



## 'Post-Olympic blues' –The diminution of celebrity in Olympic athletes

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### ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** To explore the concept of the 'post-Olympic blues' through examining the antecedents of the negative affect experienced following Olympic participation and to articulate whether the post-Olympic blues is a 'normal' short-term phenomenon or whether it is more serious and enduring.

**Design and method:** Four female British athletes who competed in the 2016 Rio Olympic Games were interviewed and asked to draw timelines about their Olympic experiences on one or two occasions. The interviews and timelines were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.

**Results:** The athletes' experiences of the Olympic and post-Olympic period were characterized by highs around the Olympic Games and lows following their return to the United Kingdom. There were distinct temporal periods that were pertinent in the consideration of the 'post-Olympic blues'; *The Olympic Experience*, *The Homecoming*, and *Moving Forwards*. A fourth theme *Celebrity* involved integral and dynamic development over time. *Celebrity* comprised the development and the subsequent destruction of the athletes as celebrities.

**Conclusion:** This study has articulated what post-Olympic blues means to those who have experienced it, identified the negative impact that the athletes' celebrityization had on their mental wellbeing, and suggested that the negative emotions and subsequent behaviors were interpreted to be a normal response to returning home following Olympic participation. It is hoped that this research will engage coaching teams to formulate what support should be offered for athletes prior to and after the Olympic Games to limit the wellbeing impact that the post-Olympic blues has on athletes.

As athletes left the Rio Olympic village in 2016 and returned home, academics, journalists, and sports reporters were warning of the risk of the 'post-Olympic blues' for athletes (e.g., Florio & Shapiro, 2016; Howells, 2016; Pendleton, 2016). A perusal of online media revealed that the flurry of writing activity on this topic corresponds with the quadrennial cycle of the Olympic Games, and the articles published detail stories of athletes feeling lost, confused, and without purpose. Noting the same occurrence following the London Olympic Games in 2012, Uphill and Dray (2013) commented that: "Media reports of the 'Olympic Blues' among athletes have been considerable yet our scientific understanding of athletes' post-competitive emotional reactions has been largely neglected" (p. 660). Since that rather pejorative reflection on the academic reaction to what the media appear to have identified using anecdotal reports, there has been a relatively muted response from the academic community and few have focused on the post-Olympic period as a critical time in respect of the wellbeing of the athletes.

There are a few exceptions, whereby sport psychologists have

focused on interventions during specific Olympic quadrennial cycles. Reporting on the psychological preparation of the 2004 South African Olympic team, Gahwiler (2016) described a 5-stage model that was delivered by a team of sport psychologists. A novel characteristic of the program was the provision, for the first time, of a budget to support the post-Olympic intervention stage (which comprised stage five). This stage reflected the recognition of a need, "to support the re-integration of positive and negative Olympic experiences into the athletes' future lives and competitions" (p. 69). In evaluating the model, Gahwiler identified an uncertainty and lack of goal-focus in the athletes after competing in the Olympic Games that he posited was central to the (anecdotally) recognized phenomenon of 'post-Olympic depression'. Moreover, reflecting on their consulting experiences after the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympic Games, Gordin and Henschen (2012) articulated the "post-Olympic transition" (p. 96) as a time that was characterized by potentially detrimental organizational stressors (e.g., funding decisions made by National Governing Bodies [NGBs]) and the loss of a long-term goal for athletes. The authors warned of athletes'

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confusion, depressive symptoms, anger, resentment, abandonment, or emptiness and suggested that the formulation of new goals may assist in dealing with the problem (Gordin & Henschen, 2012).

More recently, prior to the London 2012 Olympic Games, the Irish Institute of Sport (IIS) implemented a post-Olympic career transition program to increase athletes' coping resources to successfully negotiate the post-Olympic period. Their program comprised three tiers of support that were initiated in the year before the Games. The latter two tiers focused specifically on the normalization and management of the post-Olympic experience (McArdle, Moore, & Lyons, 2014). The authors recommended that athletes should have two contacts with psychological services to support this challenging career transition. They stressed the importance of psychoeducation involving anticipatory coping which involves an individual preparing to deal with a future critical event (cf. Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). The program was well received by athletes who benefited from anticipatory and proactive coping and considered that the opportunity to disclose to an independent sport psychologist was cathartic. A similar intervention study (Samuel, Tenenbaum, & Bar-Mecher, 2016) conceptualized the Olympic Games as a career transition with six distinct phases (the sixth being the post-Olympic experience). They found that the motivation of Israeli athletes who competed in the London 2012 Games to continue in their sport after the Olympic Games was related to their satisfaction in their coping after their Olympic Games experience, and the provision of professional support. However, importantly, the authors reported that the athletes experienced a decrease in motivation after the Games alluding to a period of the 'blues'. This program highlights the importance of a focus on coping strategies and professional psychological support. Finally, Schinke, Stambulova, Trepanier, and Oghene (2015) reported on the first step of a project developing support for the Canadian Boxing Team in the 2013–2016 Olympic cycle which conceptualized the Olympic experience as comprising six career meta-transitions. During the final meta-transition (i.e., the "post-Games") the program endeavoured: (a) to develop ideas of how to further improve the National Team Program; and (b) to ensure that the boxers were supported in the instigation of new goals in sport/life. The authors acknowledged that "sadness" (p. 85) may occur as the boxers negotiate their future pathways, but suggested that it was paradoxically accompanied with excitement for the future.

Despite this relatively subdued academic response, Olympic athletes such as the 10K Swimming Bronze medalist in Beijing 2008, Cassie Patten, have been vocal in articulating their experiences, revealing to Sky Sports (2012) that "In the year after the Games, I felt lost. I got really depressed, I was really unhappy. I would come swimming and just sit on poolside and just cry". It has been suggested that these athletes may be susceptible to significant depressive symptoms as they struggle to adapt to 'regular life' following their return from the Olympic Games; this is particularly the case for those who have a strong athletic identity (see, Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993). These athletes are inclined to have a myopic focus on their sport performance and find it difficult to balance other aspects of their non-sports lives (Howells & Fletcher, 2015). Somewhat counter-intuitively, failure to win a gold medal is not a sufficient explanation for the negative affect that may be experienced after the Olympic Games have ended, as Olympic swimming champions, Allison Schmitt (USA) and Michael Phelps (USA) have also been open about experiencing depressive symptoms within months of returning from Olympic success (Frank, 2016). Victoria Pendleton, a British cyclist who won a gold medal in the 2012 London Olympic Games, stated in a media article: "It's almost easier to come second because you have something to aim for when you finish. When you win, you suddenly feel lost" (Pendleton, 2016). Murray-Williams a judoko (judo player) in the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games and his former coach Rhadi Ferguson labelled the depressive symptoms that Olympic athletes can reasonably expect to experience as constituting a condition they coined Post-Olympic Stress Disorder (POSD; Ferguson & Murray, 2014). However, exploration of POSD as a

disorder has not been pursued by either a clinical or an academic audience, therefore it is necessary to examine the wider literature on depressive disorders, depressive symptoms, and the blues to inform our understanding of the post-Olympic experience.

In the course of our lives, depressive symptoms are common, as fluctuations in mood are part of the human condition. Depression refers to a range of mental health issues characterized by: the absence of a positive affect (e.g., a loss of interest and enjoyment in everyday experiences); persistent low mood; and a range of cognitive, emotional and behavioral symptoms (National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE), 2009). Neither the origins nor the development of depressive disorders are definitively known. However, they are believed to be multi-factorial, and to be determined through a combination of genetic predisposition, psychological vulnerabilities, and life stressors (Malhi et al., 2015). Certain clinical signs and symptoms of depression when grouped together form syndromes or conditions, such as Major Depressive Disorder (MDD; American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The term 'the blues', with reference to Olympic performance, is reminiscent of the post-natal academic nomenclature of the 1970s and 1980s when researchers (e.g., Edwards, 1973) began to distinguish between baby or postpartum blues and post-partum depression. In order to clarify what the 'baby blues' comprised, O'Hara and Wisner (2014) proposed using the 'Handley Blues' criteria to identify the presence of the blues if individuals experienced four or more commonly occurring features (e.g. crying and irritability) in the first week to 10 days postpartum. This is largely consistent with Kettunen, Koistinen, and Hintikka (2014) who identified the 'baby blues' as a transient mood disturbance which is manifested in certain behaviors such as tearfulness, as well as interpersonal hypersensitivity (i.e., heightened sensitivity to criticism and rejection), insomnia, and sometimes elation. It is also consistent with Buttner, O'Hara, and Watson's (2012) identification of the postpartum blues as a relatively commonplace (experienced by circa 40–80% of post-partum women), mild, and transient mood disturbance that may manifest itself in the days after childbirth. Postpartum depression or a postpartum major depressive episode (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), on the contrary is a diagnosable disorder, which is often defined as an episode of an MDD that occurs in the four weeks following delivery (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; O'Hara & McCabe, 2013).

A further domain where the use of the term 'blues' has become a normative characterization to explain negative mood is in reference to the deleterious emotions experienced by some brides following their marriage ceremonies. Gordin and Henschen (2012) likened the post-Olympic experience to 'wedding blues' as in both instances a goal has been pursued at the expense of many other activities, relationships, and endeavors and having reached the culmination of that goal, "an emptiness vacuum" (p. 96) remains. Specifically addressing this phenomenon, Carroll (2012) referred to a wedding as a 'redemptive illusion' which occurs when the bride, in a state of fantasy, identifies with the concept of celebrity, yet soon realizes that her life is neither transformed nor redeemed, and she experiences negative emotions that are termed the 'blues'. This concept of celebrity was alluded to in a qualitative investigation by Jackson, Dover, and Mayocchi (1998) of the experiences of Australian Olympians who won a gold medal between 1984 and 1992. The authors noted that the athletes were treated as "heroes" (p. 133) on their return home, but they struggled to cope with the high expectations placed upon them in both the sporting and public arenas and complained of feeling like "public property" (p. 128).

Across a variety of domains there has been a surge of interest in not just depression, but mental health in sport more generally. From an academic perspective, there have been peer-reviewed journals promoting special editions dedicated to the subject (e.g., *Frontiers in Psychology*; MacIntyre et al., 2016) and researchers have explored various aspects of mental health in sport (e.g., Newman, Howells, & Fletcher, 2016). However, despite ongoing research related to depressive symptoms and the elite environment, it can be challenging for

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