



The Olympic Games as a career change-event: Israeli athletes' and coaches' perceptions of London 2012



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ABSTRACT

Objectives: This study used the Scheme of Change for Sport Psychology Practice (SCSPP; Samuel & Tenenbaum, 2011a) to examine athletes' and coaches' personal characteristics, perceptions of, coping with, and perceived outcome of the London 2012 Olympic Games (OGs). We also contrasted several sub-groups (e.g., Olympic and Paralympic athletes) in certain variables, and examined the decision-making and support systems involved in the OGs change process.

Design and methods: A cross-sectional and retrospective design was used. Israeli Olympic and Paralympic athletes and coaches (N = 61) completed measures of change-event experiences (Samuel & Tenenbaum, 2011b) and athletic/coaching identity (AI/CI; Brewer & Cornelius, 2001) two years after the London 2012 OGs.

Results: Olympic athletes trained more, and had higher motivation and AI than Paralympic athletes. The OGs were perceived as a significant and positive change-event in the participants' careers. AI/CI was associated with the perceived significance of the OGs. At the time of Olympic qualification, the participants tended either to ignore this change-event or cope with it independently. Most participants reported making a decision to change related to adjustment and coping. Professional support was mainly available prior to and during the OGs. During this experience the participants did not consider using sport psychology services, but retrospectively, valued the usefulness of this support. Athletes' motivation after the OGs was predicted from their satisfaction of coping, and their perceived outcome of this change-event was predicted from their satisfaction of competition results.

Conclusions: Psychological support must be provided as part of the Olympic cycle, especially in promoting a decision to change. Maintaining realistic expectations may be critical for facilitating a positive perception of this change-event.

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1. The Olympic Games experience

Participation and success in the Olympic/Paralympic Games (OGs; refers to both Olympic and Paralympic Games) represent the highest professional ambition of many athletes who perceive the Olympic dream as a super-goal of their athletic engagement

(Debois, Ledon, Argiolas, & Rosnet, 2012; Jackson, Dover, & Mayocchi, 1998; Wylleman, Reints, & Van Aken, 2012). However, the data indicate that the majority of athletes do not win a medal in the OGs. For example, in the London 2012 Games 10,820 athletes shared only 962 medals (8.9%; London 2012 Official Olympic Games results, 2012). Therefore, in most cases, the professional success of athletes in the OGs is not reflected in achieving a medal, and should be evaluated in relative terms, considering their world rankings and previous achievements, Olympic experience, personal expectations, as well as coach's and Olympic Committee's expectations. Furthermore, both failure and success experiences in the OGs present unique challenges for athletes. On one hand, lack of

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success, or failure, can be overwhelming for many athletes, and lead to reduced motivation, need of a break, and even retirement (Debois et al., 2012; McArdle, Moore, & Lyons, 2014). On the other hand, major success in the OGs can also create psychosocial challenges for athletes. For example, Jackson et al.'s (1998) interviews with 18 Australian Olympic champions revealed that they had also experienced negative consequences; difficulties in coping, excessive demands, and pressure. Becoming Olympic champions has changed the way they were perceived by others.

Acknowledging the significance of the Olympic experience for elite athletes, researchers examined factors underpinning Olympic success (e.g., Gould, Greenleaf, Guinan, & Chung, 2002; Gould, Guinan, Greenleaf, Medbery, & Peterson, 1999), as well as presented best preparation practices prior to the Olympics (Gould & Maynard, 2009) and better post-Games support (McArdle et al., 2014). Conducting focus groups with athletes from eight Atlanta 1996 U.S. Olympic teams and interviewing their coaches, Gould et al. (1999) found that teams which had met expectations participated in resident training programs, received support, used mental preparation, and were focused. Teams that had failed, experienced planning and cohesion problems, lacked experience, and faced travel and coaching problems.

2. The OGs as a career transition

Recently, researchers have begun considering athletes' participation in the OGs as a career transition (Debois et al., 2012; Schinke, Stambulova, Trepanier, & Oghene, 2015; Sigurgeirsdóttir, 2013; Stambulova, 2016; Wylleman et al., 2012). Schinke et al. (2015) classified it as a within-career quasi-normative transition; predictable only for a certain group of athletes (i.e., those elite athletes who were selected as Olympic candidates). However, in this context, we acknowledge that while for some athletes the OGs indeed represents a within-career transition, for others it can also be associated with a career termination (McArdle et al., 2014), requiring them to face the transition to life after sports (Debois et al., 2012). In both cases, athletes are faced with a set of challenges. Based on Stambulova, Stambulov, and Johnson's (2012) five-phase Olympic cycle, Schinke et al. (2015) suggested viewing the OGs transition as a process comprised of several phases or meta-transitions: (a) entering the National Team Program, (b) entering major international tournaments, (c) Olympic qualification, (d) focused preparation for the OGs, (e) OGs participation, and (f) the post-Games. Wylleman et al. (2012) examined the changes perceived by four male athletes who competed in the 2008 Beijing OGs, using interviews (prior to and after the Games) and self-reports (during the Games). A thematic analysis indicated that prior to the Games the athletes experienced 14 changes in the athletic (e.g., increased training load), psychological (e.g., increased athletic identity), psychosocial (e.g., increased contact with the coach), and academic/vocational (e.g., decreased focus on professional activities) levels. During the Games the athletes experienced eight changes (e.g., pre-competition pressure) and after the Games they experienced 11 changes (e.g., feelings of recognition from media/public). Most of the changes occurred in the psychological level, including increases in self-confidence and athletic identity (AI) levels (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993). The study confirmed the multifaceted nature of the OGs experiences which entails many changes for athletes, requiring them to adapt to the new situation. However, it also had some limitations. The sample included only athletes who had experienced performance success. The researchers were therefore unable to assess the quality of this transition for athletes who did not meet their performance expectations. The qualitative design prevented the researchers from producing predictive data and conclusions. Qualitative designs

were also assumed by other researchers (e.g., Debois et al., 2012; Pensgaard & Duda, 2002; Sigurgeirsdóttir, 2013). The present study, therefore, attempted to account for these research limitations by examining the OGs experience using a predictive framework within the Scheme of Change for Sport Psychology Practice (SCSPP; Samuel & Tenenbaum, 2011a).

3. The OGs as a change process

Considering the multifaceted and dynamic nature of the athletic career (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007; Stambulova, 2000), the SCSPP (Samuel & Tenenbaum, 2011a) was developed to reflect how athletes perceive and respond to various change-events. These can be transitions (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007), crisis transitions (Stambulova, 2000), distinct events and longitudinal processes that disrupt the athletic engagement status quo, objectively (e.g., being selected to an Olympic Team) or subjectively (e.g., loss of motivation), and require athletes to respond by generating a matching psychological and/or behavioral change (i.e., a change process; Samuel & Tenenbaum, 2011a, 2011b). The SCSPP framework reflects two major shifts in the athletic career research area: (a) from focusing mainly on the athletic career retirement to examine within career transitions (Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler, & Côté, 2009; Stambulova & Wylleman, 2014), and (b) an adaptation process perspective, including factors that influence the quality of the transition, coping resources, and potential interventions (Stambulova, 2003). The SCSPP considers the nature of the change-event (e.g., continuous or distinct), the athlete's perception of the change-event (e.g., perceived significance), the environmental characteristics (e.g., support resources), and the characteristics of the individual (e.g., motivation, AI) as factors affecting the adaptation to the change. It aims to explain what actually constitutes an effective coping process in terms of psychological change, emphasizing decision-making (see Samuel, 2013). Therefore, it provides both *descriptive* and *intervention* outlooks on the athletic career (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007), focusing on: (a) the three situational stages that unfold as athletes experience change-events, and (b) the therapeutic process associated with an effective change. The SCSPP received empirical (Knowles & Lorimer, 2014; Samuel & Tenenbaum, 2011b, 2013; Samuel et al., 2015) and applied practice support (Samuel, 2013).

The OGs experience as a change process begins with athletes' qualification to the OGs. This is the onset of the change process, reflecting the change in athletic engagement status quo from a stable state (i.e., "Stage 1" in SCSPP) to an unstable state (i.e., "Stage 2" in the SCSPP), which may be associated with cognitive concerns regarding the new situation. However, as suggested by Stambulova et al. (2012) and Schinke et al. (2015), the OGs experience should be considered a process, with several additional phases. Therefore, this change-event continues with the preparation period, the Games (e.g., the opening ceremony, the competition), and the post-Games period. Each phase presents new changes athletes are challenged by (Wylleman et al., 2012). According to the SCSPP, athletes who make the Olympic criterion typically engage in an appraisal process: they consider the perceived significance of this change-event, existing coping resources, and potential solutions (Stambulova et al., 2009). This cognitive elaboration leads to a strategic decision as to how to initially respond to this change-event: (a) deny/ignore it, (b) cope independently, (c) consult with others, or (d) consult with a sport psychologist. Various factors may influence this strategic decision, such as the perceived significance of the change-event, the perceived control over the situation, and available support (Samuel & Tenenbaum, 2011a). It is expected that athletes with a strong and exclusive AI (Brewer et al., 1993) will tend to perceive the OGs as more significant in their careers. For

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