Preparing for the emotional and practical consequences of returning from the Olympic Games by engaging with psychological support, be that formal sport psychology or informal social support, is fundamental in managing the post-Olympic blues (e.g. Wylleman, Reints, and Van Aken 2012). However, this is an area of the athletes' preparation that is typically poorly executed. In interviews with experienced sport psychologists, Arnold and Sarkar (2015) identified that practitioners were cognisant of the fact that athletes felt that they were inadequately prepared for the aftermath of an Olympic Games. This perception is consistent across sports and is irrespective of the athletes' perceived success at the Games. Jackson, Dover, and Mayocchi (1998) identified that although winning a gold medal was perceived as positive by gold medal winners, there were negative aspects to winning gold. These included the ongoing memories of stress associated with the Olympic Games, being in the public eye, and a lack of support. The participants in the study identified that although they were prepared to win, there was no preparation for dealing with their win. Arnold and Sarkar (2015) recommended that in addition to having an awareness of the stressors that an athlete may encounter prior to and during an Olympic Games, practitioners should be aware of the stressors that athletes might encounter after an Olympic Games. They recommended that athletes have techniques in place to help proactively prevent or cope with these demands. This was reiterated by Bennie and colleagues (2021) who concluded that positive transitions were more likely when athletes had made plans for their post-Games phase and when they had received strong support from their family, teammates, as well as their governing bodies. Nevertheless, athletes are still returning from the Olympic Games and facing difficult transitions into a new training cycle (e.g. Howells and Lucassen 2018) or into retirement which have resulted in mental health problems.

The need for useful and timely interventions is perhaps indicative of the lack of proactive support provided to athletes in preparing for the Olympic experience. However, the timing of psychological interventions is a contentious issue. McArdle, Moore, and Lyons (2014) argued that athletes should be engaged in psychoeducation programmes relating to the challenges of the post-Olympic period prior to the qualification events, and Bennie et al. (2021) identified a need for psychological education before the event to help athletes cope with future critical events. Nevertheless, some National Governing Bodies (NGBs) and athletes may be reluctant to do this. This may be explained by the belief that planning for a challenging aftermath could affect the preparation and performance of the athletes at the Games. Focusing on the support after the Games, in their consensus statement, Henriksen et al. (2020) argue that mental health support should continue beyond the close of the

Games and they criticise the 'little strategized attention that is often allocated to the post-Games time period'. Addressing athletes' psychosocial concerns upon return is like the proverbial shutting the stable door after the horse has bolted; coaching and support staff are often unavailable, exhausted, burnt-out, and are ill prepared to support the athletes through this period of vulnerability (Bennie et al. 2021). This period is characterised by a lack of support and a perception that the athletes are no longer entitled to draw on their more formal support systems, this is particularly salient for those who are retiring. Henriksen et al. (2020) make a number of recommendations relating to planning and policy design and the implementation of support for athletes, including that normalisation of the experience should be facilitated through 'inviting athletes to discuss their post-Games experiences and challenges as part of peer-support groups' (Henriksen et al. 2020, 405).

Despite the increased academic interest, only one intervention has been designed to prepare Olympians for both the experience *and* the aftermath of competing at the Olympic Games (i.e. McArdle, Moore, and Lyons 2014). However, this intervention was designed without input from Olympic athletes. It has been acknowledged in the wider literature that assumptions about what is best for a population are often made with little or no engagement with the individuals themselves (e.g. Halliday et al. 2019), and that a user's perspective (i.e. an expert by experience) is often different from that of the professional experts (Todd, Jones, and Lobban 2012). Engaging with the target population in co-produced research, 'is much more likely to provide opportunities for identifying meaningful outcomes and approaches that are desired by the community' (Benevides et al. 2020, 823), and is in itself empowering for the individuals concerned (Halliday et al. 2019). Involving key stakeholders in the development of interventions has been shown to be efficacious for an array of unique sub-populations including to inform mental health priorities in autism (e.g. Benevides et al. 2020), wellbeing in students (e.g. Halliday et al. 2019), and the development of a behavioural intervention in patients with HIV (e.g. Merlin et al. 2017). Accordingly, informed by the extant research on the Olympic and post-Olympic experience and mindful of the need for the development of interventions that can support athletes, this study engaged Olympic athletes in: (a) discussing their experiences relating to the Olympic and post-Olympic periods and, (b) informing the researchers on Olympians' opinions on the management of the post-Olympic blues.

Method

Researchers and philosophical orientation

The first author, Holly (HB) adopted the position as a *researcher as participant* in a series of focus groups with Olympians reducing the power relations that often exist between the researcher and the researched. In doing so it enabled her to exhibit her own authenticity and humanness thereby enhancing trust and promoting ethical practice (Knight 2012). However, Probst and Vicars (2016) acknowledge that when qualitative researchers are members of the population they are investigating, there may be 'concerns about ambivalent motivations, conflicting agendas, and misleading assumptions that the researcher naturally "understands" what is being said' (2016:150). As a two-time Olympian selected for her third Olympics, a post-graduate research student, and a former participant in a post-Olympic blues study, HB facilitated the focus groups and actively engaged in the discussions. However, she attempted to limit her disclosures to those experiences that she believed to be shared by the participants so as to enable the research to be about the Olympians' experiences rather than what mattered to her (see Probst and Vicars, 2016); consequently, in the analysis we coded her comments. The second author, Karen (KH) is an academic and a Chartered Sport Psychologist who alongside the third author, Mathijs (ML), a mental health researcher explored the post-Olympic blues in an earlier study (Howells and Lucassen, 2018). There is coherence in our epistemological stance, in that we share a constructivist philosophy, as we are interested in making sense of peoples' own constructions of their experiences. Our ontological assumption is relativist in that we accept that *reality* is dependent on those interpreting it (Guba and Lincoln 1998). These

assumptions informed our decision to use focus groups as we endeavoured to provide a supportive space where Olympians were able to reflect on and to interpret their experiences, thereby articulating collaboratively constructed storied versions of their Olympic experiences.

Participants

Following institutional ethical approval from the KH's institution, we opportunistically sampled participants who had competed in at least one Olympic Games. Fourteen athletes ($n_{\text{females}} = 5$) from the United Kingdom agreed to participate. The ages of the participants on the day of their focus group ranged from 25 to 40 years ($M_{\text{age}} = 30$, $SD = 3.9$), and their age at their first Olympic Games ranged from 20 to 33 years ($M_{\text{age}} = 24$, $SD = 3.4$). The participants came from: field athletics ($n = 2$), track athletics ($n = 6$), triathlon ($n = 3$), kayaking ($n = 2$), and canoeing ($n = 1$). Collectively, they won one gold, one silver, and two bronze medals, and many of the athletes reached Olympic finals. To avoid possible identification of the athletes, we used numbers to identify each participant (P) and do not provide further details including gender and sport, about the Olympian quoted.

Study design

Despite a plethora of research studies that have focused on athletes' mental health and wellbeing in the last decade, recommendations for clinical practice in the field have been limited and derived primarily from expert panels of clinicians and reviews of the literature (see e.g. Reardon et al. 2019). Therefore, to assist in advancing the field, the current study has endeavoured to focus on the perceived needs and expectations of the primary stakeholders, the athletes themselves. Focus groups have been used to ascertain participants' voices in action and in co-produced research to inform interventions and policies (e.g. Halliday et al. 2019; Merlin et al. 2017), and is consistent with our constructivist philosophy of making sense of the Olympians' experiences. In the present study, the number and size of the focus groups were determined by three factors: (a) the recommendations relating to the number and size of focus groups required in the extant research, (b) access to participants, and (c) the need to collate data and analyse it in time for it to be of use for the next Olympic Games. In a study designed to assess saturation in inductive thematic analysis, Guest et al. (2016) suggested that two to three focus groups should capture at least 80% of themes on a topic and four to seven focus groups should identify 90% of the themes. Small focus groups have been used by other researchers (e.g. Bloor et al., 2001; Sarmiento et al. 2019) to promote in-depth discussion. Therefore, we utilised four focus groups comprising three or four participants who were convenience sampled to discuss the wider Olympic experience and to inform the design of an intervention to support athletes in preparing for the return home as well as the management of the post-Olympic blues. The composition of the focus groups were determined on the basis of athlete availability rather than any purposive identification of gender, medal position, or sport, however, each focus group comprised at least one male and one female athlete.

Data collection

In preparation for the research, HB spoke with fellow Olympians who highlighted they would be more comfortable talking to another Olympian than academics. This resonates with the findings of Reardon et al. (2019) who identified that athletes may not acknowledge or seek help from professionals in respect of their depressive symptoms due to a perceived stigma that exists in elite sport. In light of this, and with guidance from the second and third authors, HB facilitated three focus groups at training locations, and the final one on a virtual platform due to COVID-19 restrictions. At the start of each session, she asked the participants to complete a demographic questionnaire which included a series of closed questions relating to their opinions on the development and delivery of potential interventions relating to the post-Olympic blues. This priming generated discussion in the focus

groups around the four key areas: (1) the Olympic experience (e.g. can you describe your Olympic experience(s)?); (2) the participants' experiences of the post-Olympic blues (e.g. how did the blues impact on you in the weeks following the return to the UK?); (3) social and psychological support (e.g. what support did you receive when you returned home?); and, (4) what future support should look like (e.g. who would be best suited to deliver an intervention?). The focus groups, which lasted between 50 and 65 minutes, were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim by HB.

Data analysis

We decided that Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis (TA) was an appropriate approach to analyse the data because it offers an 'accessible and theoretically flexible approach to analysing qualitative data' (Braun and Clarke 2006, 77), and furthermore encourages participants to reflect on and articulate their construction of their own experiences. We followed Braun and Clarke's six-stage process of (1) familiarisation, (2) coding, (3) generating themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) writing up. However, informed by Braun and Clarke's (2019) assertion that research cannot be entirely inductive (i.e. that we always bring something of ourselves into the analysis) and in light of our diverse backgrounds, we adopted a dynamic approach to the process. Inspired by Wertz et al.'s (2011) 'Five Ways of Doing Qualitative Research', we embraced our individual interpretations of the data. We considered that each of us had some familiarity with the extant research in the area, but that our lived experiences were different and our own areas of expertise should inform the data analysis. This process enabled us to reflect on what was important to us as professionals and to bring our experiences into the analytical process. Previous studies that have been informed by different disciplinary-based language and theory (e.g. Krane et al. 2014) have relied on common grounding to guide researchers to consensus. We felt that our grounding was sufficiently diverse that multiple interpretations would give greater insight into the athletes' experiences and that with our different backgrounds it was unlikely that we could achieve theory-free knowledge (see Smith and McGannon 2018). Accordingly, we did not strive to achieve inter-rater reliability which would be influenced by our backgrounds and varying theoretical proclivities, rather we rejected this notion as an appropriate indicator of rigour (Smith and McGannon 2018). To enhance the quality of the research, to promote reflexivity in the analysis, and to ensure that KH and ML were sufficiently familiar with the data (Step 1), we met after each focus group and supported HB's intersubjective reflection (Trainor and Bundon Trainor and Bundon, 2021) on her interactions with the participants. Furthermore, HB provided the audio-recordings of the focus groups so that KH and ML were familiar with the nuances that could have been lost in the transcription process where the spoken word is converted into the written word.

When the focus groups had been transcribed by HB, we separately coded all of the transcripts using open coding (Step 2), that is creating labels from the data (e.g. from our data 'fake crowd noise'). Each of us employed an iterative process going backwards and forwards between the transcripts to assign new codes when applicable. Once codes had been assigned to sections of the transcripts, we separately created sub-themes (Step 3), that is, making connections between the discrete codes (e.g. 'fake crowd noise' and 'not being wanted at Rio' were combined into the sub-theme of 'anti-climax'). Braun and Clarke (2019) identified that a mismatch may occur here if inadequate coding has occurred, but we suggest that by even bracketing our views, our own diverse experiences brought about different thematic identification. We then met to discuss similarities and differences, through a collaborative approach, where we each acted as critical friends to the others; we agreed on a number of subthemes which we then collaboratively grouped into themes (Steps 4 and 5). As a final step, to facilitate the sixth stage of writing up, we each identified quotes from participants which we felt best represented the themes.

Table 1. Olympians' perceptions of psychological support after the olympic games.

Sub-Themes	Higher Order Theme
Lifetime dream	The Olympic Dream
Dream narrative	
Conflict	The Olympic Nightmare
Media intrusion	
Anti-climax	
Isolation	
Failure	
Medal machines	Commodification
Body as a functional object	
Athletes are disposable	
Dehumanisation	
Lack of support after the Games	Perceptions of Appropriate Support
Perceptions of sport psychologists	
Support from family and friends	
Perceptions of what is required	
Disruption of expectations	Limited preparation
Prepared to perform	
Prepared to win	Managing and Overcoming
'Maladaptive' coping strategies	
Avoidance strategies	
Disclosure	
Retirement	

Results

TA (Braun and Clark, 2006) resulted in six distinctive themes (Table 1). The first two themes, *The Olympic Dream* and *The Olympic Nightmare* represent two contrasting aspects of the same overall experience. The two next themes represent the way that athletes perceived that they were treated; as objects for *Commodification* and in the social support available to them in *Perceptions of Social Support*. The final two themes represent the athletes' interpretations of how well they were prepared for both the Olympic experience and its aftermath in *Limited Preparation* and *Managing and Overcoming*. Through these themes, the Olympians provide suggestions into how the content and facilitation of interventions in the future could better support athletes through their experiences.

The olympic dream

Olympic participation represented the culmination of years of training and for many, the realisation of a lifetime dream to represent their country at an Olympic Games. The athletes appeared to have internalised the expectation that the Olympic Games would be the most important and fulfilling experience of their lives and subscribed to a dream narrative; P11 explained, 'when you're a little kid and you talk about going to the Olympics and being an Olympian that's what you expect'. P1 recounted the draw for their race and said 'first Olympics and you draw [world's number one], the fastest. It was almost like I was dreaming basically'. P7 explained his team's performance in London 2012, which resulted in an Olympic gold medal: 'We did perform really well, I think it was something like 98% of our true potential, could have hardly [done any] better'.

The olympic nightmare

Despite the dream described by some athletes, the somewhat ethereal nature of the experience had negative undercurrents as the athletes talked about how the dream concurrently became a nightmare; this nightmare involved internal conflict, media intrusion, the perception of the Games as an anti-climax, feelings of isolation, and failure to meet their own and others' expectations. We

interpreted that some of the athletes had a difficult time separating the negative from the positive aspects; the same experience represented all that is possible at the pinnacle of sporting participation but also the trauma that this can entail. P9's recollection represents this internal conflict:

I was injured and it went wrong ... it's actually a miracle that I [performed] in the condition I was in ... This is the Olympic Games, I am meant to be here in the absolute shape of my life, ready to go and I am just, I don't care and it was horrible! But suddenly ... you see the Olympic rings ... and it hits you ... you're at the Olympic Games.

For one of the athletes the dream was tainted from the outset by media intrusion, specifically from social media when there was controversy over their selection to Team GB. P3 explained:

I got a little bit of backlash from a few athletes and a few different people and I think it was more the social media backlash ... it affected my parents a lot more ... mum got really upset by that sort of thing and [it] inadvertently affected me.

Even though P3's individual experience, associated with a specific controversy was unique, for the majority of the athletes the reality of Olympic participation was different from what they had expected. Informed and inspired the Olympic dream, we interpreted that the participants had created a vision of Olympic representation that ultimately was not realised, rather they experienced 'an anti-climax' (P10) particularly in relation to Rio de Janeiro/Rio, 2016. P11 expanded:

As a first Olympics we had heard ... how amazing it is. It is this huge deal and everybody is excited about it, and it felt like a massive anti-climax as it was like "the sink doesn't work" and "no one wants us here".

In this specific Olympic Games the athletes described feeling unwelcome. P11 stated: 'there was so much booing'. P6 agreed:

Rio, I hear all this noise and I'm "cool it's going to be busy" and it was fake noise. They had crowd noise pumped into the stadium ... there was about 100 people there. Swear to God ... I'm looking around thinking this is shit, this isn't the Olympic Games ... It was embarrassing.

Although the athletes' experiences were often individualised, in that some had achieved medal success and others had not, many of the athletes spoke about their disappointment in not achieving their goals and their perception that they had failed. The athletes mostly accepted responsibility for their failures. P6 stated:

I was gutted ... I ... fucked it up ... It was really tough as we went back on the flight as failures. I was sitting there with all these rowers, gold medals hanging from everywhere ... shit! That was an incredible achievement for me ... and [I] came away feeling shit.

P4 elaborated and explained how perceived failure impacted on how friends, families, and the public viewed them; despite acknowledging that those who judged him did not have access to the full facts, he took responsibility for others' disappointment in him:

I felt like I had let people down, like I was an embarrassment ... I literally felt like I'd gone there, performed, got [to] the pinnacle of the career and flopped ... People don't know what happened, they just see the result and think "fuck me what's happened, that's terrible". And they don't really know the story behind it.

Commodification

Reflecting on their disappointment about how they were treated was raised by several athletes. In particular, disappointment related to the organisational aspects of Olympic participation; the sport staff, the NGBs, and the public. Relatedly, athletes described their bodies as functional objects that were dehumanised (P12) and commodified into a product that was moulded and existed in order to perform for public consumption which was ultimately disposable. HB asked for clarification giving insight into her own experience of feeling commodified: 'Do you feel like a product?', to which P12 replied 'Well you are'. We interpreted that as a 'product', the athletes were subject to constant

critique and analysis. P6 explained: 'Two years going into it, it felt like everything you were doing was being watched, judged, overanalysed. I found that really frustrating'. This analysis involved specific focus on all aspects of the athletes including their weight, reducing them to pliable and functional objects. P11 recounted a post-Olympic debrief:

[One of the staff] was "can I have half an hour to sit down with you?" Sat down talked through the season ... "won European medal that year ... made the Olympic final, that's good", they brushed over that and goes "so we [want to] lose some weight for next season right?".

All of the athletes, without exception, acknowledged their primary role was to win medals to ensure that their sport/s continued to be funded and were therefore little more than medal producing machines. P8 recalled a conversation before his Olympic final with an influential member of the NGB: '[They] said to us ... we were one medal down on our target and that meant that [the sport] would have had a big cut from UK Sport ... [after they] said "thank you so much you've just saved our jobs, funding" and all that kind of stuff'. This content about athletes being medal producing machines, was repeated across the focus groups and irrespective of the success of the athletes. P9 articulated how he felt about the organisational aspects of sport: 'You need me to perform for your job, you don't care about me and my performance or anyone else'. P13 expanded: 'That's the problem higher up, they have performance targets which are the be all and end all, where in reality it should be about how many people, kids, teenagers or whatever, are doing the sport'. The athletes shared their reflections and highlighted this performance indicator was the prime driver of the sports even if it resulted in negative outcomes for the athletes: 'That's the world we live in, we know, everybody knows contingent on medal performances, yet to live that way will destroy you' (P7).

The focus on medals went beyond the attitudes and behaviours of the sport staff, it was also internalised by other athletes and the public. For instance, the athletes who competed in Rio 2016 discussed the distressing experience of being aboard the chartered flight that brought them home to the United Kingdom. The athletes were allocated seats based on the outcomes of their Olympic performance (i.e. gold medal winners in First Class, other medal winners in Premium Economy). This decision to rank the athletes in order of their position hardened the view that an athlete's value was directly related to their medal tally; P6 recalled:

I was in Premium Economy because I was tall and [a member of the team] came and had a go at me, saying "how come you got an upgrade? I've got a medal" and the Chef de Mission was sat in front of me and killed them [with a glare], I was "fuck you" [to member of the team].

P11 explained how the flight created a *them and us mentality*, 'It was really weird ... half the people were posting on social media about the party in the front, I saw it and I was like "well that wasn't my flight"'. The public reinforced this feeling of those athletes who had failed to win medals as being unwanted commodities who were disposable as P9 explained: 'As soon as you get back, no interest, nobody wants to talk to you, did you get a medal? No'. This was reiterated by HB's own experiences of feeling rejected: 'although you had the potential to win a medal, you have not and now they are done with you ... We are focusing on whoever else is coming [who medalled], no regard for [me/my achievements]'.

Perceptions of appropriate support

A common discussion was around the participants' perceptions of the general lack of support they had received from sport psychologists, from the NGBs, and/or from family and friends. The participants discussed the formal psychological support and were conflicted about the value of sport psychologists in preparing them for the wider Olympic experience and supporting them in the aftermath. They acknowledged the importance of sport psychology provision but a few of the participants preferred not to engage with a team sport psychologist. P1 explained, 'I think

psychology is important, I started seeing [psychologist's name withheld] privately and that stuff has really helped'. This desire to engage with a private psychologist rather than a team psychologist was explained by P8:

I've not necessarily wanted to admit something ... in case it goes against me in the future They funded this person to chat to everybody and they would only pass on information that was a real concern, but to have something that was separate I would prefer that then speaking to [the team psychologist].

This desire to speak to external practitioners was prompted by experiences of ambiguous professional boundaries; P4 explained:

I was talking to [a team psychologist] ... and I was telling them stuff about how I was feeling ... and when I got dropped off funding and I spoke to [one of the support team], he very much threw stuff in my face that only [the psychologist] would have told him. I was like WTF, that shouldn't be making its way to [him] to come back to me, it just shouldn't be, if you confide in someone else it should never really be that way.

Furthermore, the participants were frustrated by the lack of proactive support. P8 stated, 'I think as well we only really get psych support if we ask for it and I think a lot of the time you don't necessarily realise you need something'. P9 reinforced this:

I've had no sport psychology ... absolutely nothing the whole time and got myself to ... the Olympic Games and then got thrown off funding after the injury ... and not once did anyone step in and ask how I was doing dealing with it all. I would question myself and sit there losing my mind.

The athletes felt unsupported both during the Olympic Games and upon their return. Athletes noted the NGBs were only interested in them as deliverers of performance indicators. P11 explained it as: 'If the culture of ... the NGB was to care about people, then the support would be there kind of by default, as they care about you as an individual rather than "did you win a medal yes/no"'. P14 elaborated upon the lack of empathy, 'I can remember I crossed the line and the first thing one of the members of staff said to me was "don't you dare cry, get on with it". So there was never any emotional support'. P10 agreed and also expressed a desire for consistency of support:

You notice in [the] Olympic year how people start popping up, it would nice to have consistency throughout the four-year cycle, rather than a massive injection six months out.

Two participants discussed a meeting with an influential member of their NGB in the immediate aftermath of the Games which P12 described as 'dehumanising' and lacking in 'that human element'. P2 explained what happened:

[They] kind of missed any opportunity to be like "well done guys", "we've done it now". Instead, [they] went straight on to "we haven't met our UK Sport targets so we are going to have a really tough time over the next few months".

However, it was following the return to the United Kingdom that the athletes felt the lack of support most acutely as the NGB support staff took annual leave, were re-assigned, or lost their jobs. P14 explained:

The staff has been with us for eight weeks at least without seeing their own family and they all clocked off and I just felt like I was left on my own. I am not very good either at sort of talking about things or admitting that I am struggling so I [definitely] buried it ... the two years that followed I had quite a few little niggles [minor injuries] and never really got on top of things and I think it was all compounding. The niggles turned into bigger issues because I couldn't mentally deal with things and I do put that down to never dealing with how bad I felt after the Olympics. I don't think there was ever really much support or understanding around it.

P2 explained how she felt after the Games and related her experiences with the team psychologist, however, even recounting the experience made her feel uncomfortable suggesting that these interactions had long term implications not just on how she viewed the individual concerned but how recollecting the experience continued to make her feel

I remember just really having this feeling of wanting to run away, didn't want to have anything to do with it anymore and it was quite a hard time. I remember meeting with our psychologist ... and being like "I'm really struggling" ... We had this chat where they asked if I was suicidal and I was "no not quite" and then they were gone. I really felt like "what is this?" Oh gosh [recounting] this is making me feel all clammy.

Reflections on these experiences led to discussions around the development of the intervention and the perceptions of what is required, P14 stated:

There should be some after support if people need it, not everyone will need it or wants it but I think there should be something in place, you know I have heard of Olympic gold medallists who have suffered with depression and anxiety after the Games. I feel like it's kind of "Go home!" and everybody shuts up shop and sort of forgets about it all. So I think there should be something offered and in place for athletes post-Games.

The views varied about who would be best suited to deliver the support sessions. P6 stated:

'It doesn't have to be [a] sport psych, it could be ex-athletes ... that understand the situation better. I have never worked with a sport psych because I don't think they understand and they have never stood on the line and put their balls to the wall'.

This reflected the most common preference that support should be offered by a former Olympian. There were other views expressed as well, P10 drew on his post-Olympic experience, 'No one was knocking on the door with support or anything ... I would rather have my friend network around me than have people coming to me trying to force stuff on me'.

The perception of support from friends and family was more complex. The athletes were in agreement that their families were proud of their achievements and supportive, P8 stated that her parents told everyone about her selection: 'Lots of them were just like "wow she's got selected" they were just super excited. So then when they found out I got the medal ... they were that's amazing'. However, the athletes lamented that despite this positive perception of them, their friends and family did not fully understand their situation. An exchange between three of the athletes illustrated their associated frustrations:

P13: I think we all agree in that we have support, whether it is the correct support we need to deal with the situation is another thing. Probably not. My parents don't know anything about sport.

P9: I was going to say my parents don't know.

P7: My dad tries but he says all the wrong things.

Limited preparation

Preparation for Olympic participation involved a variety of different aspects in addition to training, namely, media training and avoidance of the media. As a consequence, the athletes felt prepared both to perform and to win. Overall, they perceived their sport-specific training was positive; P7 explained:

I guess our preparation ... went really quite well, we'd had some quite disrupted preparation with injury in the year before but towards the Games itself we were kind of conforming pretty well to our training plan, and things were ... in the right place.

However, the athletes discussed that despite the preparations, the Olympic Games did not meet the expectations that had been articulated in the dream narrative and that they had not been prepared for this disappointment. P12 explained, '... it didn't feel like an Olympic Games, it wasn't what I expected it to be in terms of the spectacle of the Games and feeling like it's the greatest show on earth'. Furthermore, he described being unprepared for their return home, although he accepted that his own reluctance to address the post-Games period was partly his own decision

We [were] very prepared to perform ... so that was all good but we definitely weren't prepared for afterwards at all. We were just completely unprepared ... I guess I was just looking at it as I won't think about [the impacts until] after because that's not an issue and things went relatively well. I did experience blues after but ... they were quite sporadic.

All of the participants agreed that formal support surrounding the post-Olympic blues should be available after the Games. However, three of the participants believed having a 'heads up' alerting athletes about the blues, as well as some recommendations for managing these, would be beneficial prior to the Olympic Games.

Managing and overcoming

There was the acknowledgement that the individual experiences were partly explained by the outcome achieved at the Olympic Games. The expectations on the athletes were high with P7 identifying: 'Gold seemed to us to be like a new entry level'. Those who did not win medals, even though they may not have realistically aspired to, found the perceived failure difficult to manage, particularly when faced with daily interaction with teammates or friends who had medalled. P2 recalled her experiences of not medalling whilst being very close to an athlete who did medal: 'I also got to see how differently you are treated when you came third to when you came fifth, sixth. It just seemed so shallow and you just got to see this side to it and I was like "I don't really like this"'.

The failure to medal, especially when a medal had been a real possibility, or to not meet expectations was met with distress, frustration, and anger. Several athletes felt that disclosure (i.e. talking to others who could relate to them and their experiences) helped them manage their disappointment, P4 explained:

I went out for dinner with you (P9) that night, we had a beer, we had a good chat with [another friend] that night and that was my switch, my turning point. Just speaking to the right people that makes me feel better.

Others expressed the perception they had to deal with it alone and were not able to disclose how they were feeling. P13 explained his family did not understand how upsetting it was to report his rivals' results. He recounted one response: 'he was just "oh I thought you might be interested" and I was "do you think I would be interested in something like that when I just had the worst result ever?"'. P13 agreed and explained how the focus on performance resulted in high levels of distress. He recited a conversation with his father about a major post-Games event, 'I was just what the fuck are you ringing me for, I've just been on holiday, I literally swore at him and I never swear at my parents and I just went mental'. P4 recalled he found it difficult to engage with his family as he did not want to add to their distress:

In 2016, there were a huge amount of tears ... I feel like my mum and dad have invested so much time and money and everything into it. [Because], I'm not on funding now ... I'm getting handouts. They have invested so much time into it ... [and with] my blues it felt like I couldn't come back and talk to them [because] I didn't [want to] bring up the pain for them again.

Several athletes talked about friends who had retired as a means to managing the post-Olympic experience, P2 lamented that although she acknowledged that they had all gone through the same experience, there seemed to be a reluctance to disclose:

[They were] saying what a tough time they had when they retired after a Games or something, and I think 'gosh we could just talk to each other', so many of us feel the same thing because they're one of those things that you don't talk about.

Athletes engaged in a variety of other coping mechanisms to manage their experiences of the Blues. For example, many engaged in avoidance strategies, so they could distance themselves from the Olympic Games. HB summarised this sentiment: 'It's like a bad break up. Like someone not knowing you broke up with someone and then asking about it. Having to relive it'. The avoidance involved the athletes attempting to suppress memories, '[the Olympics were] a bad memory, let's

just compress it and put it away and move on' (P1). Activity-based responses were also employed as a form of diversion, including 'gardening as ... distraction, a kind of therapy' (P2), and 'music' (P11). Some engaged in more intensive and hedonistic activities which could be viewed as maladaptive coping strategies; P5 recalled..

Partying ... didn't sleep for maybe 48 hours from when we touched down from Brazil That was my distraction from it. Being away for so long, about three or four weeks in a camp and getting ready and getting our mind ready and these moments only come around every four years. I needed to let myself go.

Conversely, several athletes reinvested their energy into their sport and re-evaluated their goals. P1 explained: 'For me my distraction is setting myself new goals I have to change what's happened ... contacting person ABC and planning for the future and that's my distraction and working towards it every day'.

The athletes who had attended more than one Olympic Games had some advice for first time participants which informed their views about the support for athletes in the future. P12 noted 'we were definitely more robust for whatever happened after Rio. Had perspective I guess'. These conversations also informed participants' feedback in respect of future interventions.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to engage Olympic athletes in: (a) discussing their experiences relating to the Olympic and post-Olympic periods and, (b) informing the researchers on Olympians' opinions on the post-Olympic blues. The findings illustrate that irrespective of athletes' performance outcomes, there was a disconnect between the expectations of the Olympic dream and the reality which was, for some of the athletes, particularly difficult. The athletes felt thoroughly prepared and sufficiently supported for their athletic performances at a number of Olympic Games but felt abandoned in the post-event period. This negatively impacted on both their mental health and the way that they perceived that they had been treated (e.g. perceptions of being dehumanised). In discussing future support, the Olympians were firmly in favour of involvement by those individuals who they considered had shared similar experiences (e.g. previously competed at an Olympic Games). The participants' voices provide, for the first time, informed recommendations about how athletes, and their NGBs, can facilitate a more constructive approach to managing the post-Olympic period (see also Doherty, Hannigan, and Campbell 2016).

This present research has reinforced, despite previous studies stressing the importance of proactive post-Games support (e.g. McArdle, Moore, and Lyons 2014), that there is still far more to be done to assist the athletes in negotiating this difficult transition (Wylleman, Reints, and Van Aken 2012). Many of the athletes had prepared for the Olympic Games for most of their lives and made sacrifices for their sport as part of a performance narrative (Douglas and Carless, 2006) and this understandably informed their experiences. However, despite the sacrifices, the athletes subscribed to the dream narrative of the Olympic experience. This cultural script is so pervasive, that even in light of the negative experiences that the Olympians discussed, the prospect or confirmation of Olympic selection was still considered a realisation of the dream. Yet, conflict, media intrusion, the anti-climatic nature of the Games (particularly in relation to Rio in 2016), feelings of isolation, and perceived failure turned this dream into one that can also be conceptualised as a nightmare. Participants expressed surprise at the extent that the reality of Olympic participation was different from their 'dream expectations' and this provides weight for some psychoeducation prior to the event. In discussing their Olympic experience, the athletes reflected on the anti-climatic nature of the Olympic Games. Previous research (e.g. Doherty, Hannigan, and Campbell 2016) has demonstrated that this anti-climax exposes athletes to a vulnerable period in their lives (e.g. vulnerability to compromised mental health) and a risk of experiencing existential concerns relating to their athletic identity, even when their goals have been realised. Despite the intense and all-encompassing build-up to the Games, the dichotomy of the Olympic dream versus the Olympic nightmare suggests that

incorporating informational resources, including psychoeducation or wellbeing seminars (see Bennie et al. 2021), into post-Olympic management during the build-up would prepare athletes for a more 'realistic experience'. In particular, providing a form of protective mechanism against compromised mental health, or at the very least alerting them to when a 'problem is likely to become a concerning problem' and limiting the risk of existential crisis. However, it was apparent that athletes who had already competed at previous Olympic Games were more realistic and better prepared. The athletes discussed how they had been equipped for certain aspects, such as media training. Therefore, it would not be unreasonable to include a pre-Olympics workshop that started to dispel the myth of the Olympic Dream, which had clearly been internalised by the athletes in this study.

Yet, having reached the pinnacle of their careers, the Olympians perceived they were viewed as little more than commodities to achieve medal success. They referred to being dehumanised, the same terminology used by professional athletes, particularly in team sports (see Larkin et al., 2020). Larkin et al. (2020) have explained that the economic literature has found that dehumanisation can occur when economic value is assigned to specific individuals. The dehumanisation of Olympic athletes in the present study is *mechanical dehumanisation*, the likening of human beings to machines. Athletic performance at the highest level is an embodied experience. Olympic athletes, their bodies honed to function at optimum levels and disposed of when no longer functioning or possessing economic value (i.e. the conversion of medals into funding allocation) are by extension disposable. Incontrovertibly, dehumanisation of an individual is represented by the denial of their human characteristics, such as their emotional responsiveness and need for interpersonal warmth (Larkin et al., 2020). It was apparent that denial of these characteristics meant that their emotional and psychological needs were disregarded in favour of the pursuit of medals and 'celebritisation' for, and by, the national media (see Howells and Lucassen 2018). This is evident in the homecoming stories of the golden-nosed aircraft following Rio 2016, which represented a harrowing experience for many of the athletes in order to create an aesthetically engaging media opportunity. This visual consumption of the (gold) medal success of Team GB was lacking in empathy for the athletes and comprised one of the most dehumanising and devaluing experiences the athletes had experienced.

Social support is fundamental in successfully managing challenging situations and overcoming adversity (e.g. Howells and Wadey 2020). The post-Olympic period can in the very least be perceived as being challenging and constitutes a critical transition whereby the risk of mental distress is increased (Cosh, McNeil, and Tully 2020), therefore by extension it is at this juncture that the athletes need enhanced social support. Although the athletes felt supported going into the Olympic Games, their perceptions were that the support (when received) diminished in the post-Olympic period. These findings are consistent with the views expressed by Australian Olympians (Bennie et al. 2021). This perception of abandonment informed the athletes' views on how support should be delivered to future Olympic athletes. For athletes who supported a post-Games intervention, while being cognisant of the organisational pressures that NGBs and the support teams were experiencing, there was consensus that there should be a permanent staff, possibly consisting of sport psychologists, available to the athletes in the period immediately following the Olympic Games (see Diment, Henriksen, and Larsen 2020). This expression of need was mindful of the knowledge that sport science and coaching staff often take annual leave in the weeks after the close of the Olympic Games. The athletes suggested that these individuals should be familiar to the athletes, although they appreciated that if staff were in attendance for the duration of the build-up to, and the whole event, then the staff needed a break too.

Notwithstanding this need for readily available professional support, consistent with previous research that used patient perspectives to inform a behavioural intervention for chronic pain (Merlin et al. 2017), the participants expressed concern about interventions wholly designed and led by sport psychologists. Although they recognised the value of expertise, the Olympians' reluctance to fully support psychologist-led interventions was partially due to a perception of a lack of confidentiality that has been an ongoing ethical issue in sport psychology practice for some time. Moore (2003) identified that when a sport psychology practitioner has been contracted by a sport organisation,

the typical confidentiality parameters cannot apply. This is particularly the case when the sport psychologist is required to place primary consideration on the fulfilment of the organisation's broader mission, intent, and goals. While the participants perceived that expert delivery was acceptable, they demonstrated a clear preference for interventions to be facilitated by ex-Olympians with whom they could relate. This perspective is interesting because as far back as 2012, Wylleman et al. had recommended that Olympian-led workshops held in the months leading into an Olympic Games could create a supportive environment in which to share coping strategies to negotiate the post-Games period. In light of their experiences, and the dislocation of these relative to their expectations, the athletes perceived that they were expected to find and refine their own approaches to survive. Consequently, their coping mechanisms varied and included possibly maladaptive (e.g. alcohol-fuelled partying) strategies being adopted.

Strengths, limitations, and applied implications

This research involved Team GB Olympians from multiple sports and included both medal winners and those who did not win medals providing a broad and inclusive sample. Their experiences of the post-Olympic period, contrary to earlier research (e.g. Hammond et al. 2013; Schinke et al., 2015) that stated that the post Games meta-transitions meant that some athletes were more vulnerable than others, all appeared equitable once the elation of success or the anguish of failure had subsided. The research is timely, it is accessible in the Olympic year and may inform the development of interventions to support athletes following the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games. The participants' voices provide, for the first time, the opinions and experiences of those who have experienced the post-Olympic blues phenomenon to (as HB stated at the start of this research) ensure that, 'everyone, the media, the NGBs to learn and have some support there'. The research is unique in that it involved an Olympic athlete who had experienced the post-Olympic blues in the design, delivery, analysis and write-up of the research. HB's leading role in the research removed the potential power relations or 'them and us' element often evident in research that is *done to* participants. This co-production focus facilitated movement beyond description and generated an in-depth and authentic account of the Olympic and post-Olympic experience from athletes. Nevertheless, although participants' voices are useful for informing intervention design and content (Merlin et al. 2017), we acknowledge a limitation of this research is that other stakeholders' voices are absent from this research (e.g. sport psychologists). In focusing on the Olympians' experiences we did not engage with NGBs, coaches, or practitioners; this was a deliberate decision to put the athletes front and centre in line with recommendations in a consensus statement delivered by the International Olympic Committee (Reardon et al. 2019) on mental health in elite athletes. In developing an evidence-informed and relevant intervention to benefit athletes in future Olympic quadrennials, the views, expertise and support of coaches, sport psychologists, and NGB support staff should be ascertained. A further limitation of this study is the absence of an informing theoretical framework to explain the athletes' experiences. This decision was made in light of the exploratory nature of this study, because we did not wish to be constrained, for example, by conceptualising the Olympian's experiences as being characterised as a transition (e.g. Stambulova 2017) or by focusing primarily on mental health (e.g. PERMA model; Seligman 2011). Rather the focus was on the athletes' voices and their perceptions of their experiences.

Proactive support would better help the athletes manage this transition, where the onus to secure appropriate assistance is not placed on the athletes. This support will be required not only after the event but as part of the Olympic preparation, possibly in the form of psychoeducation provided using a range of mediums (e.g. digital video; Burrows and McArdle 2020) to suit the individual athletes and their training and competition commitments. This flexibility and its bespoke nature are important because firstly, the post-Games experience is influenced by the major career decisions (often necessarily made swiftly by athletes) in their aftermath. In discussing the transitions of Olympic boxers, Schinke et al. (2015, 85) identified those who were progressing into a professional

career met this challenge with excitement, despite post-Olympic ‘sadness’, whereas other retiring athletes experienced major life changes relating to identity, occupation, and social networks. Secondly, bespoke interventions are advised in light of observations that restricting psychoeducation to a group format over a number of weeks has been identified by Olympic athletes as suboptimal (McArdle, Moore, and Lyons 2014). Therefore, there is a need for the provision of specially-tailored, proactive, and prospective support that will facilitate the athletes’ management of the post-Olympic blues, and the impact that this has on their wellbeing.

Conclusion

Our approach to TA meant that the analysis was informed by three qualitatively different lenses (i.e. the Olympic athlete experience, sport psychology and applied mental health) providing a rich in-depth understanding of the issues. It is estimated that more than 11,000 athletes from around the globe competed in the Tokyo Olympic Games in 2021 (Statistica Research Department 2020), this represents a large number of individuals at risk of the post-Olympic blues. Although the research is still in its infancy, the post-Olympic blues have been identified (e.g. Howells and Lucassen 2018) as a sizeable mental health problem for Olympic athletes. NGBs and those working in the sports industries have a duty of care to ensure that athletes are appropriately prepared for participation at such a high-level event given the implications for athletes’ mental health (Grey-Thompson 2017). Various strategies have been offered to achieve this, for example improving the mental health literacy of coaches at all stages of the athletes’ journey (Duffy, Rooney, and Matthews 2021). The findings from our study were clear, Olympic athletes, irrespective of their prior performance at an Olympic Games, express a desire for support in preparing for the post-Olympic experience. Although there were differing opinions as to when this should be delivered, evidence-informed research (e.g. Wylleman, Reints, and Van Aken 2012) and the views in this study suggest that this should be delivered both before (briefly for awareness raising) and more intensively (at a practical time) after the Olympic Games. However, moving away from expert sport psychology delivery of interventions (see also Liddle et al. 2021), the athletes would welcome a programme with psychoeducational features and pragmatic content delivered by people who ‘have the actual experience’, namely the Olympians themselves.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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