

Olympic Athletes' Experiences of a Post Games Career Transition Program

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Career pathways in high performance sport include a number of emotionally resonant transitions. Sport systems must be able to effectively support the athlete's endeavors to negotiate such challenges. This study investigated qualitatively the experiences of Olympic athletes who took part in a three-tier, post-games career transition support program. The aim of the program was to increase athletes' coping resources to successfully negotiate the post-Olympic period. Ten athletes who participated in the program were recruited to participate in semi structured individual interviews. Directed content analysis was employed to identify key themes in the data. Athletes perceived two components of the program as particularly helpful, the normalization of the emotional and psychological challenge of the post Games period and the use of problem focused coping to redirect athlete focus to the future. The findings from this study provide a preliminary framework for the planning of future post-Games career transition support programs.

Keywords: career transition, high performance, critical career events, Olympic athletes

Recent career research in sport has acknowledged that career development is multifaceted, unstable and transitional (Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler & Côté, 2009; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). Career pathways in sport are dotted with a number of emotional transitional episodes that can disrupt performance, impinge on motivation and have negative implications for mental health (Stambulova et al., 2009; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). In the case of Olympic athletes, one career transition that can be particularly emotionally challenging is the end of Olympic games transition process (McCann, 2000). For many Olympic athletes this might involve the end of one four year training cycle and the beginning of another, whereas for others, this period might mark the commencement of a transition out of sport. Given the documented challenges of the Olympic aftermath, the development of interventions designed to facilitate the athlete's ability to cope with intense emotional events such as the Olympic games is an important area for investigation.

Current conceptual models of career transition in sport operationalize a transition as a coping process, the outcome of which is largely influenced by the demands of the situation and the athlete's resources (Stambulova et al., 2009). The athlete's transition resources refer to all the factors that facilitate the transition process including both personal resources and external, interpersonal and system resources. Personal resources refer to those strategies/ characteristics needed to successfully manage current and anticipated career transitions. System resources refer to formal structures that support and enable the individual's navigation through the transition process. The extent to which a transition is more or less negotiable for the athlete is largely linked to whether the transition can be viewed as normative or non-normative (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). Normative transitions are those in which the athlete moves from one phase of their sport career or personal life into another in an expected manner; for example the transition from junior to senior competition (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). Non-normative transitions are those that are not necessarily anticipated, for example, the transition out of a competitive season due to an unexpected injury (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). This type of transition also includes nonevents, transitions that were hoped for but that did not occur (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). An example of this would be an athlete expecting to make Olympic qualification standards but failing to do so.

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The extent to which normative versus non-normative transitions tax the resources of the athlete is linked to the individual's appraisal of the situation. The coping process begins with a triggering event or condition that is appraised by the individual as significant, challenging or exceeding the individual's coping resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The appraisal process is characterized by intense emotions that are often negative in nature. In response to the emotional event the individual will try to employ coping responses to down-regulate the negative emotions (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). Traditionally coping responses have been broadly classified into emotion focused coping, which is aimed at diminishing negative emotions and problem focused coping, which is aimed at planning a course of action (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). These two groupings are not mutually exclusive in that a coping strategy can be classed as problem focused in one context and emotion focused in another (Lazarus, 1991). Both emotion and problem based coping may be effective in one situation but not in another or effective at the outset of a stressful situation but not in later stages (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). The outcome of the coping process is dependent on whether the stressful encounter has been resolved. Positive resolution of the stressful situation will result in positive emotions and adaptive responses whereas failure to resolve the stressful encounter will result in a negative resolution and maladaptive responses. (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004).

It is possible to characterize the post-games Olympic transition as normative (e.g., the athlete is psychologically prepared for both the Olympic experience and the period afterward) and in some cases non-normative (e.g., the athlete has an unexpected experience at the Games and/or their experience after the Games is not what he/she had anticipated). Therefore the coping resources demanded of the athlete at this time can be variable. For example, the athlete making a non-normative transition may have to draw on greater system sources of support and emotional regulation and cognitive reappraisal strategies than the athlete whose transition is more normative in nature. It is not surprising therefore, that the literature has flagged this period as a critical window in terms of professional support (McCann, 2000). Although research has explored psychological support for athletes both pre and during the Games (e.g., Bortoli, Bertollo, Hanin & Robazza, 2012; Birrer, Wetzel, Schmid, & Morgan, 2012; Gould & Maynard, 2009; Gould, Murphy, Tammen & May 1991; Greenleaf, Gould & Dieffenbach, 2001) we are not aware of research that has focused on psychological interventions to facilitate the post-games transition process.

In this study, therefore, we investigated qualitatively, the experiences of athletes who took part in a theory driven intervention program aimed at enabling athlete coping resources in the post-Olympic period. An examination of the athlete career transition literature reveals a number of theoretical frameworks that can be used to facilitate and support athletes through career transitions. These include information processing approaches

such as account-making, mentoring paradigms and more intensive clinical counseling (Lavallee, Nesti, Borkoles, Cockerill & Edge, 2000; Sinclair & Hackfort, 2000). Account making refers to a process of reflecting, understanding, describing and emotionally responding to significant life events (Harvey, Orbach, Weber, Merbach & Alt, 1992). Account making allows the individual the space to make sense of their own experiences but also provides the opportunity to address any emergent difficulties through the process of confiding (Lavallee, Gordon & Grove, 1997). The process of reflecting, developing and subsequently sharing a personal narrative with a significant other is central to the psychological recovery/closure from a stressful event (Harvey, Weber & Orbach, 1990). The underlying mechanism facilitating this process is thought to be the individual's increased sense of control over the thoughts and emotions linked to the stressful event (Harvey, 1996). By coming to terms with the meaning of the event for themselves, people are more likely to be in a position to share their adjustment experiences with others (Lavallee, 2000). Narrative involvement to the extent where the individual is concerned for the welfare of future generations is referred to as generativity (Erikson, 1963).

Informed by the theoretical framework of account making and the concept of a stepped model of care (Bower & Gilbody, 2005), the Irish Institute of Sport (IIS) developed a post-Olympic career transition program consisting of three tiers of support. At the first level was an informal '*mental cool down*' which took place after the completion of the athlete's performance at the Olympic Games. This consisted of a 10–20 min check-up with the athlete by a sport psychologist or service provider (i.e., a life-style manager) positioned in the Olympic village. The main aims of the '*mental cool down*' were to stimulate the beginning of the account making process, to clarify the athlete's plans for the upcoming days, to normalize the athlete's experience and to explore whether the athlete needed immediate, more intense support while at the Games. This involved asking the athlete about their Olympic/Paralympic experience, immediate plans for the next five to ten days and perceived need for support at the Games. The athlete was also provided with both verbal and written information in the form of a leaflet on the other support program components. The timing of the *mental cool down* was left entirely to the athlete but typically occurred one to five days post event completion. The second level of the program took place approximately four to five weeks post the Games. This included the opportunity to formally debrief with a sport psychologist and to participate in group workshops. Similar to the *mental cool down*, the *psychological debrief* was aimed at normalizing the post-games transition experience and refocusing the athlete on next steps moving forward. As per the recommendations of Sinclair and Hackfort (2000), in the psychological debrief, the sport psychologist also documented any clinical symptoms observed in the athlete that warranted referral to a third, more intensive tier of counseling. If an athlete requested further support after

the individual psychological debrief or if it was deemed that further support was required, this was communicated back to the IIS Director of Performance Services. The Director then assumed the responsibility of referring the athlete for further support with the appropriate professional (Tier 3). Based on the concept of generativity, the ‘group workshops’ were facilitated by retired athletes who shared their accounts of the post-games experience. The workshop was designed to facilitate discussion between athletes on their post-games experience. This included an opportunity to share their responses to the immediate post event period (i.e., while still in the Olympic environment), the immediate events around their return to Ireland (i.e., the first few days home) and then the longer transition back to “normal” life. The psychological debrief and group workshops were voluntary and took place, for the most part, at the IIS headquarters in Dublin, Ireland. See Table 1 for an overview of the IIS three tier career transition program

The IIS post-Olympic three tier support program was part of a larger career transition support program that included support for coaches and service providers attending the Games. The larger program was initiated one year before the Games. In part, the pre-Olympic lead-in elements of the program were designed to achieve appropriate athlete engagement with support services before, during and after the games. It was hoped that high levels of participation by Olympic athletes in the lead-in elements would normalize the engagement process and reduce barriers to help-seeking (i.e., lack of knowledge, perceived stigma) post-games. Multiple communication methods were employed to engage athletes in the support programs including e-mail, telephone, Skype, text,

face-to-face, hard copy literature, website and social media. Athletes’ participation in the career transition program, at all stages, was completely voluntary.

Athlete support programs cannot make an impact unless athletes view engagement in such interventions positively. Therefore with respect to the IIS post-Olympic transition support program, it is important to understand the experiences and views of the program from the end-users perspective. Qualitative approaches are attributed an important role in exploring participants’ experiences of support programs and complex interventions (MRC, 2008). Individual interview strategies provide an opportunity to explore individuals’ experiences and views in some depth. Further semistructured interviews provide the participant with enough flexibility to discuss their experiences in their own way. The main aim of this study was to employ semistructured interviews to explore elite athletes’ views and experiences of a post-games transition support program.

Method

Participants

The Irish Olympic and Paralympic teams consisted of 65 and 48 athletes respectively. From these teams, 93 athletes (82%) availed of at least one element (i.e., mental cool down, psychological debrief, group workshops) of the first and second tier of the transition program. Twenty-eight percent of athletes availed of both the first and second tier of the intervention and three percent of athletes were referred on to the third tier where they received more intensive clinical support. Because tier

Table 1 Overview of the Structure of the IIS Three Tier Career Transition Program

Tier	Focus	Timeframe
Tier 1: Initial Debrief—Mental Cool down	1. Olympic/Paralympic experience 2. normalization 3. immediate plans (next 5–10 days) 4. information on other support program components 5. risk assessment and referral as appropriate	1–5 days postevent completion
Tier 2: Psychological Debrief	1. Olympic/Paralympic experience 2. post-Games experience 3. normalization and education 4. future planning/next steps 5. information on other support program components 6. risk assessment and referral as appropriate	30–45 days post-Games
Tier 2: Group workshops	1. validation of the shared social reality of the Olympic / Paralympic and post-games experience 2. normalization of the post-games experience 3. development of an athlete peer-support network	14–90 days post-games
Tier 3: Clinical Support	1. intensive counseling or clinical intervention with clinical psychologist or psychotherapist	1–100 days post-games

two was viewed as the program core, participation in tier two (psychological debrief and group workshops) was the main study eligibility criteria. Purposive sampling was employed to recruit athletes who had availed of the second tier of the IIS support program and who indicated to the individual conducting their debrief that they were interested in participating in the study. Contact was made with 27 athletes who met these criteria. However, due to travel obligations, scheduling or transportation difficulties, only 11 participants were interviewed. Subsequent to the interviews, one athlete requested permission to withdraw from the study resulting in a final sample size of 10 athletes, two Paralympians and eight Olympians, (4 females, 6 males). Participants' ages ranged from 19 to 34 years of age. Details of the ten participants are included in Table 2. Due to the small size of the Irish Olympic and Paralympic teams, listing the sports represented by these athletes would make the athletes identifiable and therefore have not been included in the Table. In addition age bandwidths rather than exact ages have been outlined to protect the anonymity of the athletes.

Data Collection

With Institutional ethical approval (Ref: REC/2012/185), athletes were recruited through the Irish Institute of Sport. After completing their main psychological debrief, athletes were asked by the debriefing sport psychologist if they would be interested in participating in a study aimed at exploring athletes' experiences of the IIS post-games support program. Individuals who were interested were given an information sheet and their names were noted by the sport psychologist. Names of interested athletes were communicated to the research team who then followed up with a telephone call to organize an interview date and time. Interviews took place at a location convenient to the athlete and ranged from 35 min to 1:02 hr in length.

With the athletes consent, the interviews were digitally recorded and summarized back to the athletes at the end of each recording to check for understanding.

Interviews were semi structured around a topic guide that was informed by previous qualitative studies on participants' experiences of health service interventions (e.g., Hasson-Ohayon, Roe & Kravetz, 2006). The main interview topics for each interview included athletes' experience of the program, expectations of the program, views on the structure, timing and location of the intervention, perceived benefits, components of the intervention perceived as helpful/unhelpful, similarity/differences to previous psychological support, barriers to participation and recommendations for development/improvement of the program.

Data Analysis

Each interview was transcribed verbatim. Employing directed content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), themes were initially identified by the first author that linked to the topics covered in the semistructured interviews. A codebook was created to capture this first round of coding. The transcripts were then independently analyzed a second time by the second author using the codebook and any other important issues raised by the participants were noted. The coders then met to discuss statements that could fit under higher level dimensions to agree where these statements were best represented and to agree the coding frame as a whole.

Results

In line with the aim of the study individual views and experiences were summarized into four themes a) "structural and implementation features," b) "active ingredients," c) "barriers to participation," and d) "rec-

Table 2 Participant Characteristics

Participant Code	Gender	Age Band	Training Status	Previous Olympian	Team (T) or Individual Sport (I)	1st Tier	2nd Tier	2nd Tier	3rd Tier
						Mental Cool down	Psychological debrief	Group Workshop	Clinical Referral
I2	M	31+	FT	No	I	No	Yes	No	No
I3	M	19–21	PT	No	I	No	Yes	Yes	No
I4	M	22–24	FT	Yes	I	No	Yes	Yes	No
I5	M	31+	FT	Yes	I	No	Yes	Yes	No
I6	F	25–27	PT	No	I	No	Yes	No	No
I7	F	31+	FT	No	I	Yes	Yes	No	No
I8	F	22–24	FT	Yes	I	No	Yes	No	No
I9	M	25–27	FT	No	I	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
I10	M	31+	FT	Yes	I	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
I11	F	31+	FT	Yes	T	Yes	Yes	No	No

Note. FT = full time; PT= part time.

ommendations.” Each of these four themes are discussed and key quotes will be employed to demonstrate the main issues identified in the analysis.

Structural and Implementation Features

The results highlight a number of key structural and implementation features for consideration in future program development of post-games support interventions.

Structural Factors. The timing of the post Games mental check-up and follow-up psychological debrief was a topic that elicited strong opinions from the participants. Many participants believed that a mental check-up at the Games would not have been beneficial to them because of the proximity to their participation. For example participant I2 reflected, “I actually don’t think that seeing someone that close to things, even getting an objective, sensible sort of opinion on it I don’t think that would have helped at all.” Others indicated that because the Games can be an overwhelming and surreal experience, trying to come to terms with the experience while still at the Games may not be that beneficial to the athlete. For example, participants I10 and I5 reflected, “There’s never going to be a good time to talk to somebody but yeah it’s not the best environment for it and you’re still on cloud cuckoo land so to speak.” (I10) “Again it’s only personal to me but I needed a lot of time to absorb what had gone on and what had happened.” (I5) In contrast to those who felt contact from support services at the games would not be beneficial, other athletes indicated that it was very beneficial to have some support at the games. For example participant I7 stated, “it was obviously very beneficial to have it particularly when we were still in London.”

There was a general consensus among athletes that the timing of the second, more formal psychological debrief should take place 4–5 weeks post the Games, “about a month after the Games like, I think that’s the way it should be like you know.” (I4) However, all of the athletes recognized that the exact timing of the main debrief should be left up to the athlete to decide, “I think it was a good idea to email because then you could kind of have the opportunity to decide yourself.” (I7) Other structural features of the program discussed included the number of contacts that should be included in a post-Olympic support program. Most athletes suggested two points of contact, “two with a third optional debrief.” (I11)

Implementation. When asked to compare the implementation of the psychological support received post the Games to previous experiences of sport psychology, many of the athletes emphasized that the nature of the psychological support was different. For example participant I5 stated, “No it was very different and that’s why I think it had a lot of value at that time for me.” One of the significant differences indicated by participants was that the implementation of their previous sport psychology support focused on performance, whereas the post Games debrief focused more on the

individual and their emotions. For instance, participant I9 stated,

It was more, his end was more the performance end and their end was more kind of post-performance kind of dealing with the emotional end and they were just completely different things. ..the more post emotional end was definitely a bit more beneficial at the time because it was exactly what I needed.

In one case, the athlete indicated that there was an element of performance reviewing during his debrief and he viewed this as a weakness.

Getting feedback on the actual performance itself wasn’t helpful at all for me. It, it made me angry but it was kind of like but I had sat down and looked at that, I know that it went wrong I know why I wasn’t happy with it, I don’t need sort of to be told it was good, bad or indifferent. (I2)

The importance of not focusing on performance in the psychological debrief was reiterated by participant I5 who emphasized the importance of communicating to athletes that a psychological debrief “is not a performance analysis.”

One of the topics that arose when discussing the implementation of the program was familiarity with the sport psychologist conducting the debrief. When scheduling their debrief, athletes could choose to make an appointment with one of three sport psychologists. Some of the athletes had worked with one or more of the sport psychologists in the past, whereas others were completely unfamiliar with the debriefers. Participants were divided in their views as to whether the debriefer should or should not be familiar to the athlete. All the females, bar one, thought that there should be an established relationship between the athlete and sport psychologist before the post-Olympic debrief, “looking back now I’d say it would have been better if I had of worked with her before the Olympics, during the Olympics and after the Olympics.” (I8) Likewise participant I6 reiterated “I think with that type of service particularly it’s a very personal thing, and eh, and to be able to know them a little bit which would help so much.” Conversely all of the male participants, with the exception of one, indicated a preference to be debriefed by a sport psychologist unknown to them or to their sport. For example, one male participant stated, “Em, particularly good if you don’t know the person at all I mean that’s a, that’s a big plus.” (I5)

Active Ingredients

Active ingredients refer to those components of an intervention which comprise the underlying mechanisms influencing the intervention outcomes (Michie & Abraham, 2004). To understand the putative active ingredients of the IIS support package, it is important to take into consideration and relate the processes to athletes’ perceptions of the impact of the program. Although there

are possibly a great number of mechanisms of change in a complex intervention such as the one described we have focused on those that emerged as most commonly reiterated by the participants.

Perceived Impact of the Program. Reflecting on their experience of the program, athletes described the intervention very positively and indicated that other athletes would find it very useful and helpful. For example participant I8 highlighted the importance and benefits of the debriefing process particularly for younger and inexperienced athletes,

I think like someone who was going to the Olympics and they hadn't been before like that's a big thing that they wouldn't know what was going to happen. And then I would say you know the debrief is so important and that's that what I'd describe to them it's just the feeling afterward, sometimes it's hard to get out of it.

Many athletes described the experience of sharing their personal account as cathartic in nature, resulting in a perceived reduction in personal stress levels, "I remember coming out to the car park going jeez that was brilliant like actually it was like massive weight had been lifted." (I10) Other athletes recognized the main psychological debrief helped them to look at their experience differently and consequently helped to resolve the stress experienced in the aftermath of the Games.

It definitely changed my thinking..I mean still at the time I was again I was saying to (name of sport psychologist) at the time that you know it was probably four weeks afterwards, but I was still kind of getting this kind of this waves of frustration then settling back down, frustration then kind of going towards apathy and frustration, apathy, em you know...(name of sport psychologist) helped with that...it did kind of make me look at things differently. Em as soon as I started thinking about it slightly differently the whole thing changed, pretty quickly. (I2)

Putative Mechanisms of Change. Athletes in this study reported that the normalization of their personal account by the sport psychologist helped them to make sense of their post Games experience and consequently reduced their levels of distress. For example participant I2 stated,

It's funny like you go in and I kind of expected him to say that yeah that's a normal thing yea that's a normal thing to expect yeah. I was expecting but then to actually hear it was useful as well, you know even though you know it's coming and you know it's someone's going to say it, but they still, to still have it said to you but it's still quite useful it's still quite I don't know relieving in some way shape or form.

Many participants indicated that as well as experiencing distressing feelings post the games (e.g., low

mood) they also became worried and anxious that they were having a difficult time adapting. Understanding and making meaning of the occurrence of negative thoughts and emotions helped to alleviate their anxiety. For example, participant I7 stated,

Yeah like otherwise I think I would have been, like I was probably like I was finding it difficult but I think if I hadn't had known it was normal I would probably be still worrying....whereas I knew, I knew that it was normal for me to feel like that because I suppose what I was thinking is well if people are feeling like this and they actually did really well.

The positive effect of normalizing the post-Olympic lull was also evident in athletes' reflections on their shared experiences in the group sessions,

The group session was the initial major help in the sense that when I went there I was, everyone was experiencing the same thing...and the fact that we were, I know other athletes who were experiencing it like made kind of my experience feel like ah...it's just the normal thing. (I9)

Athletes also indicated that problem focused coping strategies made them feel better. This suggests that the process of reengaging with future plans was also a critical component of the psychological debrief. For example participant I8 stated,

It just helps you get your life back on track, it helps you with your future, what you're focused on and where you're going now and I think that's definitely like it just reminds you that your still a person, that this is happening and your life is still great.

Barriers to Participation

Perceived barriers to engaging in the main psychological debrief described by athletes were organized into two related subthemes namely person-level and system-level barriers. Person-level barriers to accessing support services refer to individual client characteristics whereas system level barriers refer to barriers at the organizational level (Cachelin & Striegel-Moore, 2006).

Person-Level Barriers. At the person level, barriers to participation in the IIS post-Olympic support program included perceived stigma and low expectations of the value of engaging in the support program. A number of participants revealed that availing of psychological support services was still perceived by some athletes as indicative of weakness. For example participant I10 stated,

I think a lot of it is that they don't want to say anything about it because they don't want to be judged, like everyone wants to come back and say yeah I was as strong as I was and nobody wants to admit, like it is, there is a big ego thing it is...I don't need one sure why would I...blah blahblah.

Participants also highlighted that this reticence to engage with sport psychology among athletes could have been exacerbated by the language used in the support package. A number of the athletes indicated that language such as psychological debrief was “off-putting.” The importance of language for this cohort is demonstrated by athlete I7’s discussion of the term ‘mental cool down’, the term used to describe the minimal support intervention offered by the IIS at the Olympics,

I think the fact that it was called ‘mental cool down’ helped me...because the fact that, you know, you’re not talking about seeing a psychologist as such...I think I felt it was, it was easier for me to like go to it.

For some, the emotional difficulty of the post-Olympic period coupled with not knowing what to expect from the psychological debrief increased their reluctance to engage. For example participant I8 reflected,

And I didn’t know I was like, no I don’t want to talk to anyone I just want to be in my bed, dark room nothing and then I had no expectations like and then we got these emails saying you have to do an Olympic debrief and I was like oh god like this is the last thing I wanted to do like.

Likewise participant I3 indicated that he didn’t have any expectations of the debriefing component of the program and was unclear as to whether this aspect of support was an element of his performance review, “I didn’t really know what this big psychological debrief like I didn’t know whether she was going to have an input (on his performance review) or not...em I didn’t know.” (I3)

System-level Barriers. In addition to person-level factors the athletes identified one main system-level barrier to participation, namely accessibility. Many of the athletes felt that locating the individual psychological debrief and group support sessions in the IIS headquarters in Dublin was not that accessible for a lot of athletes. For example, one athlete stated, “The location is a challenge and potentially is a barrier for athletes.” (I6)

Recommendations

Athletes made a number of recommendations for improving the post Games transition process. These were grouped into two subthemes, psychoeducation/communication and psychological debriefing as part of the performance cycle.

Psychoeducation/Communication. Many of the athletes indicated that they experienced psychological distress after the Olympics and for some this was a surprise. Therefore a number indicated the importance of psychoeducation for the athletes regarding the post-Olympic period. For example, participant I9 stated,

you know I think the biggest shock was the fact that I wasn’t expecting to feel the way I was feeling after

the Games...so that was like the biggest shock I think if there was some sort of education maybe prior as in a lot of people feel kind of you know lost after the Olympics.

The value of psychoeducation, preparation and planning pre the Games for the period afterward was reinforced by other athletes. For example, participant I2 stated,

I had done good work before hand with (name of sport psychologist), we had sort of looked at you know what the common Olympic experiences were before (the games) and I was much better prepared then, like the debriefings were great afterwards and they were helpful but yeah I was prepared for it, it made it an awful lot easier when I started getting sort of up and down afterwards. (I2)

Referring to efforts in the pre-Games period by the IIS to deliver information on the challenges athletes often faced post Games, one participant highlighted that the timing of such information was a critical consideration, “I personally, it wouldn’t have made a difference to me because you’re just so focused on the Games and you couldn’t care less what’s going to happen afterwards.” (I5) Although Irish athletes received a number of communications around the transition support program both pre and post the Games, it was evident from athlete feedback that communication was an issue. For example participant I5 stated “Well I mean I don’t even know what, if there was some sort of document out there before the Games to tell you this is exactly what it (i.e., the IIS support program) is or if there was I don’t remember reading and I probably wouldn’t have read it.” In the post Games period, all athletes highlighted the need for greater reach in terms of the implementation and communication of the program. One athlete recommended considering different modes of communication to obtain greater reach. “And eh the rest of the like country like probably didn’t get access to the group sessions, so you know, with technology the way it is today you could have group sessions on Skype you know, ..em I don’t know just get creative.” (I9)

Psychological Debriefing as Part of the Performance Cycle. Stemming from the discussion on barriers to engagement in the program, athletes were divided on their views on whether psychological debriefing post the Olympics should be mandatory. For example, some participants felt it should be mandatory and part of the performance cycle. Participant I5 stated, “Maybe the way to do it would be to make it less of an option, make it part of an athlete’s program ..athletes are very good at being in a program if you tell them this is what’s going to happen and sign off on it they’ll do it.” Other athletes however felt that psychological debriefing would not be beneficial to an athlete if the athlete was forced to engage to meet funding requirements. For example participant I3 stated, “I definitely think like it’s as beneficial to all athletes so to try and get them all involved, em you can’t

really make something like that mandatory.” Similarly participant 17 reflected, “Well I think probably optional because I don’t know if you’d benefit a lot from it if you didn’t, I think you have to be willing yourself to share otherwise it’s probably pointless.”

Discussion

This study explored athletes’ views and experiences of a post-Olympic transition support program. The results inform the planning of high performance career support interventions of this nature in terms of program structure, individual components and delivery. The findings also elucidate barriers to athlete participation in this type of support service and inform strategy development, applied practice and future avenues of research.

Overall, the results suggest that future Olympic transition support programs should include a minimum of two contacts with psychological services to support this particularly challenging career transition. In this study, the timing of the first contact, Tier 1 (the ‘mental cool down’) received mixed reviews from the athletes. Some athletes argued that sufficient time should be given to the athlete to process their own experience before sharing their account with another in a structured debrief. The reported need for time supports the literature on account-making. Narratives help individuals link the past with future goals and make sense of unanticipated change (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). To do this the individual needs time to reflect and develop a coherent account of their experience, sharing their narrative only when the individual feels most ready (Lavalley et al., 2000). This may explain why a number of the athletes thought that starting an interactive account making process at the Games would not be personally beneficial. Other athletes however, found the immediate postgames support valuable. Further research is needed to explore the timing and utility of post competition athlete psychological support at the Games and what shape, if any, this type of support service should take.

Participants also expressed a range of views on the nature of the relationship between the athlete and the psychologist conducting the debrief. Vital to the account making process is the confidante who acts to legitimize the individual’s story and to foster positive account making (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Lavalley et al., 2000). Although some athletes preferred to have an existing relationship with their debriefer, others favored a previously unknown practitioner. There was a general consensus however, around the importance of trust and confidentiality. Athletes’ knowledge that their one-on-one debrief with the sport psychologist was entirely confidential, and for their benefit only was viewed by participants as central to their engagement in the process. This would suggest that future post-Olympic programming should consider providing athletes with a choice of a number of sport psychologists with whom they can engage. The findings also reiterate the importance of clearly communicating to athletes, coaches, program

directors and sporting bodies that post-Games support services are for the athletes’ benefit only and should remain confidential.

Tier 2 (the psychological debrief and group workshops) was the most commonly accessed element of the IIS program and therefore it was possible to get some understanding of elements of this tier that athletes perceived as particularly helpful. One putative active ingredient of the psychological debrief and the group debriefing sessions was the normalization of the psychological lull of the post-Olympic period. The normalization process helped athletes make sense of their post Games experience leading to a perceived decrease in psychological distress. Normalizing and making sense of one’s experience is a coping strategy that is not included in most coping inventories (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). However previous qualitative research has also demonstrated the utility of normalizing and meaning making as a way of coping (Gottlieb & Gignac, 1996). Another putative mechanism of change in the debriefing process was the collaborative effort by the sport psychologist and athlete to reengage the athlete with future planning and next steps in the post Olympic period. Self-regulatory and life management skills such as future oriented goal-setting reflect proactive coping. In proactive coping future difficult situations are seen as challenges and the emphasis is on skill development, amassing resources and future planning (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). Based on our findings, normalization of the athlete’s post-Games experience and the implementation of proactive coping strategies should be included in future interventions of this nature. A key finding from the analysis was that performance reviewing was not perceived as a particularly helpful component of Tier 2. This suggests that the aims of performance reviewing and psychological recovery should be addressed separately when planning post Games support services.

Recommendations stemming from the research included the importance of psychoeducation before the Games to prepare for the post Games period. Preparing in advance for the aftermath of the Olympic Games is an example of anticipatory coping (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). This type of coping involves the individual making an effort to deal with a future critical event (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). Providing athletes with psycho-education programs on the challenges of the post-Olympic period well in advance (i.e., 12–18 months before the Olympic Games) is one way of improving athletes’ ability to cope with and negotiate this career transition. We suggest this specific window, as it precedes the qualification and preparation period before the games. Recommendations stemming from athlete interviews and debriefing sessions with coaches/support staff (not part of this study) highlight that support staff should also receive specific training on the challenges of the post-Olympic period for elite athletes. Training of this nature should also include the development of supportive skills (i.e., normalization of the ups and downs of the post-Olympic period) and mental health first aid (Kitchener, Jorm & Kelly, 2012).

Increasing capacity in the athletes' social support system is a way of increasing the athletes' interpersonal/system resources and is likely to be more effective than increasing the knowledge of athletes alone.

The findings also highlighted other important considerations in post-Olympic support program planning such as barriers to participation. Despite efforts to normalize athlete engagement in career transition support services offered by the Institute before the Games, athletes still perceived a certain degree of stigma attached to engaging in psychological support in the post Games transition process. These findings are in line with recent qualitative research conducted with elite Australian athletes who also highlighted stigma as a barrier to help seeking for mental health concerns (Gulliver, Griffiths & Christensen, 2012). Although we are not aware of any interventions that have been specifically developed to address stigma in the sport context, it is clear that the impact of stigma should be given important consideration in program planning. Our findings would suggest that more intensive efforts are needed in the pre-Olympic period to psychoeducate and normalize some of the difficulties athletes encounter post the Games. This may involve social contact (i.e., group workshops) with previous Olympians 12–18 months before the Games. Other recommendations include the delivery of the low-intensive support component of the program (Tier 1) by support staff other than sport psychologists (e.g., life style managers). Future research should examine the utility of such antistigma interventions on post Games support service uptake.

Other key considerations for sport organizations who plan to provide a post Games career transition support program is the communication plan around program implementation and dissemination. The manner in which the program is framed (i.e., language used) and purpose of the program need careful consideration. A variety of communication mediums should also be considered to increase the reach of support services. Finally at the policy level, sport organizations need to consider whether participation in a post Games career transition program should be a mandatory component of performance planning across all sports competing at the Games.

Limitations

The fact that the participants did not all take part in all stages of the IIS post-Olympic transition support program is a limiting factor in our study. Given that only one of our participants engaged in the third tier of the program, we were unable to gain insight into this particular aspect of the intervention. However athletes did indicate that the availability of additional, more intensive help for athletes in need was perceived as supportive. Future research should aim to get a more in-depth understanding of athletes' experiences of clinical mental health problems post Games and their experiences of services for recovery.

Participants involved in the study were representative of individuals who partook in the IIS post Games support program. However this study is limited by including

only those participants who engaged in the intervention. It can also be argued that only those athletes who found the support program helpful or those who felt obligated to those recruiting for the study volunteered to participate. Therefore the results of this qualitative evaluation are potentially positively biased as the experiences of those who did not engage in the support program are neglected. Future research of this nature should try to include both those who did and those that did not engage in the intervention.

Conclusion

The positive views of athletes on the IIS post-Olympic transition support program highlights the utility of aspects of the model for other sport organizations. Specifically tier 2, the debriefing session and group workshops are recommended for other programs with similar aims. Such programs should include two critical components: the normalization of the emotional and psychological challenge of the post Games period and the redirection of athlete focus to future possibilities and plans. Although there was only one athlete who represented a team sport, it is recognized that team debriefing and making sense of the Olympic experience from a team perspective is also an important part of post-Olympic service provision. The views of participants in this study emphasize challenges around lines of communication and the psychoeducation process with elite athletes. We recommend that other sport organizations strategically build into their four year Olympic plans approaches to increase psychoeducation in respect to the challenges of the post Games period and facilitate anticipatory and proactive coping. Finally, the findings from this study underscore the importance of continuing to develop a more comprehensive understanding of athlete career transition needs and how these needs can be best met.

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