



## LJMU Research Online

**Whitcomb-Khan, G, Wadsworth, N, McGinty-Minister, K, Bicker, S, Swettenham, L and Tod, D**

**Critical Pause: Athletes' Stories of Lockdown during COVID-19**

<http://researchonline.ljmu.ac.uk/id/eprint/14080/>

### Article

**Citation** (please note it is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from this work)

**Whitcomb-Khan, G, Wadsworth, N, McGinty-Minister, K, Bicker, S, Swettenham, L and Tod, D (2021) Critical Pause: Athletes' Stories of Lockdown during COVID-19. *Sport Psychologist*, 35 (1). pp. 43-54. ISSN 1543-2793**

LJMU has developed [LJMU Research Online](#) for users to access the research output of the University more effectively. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LJMU Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain.

The version presented here may differ from the published version or from the version of the record. Please see the repository URL above for details on accessing the published version and note that access may require a subscription.

For more information please contact [researchonline@ljmu.ac.uk](mailto:researchonline@ljmu.ac.uk)

<http://researchonline.ljmu.ac.uk/>

1• **Critical Pause: Athletes' Stories of Lockdown during COVID-19**

2•

3• **ATHLETE STORIES OF LOCKDOWN DURING COVID-19**

4•

5•

6• Gabriella Whitcomb-Khan <sup>a\*</sup>, Dr Nick Wadsworth <sup>b</sup>, Kristin McGinty-Minister <sup>a</sup>, Stewart Bicker <sup>a</sup>, Laura  
7 Swettenham <sup>a</sup>, Dr David Tod <sup>a</sup>

8•

9 <sup>a</sup> *School of Sport and Exercise Sciences, Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool, United Kingdom*

10 <sup>b</sup> *School of Sport and Exercise Sciences, University of Bolton, Bolton, United Kingdom*

11

12 \* Miss Gabriella Whitcomb-Khan

13 c/o Tom Reilly Building

14 Liverpool John Moores University

15 Byrom Street

16 Liverpool

17 L3 3AF

18 g.whitcomb@2018.ljmu.ac.uk

19

20

21

22 We have no conflicts of interest to disclose

23

24 **A Critical Pause: Athletes' Stories of Lockdown During COVID-19**25 **Abstract**

26 This study explored the experiences of elite athletes during the initial stages of lockdown as a  
27 result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The eight recruited participants (three females, five males)  
28 were asked to tell a story of their lockdown experience. Narrative analysis was used to  
29 explore the athletes' stories. The athletes' narrative is best represented in four distinct  
30 sections: a) Threat to Goals, b) On-Going Consequences, c) Overcoming COVID-19, and d)  
31 Adapting to COVID-19. Four narrative themes were also co-constructed from the athletes'  
32 stories: a) Factors Athletes Found Challenging, b) Loss, c) Strategies that Benefitted Athletes  
33 Psychologically, and d) Silver Linings. Combined, these findings suggest that the initial  
34 stages of lockdown are best described as a *critical pause*. We present applied implications for  
35 athletes and sport psychology practitioners. We also recommend future research investigate  
36 the longitudinal effect of prolonged lockdown on athletes' lives and a potential return to  
37 sport.

38 *Keywords:* COVID-19, lockdown, critical pause, identity, narrative analysis

39

40

41

42

43

44

Date of Submission: 26/10/2020

## ATHLETE STORIES OF LOCKDOWN DURING COVID-19

45 **A Critical Pause: Athletes' Stories of Lockdown During COVID-19**

46 The journey of a professional athlete inevitably involves various critical moments,  
47 which are “those frequently experienced moments in our lives when we must confront the  
48 anxiety associated with an important change in our identity” (Nesti et al., 2012, p.25;  
49 Ronkainen et al., 2014). One critical moment that athletes have recently faced is lockdown  
50 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Many countries adopted varying context-specific, complex,  
51 and rapidly evolving responses, causing confusion and stress worldwide (Alderwick et al.,  
52 2020; BBC Sport, 2020). The turbulence between science and policy saw the world plunged  
53 into chaos in a matter of weeks. With the Olympic qualifiers originally scheduled to take  
54 place in Wuhan, China, many elite athletes experienced side effects (e.g., relocated events,  
55 anxiety over catching the virus) of the pandemic as early as January 2020. The sporting world  
56 is unsure of what the future holds: Major competitions were postponed or cancelled, and elite  
57 athletes were isolated from their teammates, coaches, physiotherapists, and the systems which  
58 they rely on to maintain high levels of performance.

59 COVID-19 has been a crucial critical moment for elite athletes, who spend much of  
60 their time, energy, and resources within a sporting context and are likely to attribute high  
61 importance to their involvement in sport; often experiencing an overpowering athletic  
62 identity (Aquilina, 2013; Lally, 2007). Athletic identity has been described as the extent to  
63 which an individual identifies with the role of an athlete (Brewer et al., 1993). While a strong  
64 athletic identity has been shown to have positive outcomes (e.g., high levels of commitment  
65 to sport), it can come at the expense of exploring other available or appropriate roles (Brewer  
66 et al., 1993; Lally, 2007). The commitment and dedication required to excel in elite sport may  
67 be accompanied by the pervasive belief that engaging with other areas of life might  
68 negatively affect performance, which can restrict athletes' ability to explore further identities,  
69 potentially leading to identity foreclosure (Aquilina, 2013; Murphy et al., 1996). Upon the

## ATHLETE STORIES OF LOCKDOWN DURING COVID-19

70 loss of a dominant identity, individuals may experience emotional disturbances, feelings of  
71 loss, disorientation, uncertainty, and serious mental health issues (Brown & Potrac, 2009;  
72 Wiechman & Williams, 1997). The inability to engage with the athlete role, an experience  
73 many athletes have faced during the COVID-19 pandemic, has the potential to affect overall  
74 sense of self (Brewer et al., 1999; Lally, 2007).

75 Critical moments can be small or large, intended or unintended, positive or negative,  
76 and invoke an emotional response. They are highly contextual, involve the individual's  
77 subjective lived experience and can impact well-being (Nesti et al., 2012; Ronkainen & Nesti,  
78 2017; Wylleman & Reints, 2010). While critical moments have the potential to elicit negative  
79 outcomes, they provide an opportunity to explore values and beliefs, improve self-  
80 knowledge, and grow psychologically (Ronkainen et al., 2014). An individual who takes  
81 responsibility and engages in self-exploration can experience growth following traumatic or  
82 adverse events (Becker et al., 2008; Ronkainen, et al., 2014; Ronkainen & Nesti, 2015). Two  
83 critical moments, athlete career transition and sport injury, have emerged as potential  
84 signposts for what athletes may have experienced during isolation due to the COVID-19  
85 pandemic.

86 Athlete career transition involves the period in which an athlete transitions out of  
87 playing their sport. This can be normative (predictable or anticipated) or non-normative  
88 (unpredictable or involuntary) and the quality of this experience can impact an athlete's  
89 mental health and well-being (Wylleman & Reints, 2010). Transitional issues are more  
90 problematic for those who attribute high importance to their sport, have a strong athletic  
91 identity, and/or are forced to retire (Brown & Potrac, 2009; Knights et al., 2016, Sparkes  
92 2000; Wylleman & Reints, 2010). This can generate a profound mix of emotions, thoughts,  
93 and behaviours; athletes may experience difficulties such as depression, eating disorders,  
94 decreases in self-confidence, substance abuse, fear of social death, betrayal, social exclusion,

## ATHLETE STORIES OF LOCKDOWN DURING COVID-19

95 and loss of identity (Lally, 2007; Park et al., 2013; Wylleman & Reints, 2010). A  
96 comprehensive review by Park and colleagues (2013) found several additional factors that  
97 affect the quality of transition such as financial status, self-perception, a loss in perceived  
98 autonomy and power over one's own decisions, changes in routine, and available resources  
99 such as coping strategies and psychological support. These concepts may be applicable to  
100 isolation due to COVID-19. For example, loss of autonomy, inability to engage with routines,  
101 issues with compensation, and the removal of traditional support systems have been  
102 commonplace throughout the pandemic. While the COVID-19 pandemic vastly differs from  
103 athlete retirement, the sudden and involuntary removal of sport from elite athletes' lives and  
104 forced isolation have the potential to elicit similar reactions.

105 Another experience which may be compared to the experience of COVID-19 is sport  
106 injury. Injury is a common occurrence among elite athletes, with more serious injuries  
107 resulting in longer periods of rehabilitation and isolation from sport (Brewer, 2009). This  
108 generally impacts athletes at elite levels significantly due to their high involvement in sport  
109 and strong athletic identity (Santi & Pietriantoni, 2013). Several similarities may be drawn  
110 between injury and early phases of lockdown. For example, athletes often experience a lack  
111 of control while injured. The inability to train and the resulting decline in fitness, as well as  
112 their lack of control over the circumstances, have the potential to impact athletes' sense of  
113 autonomy (Wierike et al., 2013). Importantly, an athlete's perception of their recovery can  
114 impact how quickly they return to their sport (Ardern et al., 2018). Athletes are likely to  
115 return to their sport after an injury with a range of thoughts, emotions, and behaviours,  
116 relating to achieving personal goals, re-engaging with training partners and teammates,  
117 establishing their place in the squad, and regaining pre-injury levels of fitness and technique  
118 (Podlog & Eklund, 2006). Furthermore, injury can often cause a sense of alienation from  
119 teammates, coaches, and even themselves (Ermler & Thomas, 1990; Podlog & Eklund,

## ATHLETE STORIES OF LOCKDOWN DURING COVID-19

120 2005). This is potentially similar to athletes' experiences of lockdown. The COVID-19  
121 pandemic has forced athletes to disengage from their sport, leading to a lack of control,  
122 potential decline in fitness and conditioning, an inability to achieve their professional goals,  
123 and isolation from teammates, coaches, and support staff. The national lockdown of the  
124 United Kingdom and sport injury are profoundly different in the sense that the lockdown was  
125 experienced collectively, and injury is experienced individually. However, many elite athletes  
126 compete on an international stage and may still have been preoccupied with the progress of  
127 their international counterparts during this period. Finally, both injury and lockdown have  
128 brought about a sudden loss of their sport and inability to train or compete, which can leave  
129 athletes vulnerable to issues relating to mental health or well-being (Wierike et al., 2013).

130 The COVID-19 pandemic has provoked an unparalleled challenge for all of humanity,  
131 and sport has been impacted in an unprecedented manner. Lockdown denied athletes access  
132 to essential commodities such as gyms, physiotherapists, and training facilities. In addition,  
133 athletes' lifestyles have been drastically altered. Similarities can be drawn between changes  
134 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and those brought on by other critical moments, which have  
135 the potential to bring considerable challenge. The inability to cope with such moments may  
136 slow or restrict athlete development (Wylleman & Reints, 2010). While there is potential for  
137 negative outcomes, elite athletes have the opportunity to use the challenges associated with  
138 lockdown to develop as individuals. Positive outcomes of critical moments include renewed  
139 perspective, increased motivation, development of other areas of the self, a better  
140 appreciation of sport, and enhanced 'mental toughness' (Podlog & Eklund, 2005). Athletes  
141 may be prompted to consider their future and whether they want to continue being an athlete.  
142 The inability to plan or prepare for a life without sport is associated with negative emotions  
143 such as self-doubt, anger, and frustration as well as more severe psychological difficulties  
144 (Knights et al., 2016; Park et al., 2013). A global pandemic is a new and unexplored critical

## ATHLETE STORIES OF LOCKDOWN DURING COVID-19

145 moment for the modern elite athlete which must be investigated. The purpose of this study is  
146 to explore elite athletes' stories of their experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic. We aim to  
147 understand the athletes' beliefs about how the COVID-19 pandemic may impact them as  
148 people and performers.

### 149 **Method**

#### 150 **Philosophical Assumptions**

151 The present study was situated in an interpretivist paradigm (accepting that there are  
152 multiple meanings and ways of knowing), informed by ontological relativism (multiple  
153 subjective realities exist) and epistemological constructivism (reality is to be interpreted and  
154 is used to discover the underlying meaning behind events; Sparkes & Smith, 2013). Because  
155 narratives play a key role in constituting meaning and making sense of our experiences, a  
156 narrative approach was deemed appropriate (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). This allowed the  
157 research team to gain insight into the subjective lived experiences of participants through the  
158 stories they told of their lockdown experience.

#### 159 **Participants**

160 We recruited adult elite athletes who were competing and/or training prior to the  
161 initial lockdown period. Participants were over the age of 18 and were competing at semi-  
162 professional and professional levels in the UK, both domestically and internationally. Swann,  
163 Moran, and Piggott's (2015) systematic review provided the rationale for defining 'elite'  
164 level sport for the present study, whereby all athletes competed at a national level or higher  
165 (International, Olympic level) and had high levels of experience and 'professionalism'. Some  
166 data have been altered to protect participants' identities, including the sport they participate  
167 in. The research team concluded that revealing participants' specific sport was likely to  
168 jeopardise anonymity. Eleven participants originally agreed to take part in the study. Three  
169 semi-professional athletes withdrew prior to the interview. Consequently, a total of eight



## ATHLETE STORIES OF LOCKDOWN DURING COVID-19

170 participants took part (seven professional and one semi-professional). Participants were from  
171 a range of individual and team sports. Participants' ages ranged between 23 and 34 years ( $M$   
172 = 28 years), three were female and five were male. Participants were recruited using  
173 purposeful sampling and online recruitment via Twitter (Sparkes & Smith, 2013). Purposeful  
174 sampling is generally used when utilising intense, focused methods such as in-depth  
175 interviews, and therefore aligned with the conceptual framework of narrative analysis (Curtis  
176 et al., 2000). Furthermore, elite athletes can be a difficult population to reach; adopting  
177 purposeful sampling allowed the research team to access a greater number of diverse  
178 participants.

179 *[insert table 1 here]*

**180 Information Power**

181 In the current study, information power was employed to determine sample size  
182 (Malterud et al., 2016). Information power is achieved through considering a) the study aim,  
183 b) sample specificity, c) theoretical background, d) quality of dialogue, and e) the strategy for  
184 analysis. It was determined that information power was high based on the following criteria:  
185 a) the study aim was clear and specific, b) the population sample consisted of professional  
186 and semi-professional athletes who were purposefully recruited for their knowledge and  
187 experience of the relevant phenomenon, c) the research team used transition and critical  
188 moment literature to underpin the study, d) each member of the research team was a sport  
189 psychology practitioner with experience conducting qualitative interviews, demonstrating an  
190 ability to build trust and rapport, and e) data analysis was guided by literature theory to  
191 examine athletes' stories (for more information see Bell, 2004; Booker, 2004). It was  
192 concluded that these five factors contributed to high information power. When information  
193 power is perceived to be high, a study only needs a small number of participants (Malterud et  
194 al., 2016). Eight participants were chosen to take part in this study because it allowed the

## ATHLETE STORIES OF LOCKDOWN DURING COVID-19

195 research team to recruit a) a variety of athletes who were impacted differently by the  
196 lockdown (unable to attend Olympic trials/seasons being forced to end etc.), b) athletes  
197 competing in individual and team sports, and c) enough athletes to collect data on a variety of  
198 stories and experiences to meet the purpose and aim of the study.

### 199 **Procedure**

200       After receiving ethical approval from the University Research Ethics Committee,  
201 participants were invited to take part in an interview to tell the story of their experience of  
202 COVID-19 and lockdown. The data was collected between the 4th of May 2020 and 22nd of  
203 May 2020 (see Figure 1 for context surrounding the progression of the COVID-19 pandemic  
204 at this time). As face-to-face interviews were not possible due to social distancing  
205 restrictions, interviews were conducted remotely using Zoom (V5.0; San Jose,  
206 California). Interviews lasted between 24 and 56 minutes ( $M = 32$  minutes) and were  
207 recorded using a dictaphone and transcribed verbatim.

208       The opening question surrounding the participants' experience of COVID-19 and  
209 lockdown was purposefully broad to allow the individual to tell a story which was  
210 meaningful to them (Smith, 2010). The question "Can you tell me the story of your lockdown  
211 experience?" allowed participants to lead the interview with the interviewer assuming the role  
212 of an 'active listener'. To understand participants' full stories, the research team utilised  
213 prompts when necessary to capture data surrounding the participants' lives before lockdown  
214 and the impact lockdown had on their lives. This covered areas such as life before lockdown,  
215 athletes' living arrangements, day-to-day life during lockdown, and participants' thoughts  
216 surrounding their career and sport in the future. This was to encourage them to discuss their  
217 'story' of the lockdown experience.

218

### 219 **Data Analysis**

## ATHLETE STORIES OF LOCKDOWN DURING COVID-19

220 Data analysis was first conducted individually to ensure each member of the research  
221 team was not influenced by their colleagues' perceptions, opinions, and analysis of the data.  
222 The research team read and re-read the transcripts, immersing themselves in the data and  
223 identifying the beginning, middle, and end of each story to ensure that each participant had  
224 told a complete story. Through the use of literacy theory (Bell, 2004), the researchers  
225 developed narrative structures (How are athletes telling their story?) and narrative themes  
226 (What are the athletes saying?). This was achieved by determining and understanding the  
227 Lead Character(s), Objective/Obstacle, Conflict/Consequence, and Knock-Out Conclusion  
228 (or ending) (LOCK principle; Bell, 2004).

229 The research team then engaged in discussion surrounding each of the participants'  
230 stories and presented their findings. This enabled comprehensive collaboration for each story,  
231 with opportunities for members of the research team to agree (or disagree) and to capture  
232 details which may have otherwise been overlooked. Team members presented their respective  
233 narrative structure for each participant to the rest of the group. Each member of the research  
234 team agreed the following broad structure was representative of all the athletes' stories: a) the  
235 athletes were working towards a goal, b) the conflict (virus) had occurred resulting in  
236 external and internal challenges, c) the athletes had to adapt to overcome these challenges,  
237 and d) a conclusion to the story. Narrative themes were then co-created to underpin the  
238 narrative structure and to examine the similarities and differences between the athletes'  
239 stories.

**240 Quality**

241 The research team adopted a non-foundational approach to credibility (Sparkes &  
242 Smith, 2013). Considering that the philosophical underpinning of the current study is rooted  
243 in interpretivism, 'member checking' was not an appropriate tool for evaluating the  
244 participants' stories. Based on recent reviews (Thomas, 2016), a great deal of qualitative

## ATHLETE STORIES OF LOCKDOWN DURING COVID-19

245 research has utilised member checking as a tool for enhancing the quality, validity, and  
246 credibility without careful consideration as to ‘why’. Credibility was achieved by first  
247 reflecting on the research team’s values and beliefs about how research should be conducted.  
248 The research team also reflected upon how these values and beliefs would allow them to  
249 achieve the overall aim of the research. Smith and Sparkes (2013) have suggested a ‘letting  
250 go perspective’ regarding the quality of qualitative research. In this sense, criteria such as  
251 Tracey’s (2010) ‘Big-Tent’ criteria do not represent a definitive or exhaustive list of traits or  
252 characteristics, rather they are guidelines that are open to interpretation and reinterpretation  
253 dependent on the situation, context, and time. The research team reflected both on Tracey’s  
254 (2010) ‘Big-Tent’ criteria and their own values prior to the study and concluded the following  
255 criteria best represented their approach to research.

256 *[Insert table 2 here]*

### 257 **Results**

258 The narrative structure and narrative themes are discussed collectively below. There  
259 was one clear narrative structure that represented the athletes’ stories, which is best  
260 understood when presented in four distinct stages: a) COVID-19 as a Threat to the Athletes’  
261 Goals, b) On-Going Consequences of COVID-19 on the Athletes’ Personal and Professional  
262 Lives, c) Attempting to Overcome the Negative Impact of COVID-19, and d) Reflecting on  
263 and Adapting to the Effects of COVID-19. This consistent narrative structure was further  
264 reinforced by the narrative themes co-constructed between the athletes and the research team.  
265 There were four narrative themes, which reinforced each stage of the narrative structure: a)  
266 Factors Athletes Found Challenging, b) Loss, c) Strategies that Benefitted Athletes  
267 Psychologically, and d) Silver Linings.

268 *[Insert table 3 here]*

## ATHLETE STORIES OF LOCKDOWN DURING COVID-19

269 Collectively, these results suggest that the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic  
270 are best described as a *critical pause*. There was a sense from the athletes that they were  
271 standing still and that the changes they were making (to themselves and their routines) were  
272 temporary as they waited to continue their ‘normal’ lives and return to training.

**273 COVID-19 as a Threat to the Athletes’ Goals**

274 When the first cases of the coronavirus were reported in the United Kingdom, many  
275 of the athletes in the current study became aware of the potential threat it posed, but seemed  
276 to underestimate the real impact it would have:

277 Yeah, well to be honest, my team is quite a jokey team, so we all kind of laughed  
278 about it and laughed it off so...one of the girls was ill the week before, so we were  
279 just making jokes with her like...it’s not funny now, it’s not funny...we were just  
280 like, “you’ve got corona blah lalala” making laughs out of it (Katie)

281 However, as the threat of the virus became more apparent and the number of cases (and  
282 subsequent deaths) began to rise, there was a realisation that this threat needed to be taken  
283 seriously. The start of lockdown in the United Kingdom saw strict social distancing rules put  
284 in place, at which point the athletes realised how disruptive and challenging the virus was  
285 going to be for their sporting lives. The Olympic Games were postponed, Olympic qualifiers  
286 were cancelled, seasons were ended, and all preparations for upcoming tournaments and  
287 competitions were abruptly put on hold:

288 So, it all hit you at once. But, at the beginning, being in quarantine was like, I’ve got  
289 to carry on, there’s an Olympics coming, I have to maintain it. You can’t stop,  
290 you’ve got to keep going. But, when we got told that the Olympics was postponed  
291 until next year. Motivation went from here and just crashed. Absolutely crashed. It’s  
292 kind of like erm...getting the engine started, getting ready to go through that trip, to  
293 get to that destination and you’ve been told that it’s cancelled. You know, you’re

## ATHLETE STORIES OF LOCKDOWN DURING COVID-19

294           distraught, you don't have that same mind frame anymore. It's kind of like your life  
295           has been put on hold for a moment. So that feeling, it burned inside, because  
296           obviously when your dream has been taken away, due to the fact of the pandemic,  
297           erm...yeah it hurts, it absolutely hurts (Ronald)

298   In addition to the impact the virus had on the athletes' sporting lives, lockdown had personal  
299   implications. Some athletes had to postpone weddings, spend milestone birthdays in isolation,  
300   move back in with family, and many had concerns over their health and well-being:

301           Yeah, so, we had a big summer coming...well not a big thing, but a better thing than  
302           just being in lockdown on your birthday. So that was the first thing that had to be  
303           adjusted, erm...so we had all these plans and now it's just waiting basically to see  
304           what happens. Another thing was being at risk [health]...that was a big sort of moment  
305           that was causing anxiety and all sorts because, it was like, well I don't want anyone  
306           leaving the house, because if I'm not leaving the house, but you are, then you're going  
307           to bring it back and I'll be isolating for 12 weeks and there's all that unknown of am I  
308           in that risk category or not, so it was very rocky at the beginning (Jen)

309   One athlete, along with his girlfriend, believed that they caught the virus and experienced  
310   serious symptoms:

311           So then I hit a road-block where my girlfriend, who works in the NHS, she got ill, and  
312           it was sort of like earlier, I think start of lockdown, where they weren't testing a lot of  
313           people, she couldn't get a test at the time, so she had to just sort of isolate for a week,  
314           which meant I had to isolate for fourteen days then as well. So, she was ill, she was  
315           bad for about two days and then about probably day five, I started getting symptoms  
316           and by the fifth day I was really bad, fever, shivering, sweating...had that for a couple  
317           more days, so it was about seven days in, not feeling any better at all, it started getting  
318           worse then I was struggling with my breathing... I was getting out of breath and I was

## ATHLETE STORIES OF LOCKDOWN DURING COVID-19

319 getting like sort of a crackling noise coming from out of my lungs...so that's when I  
320 was starting to worry and panic (Gary)

321 *Factors Athletes Found Challenging*

322 'Factors Athletes Found Challenging' outlines factors that athletes struggled with  
323 while in lockdown due to COVID-19. These factors were broken down into five subthemes:  
324 'Abrupt End to Sport', 'Lack of Control', 'Missing Friends and Teammates', 'Pressure  
325 Athletes Place on Themselves', and 'Uncertainty'. 'Abrupt End to Sport' refers to the  
326 challenges associated with competitive leagues and events being cancelled due to COVID-19,  
327 'Lack of Control' concerns the difficulties associated with having no control over COVID-19  
328 and its ramifications, 'Missing Friends and Teammates' refers to athletes experiencing social  
329 isolation as challenging, 'Pressure Athletes Place on Themselves' relates to the pressure  
330 athletes placed on themselves when first entering lockdown, and finally, 'Uncertainty'  
331 depicts the lack of clarity about the future.

332 **Abrupt End to Sport.** Athletes expressed how it "hurt" to have sport taken away.  
333 The cancellation of competitive leagues and events meant some athletes were experiencing  
334 the inability to participate in sport for the first time. This led to "frustration" and  
335 "disappointment":

336 A lot of frustration because I've not had that for well since I started playing so a good  
337 20 years, I've never really had that sort of indefinite break [from sport] (Josh)

338 For others, the cancellation of the Olympics was challenging, leaving them feeling that their  
339 hard work and preparation had been for nothing:

340 I was supposed to be leaving for European Olympic qualifiers to do my first trial for  
341 2020 so that was hard because obviously we'd done a lot of work and a lot of  
342 competitions to build up, to get ready, to prepare (Meghan)

## ATHLETE STORIES OF LOCKDOWN DURING COVID-19

343           **Lack of Control.** Athletes' sense of control diminished, which was challenging for  
344 some, who expressed not feeling "comfortable" with this aspect of lockdown. Athletes closer  
345 to retirement found it "upsetting" that they could do nothing about their sporting career being  
346 fast-tracked, and some expressed feeling that their time as an athlete was being "taken away":

347           Sometimes I really miss fighting and you know, like, so much of these [months  
348 competing] are just going to pass by and there's absolutely nothing I can do about it,  
349 it's out of my hands erm and er it's all it's quite er upsetting erm and you know I'd  
350 like the opportunity to do everything I can and to have that taken away from me is not  
351 nice. But sort of what are you going to do about it? (Karl)

352 Some athletes discussed how lockdown took away their sense of control over their day-to-day  
353 activities and decision-making:

354           As an individual I'm always trying myself to be in control of everything. I always  
355 make decisions, I'm always creative. I've always been able to be in control because  
356 that's what I love. That's who I am should I say. But when you're being told err this is  
357 what's going to happen and you have no choice but to do that, then yeah it's not  
358 something that I like. It's not something, I'm not comfortable with it. And that's  
359 something that I found hard to deal with at the beginning [of lockdown] (Ronald)

360           **Missing Friends and Teammates.** Athletes found it "difficult" being unable to  
361 interact with friends and teammates in a normal social or training environment. Many  
362 engaged in Zoom meetings with teammates and friends, but expressed that it was not the  
363 same as physically spending time together; they missed talking to people on the "same  
364 wavelength":

365           Like it must be like... just being on the same wavelength as someone and having  
366 things in common is fun and you can have a joke you know it's like just having a



## ATHLETE STORIES OF LOCKDOWN DURING COVID-19

367 laugh and stuff yeah like I have done some bits like you know the pub quiz type  
368 things on zoom, done some of those and stuff and they are fun for like a hour you're  
369 having a good time with your mates and normally that's all the time and or like at  
370 least a few times a day that's happening and now it's like once a week and like erm  
371 that sort of really quite difficult (Karl)

372 This was difficult for athletes from both team and individual sport backgrounds. Katie  
373 recognised the importance of teammates in supporting her psychologically when she is  
374 feeling stressed or low:

375 So it's been, it's been quite hard to adjust really to being in lockdown. Because  
376 obviously I do [sport], which is a team sport so, it's been difficult not having like my  
377 teammates around me who obviously help me, help me train and pick me up when  
378 you've got your bad days and stuff like that. So, that's been quite difficult (Katie)

379 For Katie in particular, not being able to see family members and romantic partners was their  
380 "biggest struggle":

381 I've been missing quite a lot of people so that's the biggest struggle for me...missing  
382 like my friends and stuff, my family. So that was really the biggest struggle (Katie)

383 **Pressure Athletes Place on Themselves.** Some athletes felt pressure to stay fit due to  
384 the lack of clarity around when sport may return and wanted to ensure they were fit for when  
385 sport commenced. As lockdown continued, athletes began to experience feelings of "guilt"  
386 when they did not adhere to their training plan, which took a toll on athletes' well-being:

387 I think the first like few weeks or couple of weeks we were in lockdown I was trying  
388 to like work out every day and was putting a lot of pressure on myself to try and stay  
389 in shape because I didn't know what was going on with the league and no one really  
390 knows when things are going to start up again (Jen)

## ATHLETE STORIES OF LOCKDOWN DURING COVID-19

391 Other athletes placed pressure on themselves by worrying about their opponents  
392 getting “one step ahead” during lockdown. This appeared to create a sense of hopelessness  
393 and anxiety initiated by feelings they may be left behind:

394 Even though I know that they’re you know on lockdown with me I’m constantly  
395 thinking they’re doing something right now and getting that one step ahead that’s  
396 constantly on my mind and I’m worried instead of being there I’m worried they’re  
397 slowly getting higher and I’ll have to catch up. I know they’re probably not, they’re  
398 probably just going for runs like I am and doing they’re training what they need to do  
399 but in my head I’m constantly thinking my competitor is getting better than me right  
400 now, they’re getting further and further away which is the wrong thing to think about  
401 but after a while it’s hard to think of anything else really (Meghan)

402 **Uncertainty.** Athletes felt a sense of uncertainty as they entered this unknown world.  
403 Those approaching retirement saw the pandemic as potentially taking away years of their  
404 careers. Others struggled with confusion over what was going to happen on a day-to-day  
405 basis, how the pandemic would evolve, and when they may return to sport:

406 It was such a bittersweet thing [the last match before lockdown] because like I’d  
407 become the all-time leading scorer for the club but had a pretty bad game anyway and  
408 then also thrown into the mix, would that potentially be my last [point] ever scored?  
409 Like if [sport] and if sport doesn’t return (Shaun)

410 I just I don’t really like not knowing the unknown and that’s probably what the  
411 toughest is of this experience right now is that it’s all quite unknown and up in the air  
412 like go to listen to the news at least once a day to just try and see what’s going on  
413 (Meghan)

414

## ATHLETE STORIES OF LOCKDOWN DURING COVID-19

415 **On-Going Consequences of COVID-19 on the Athlete's Personal and Professional Lives**

416 Having initially underestimated the virus, it was at this point that the athletes began to  
417 experience the full force of the pandemic and its destructive consequences. As lockdown  
418 continued the athletes experienced on-going challenges and consequences of the virus that  
419 were becoming a threat to their personal and professional lives.

420 ***Loss***

421 'Loss' outlines factors where athletes experienced a sense of loss during lockdown. These  
422 factors were broken into four subthemes: 'Loss of Athletic Conditioning', 'Loss of Athletic  
423 Identity', 'Loss of Motivation', and 'Loss of Routine'. 'Loss of Athletic Conditioning' refers  
424 to athletes losing muscle and fitness levels during lockdown away from their structured  
425 training environment, 'Loss of Athletic Identity' refers to athletes experiencing an integral  
426 part of who they are (their sport) being taken away from them, 'Loss of Motivation' concerns  
427 athletes losing the drive and desire to perform their day to day tasks and training at home, and  
428 'Loss of Routine' relates to athletes losing their normal work and training schedule.

429 **Loss of Athletic Conditioning.** Due to the end of routine training programmes, some  
430 athletes noticed a loss of athletic conditioning. Though online workouts were organised, they  
431 were not the same intensity as traditional training routines. Some athletes mentioned that they  
432 were initially eating more, gaining weight, and the mental toll this had particularly in weight  
433 orientated sports:

434 I'm very weight orientated in sport as well, so obviously you're going to gain a bit of  
435 weight whilst you're off and you can't keep it down and that plays a big mental toll  
436 because you're just thinking you're getting big but you're not you're just more  
437 average. For me it's been about 7 weeks, that's over a month since I've done any  
438 training and you can do your own training, going on a run or your own workouts, but

## ATHLETE STORIES OF LOCKDOWN DURING COVID-19

439 it's still not the same to get that proper training in. Your fitness isn't going to be  
440 anywhere near the level that it would normally be and I don't like going out to a  
441 competition not feeling 100%, because then even though I could be in a good position  
442 or fitter than that person I'm going up against, my mentality is not there and then I  
443 just don't perform and that has a really negative effect on me as an athlete (Meghan)

444 **Loss of Athletic Identity.** Athletes discussed their loss of athletic identity due to  
445 sport being taken away and their busy everyday lives coming to a halt. Though online  
446 sessions with teammates or trainers supported some athletes' athletic identity, this was  
447 difficult to maintain:

448 My whole kind of like normal everyday life just kind of stopped, I was still working  
449 which was good, but then I got put on the furlough, so I've gone from being  
450 extremely busy and always having stuff to do and feeling quite good about myself, to  
451 kind of stopping and almost being someone I wouldn't even recognise anymore. You  
452 know like an athlete...I feel a lot of my identity has been put on hold or taken away.  
453 Obviously I'll try and keep positive like try to keep my whole [sport] identity and  
454 fitness identity like every time there's a [team] session on I'll join in any chance you  
455 get but it is tough to maintain that positivity, like we're seven weeks in and it doesn't  
456 look like it's livening up any time you're just there thinking like at least before I  
457 would have had work to distract myself but I don't even have that now (Meghan)

458 Karl's attempt to earn money doing a construction job gave him an insight into what a  
459 'normal life' looked like outside of his role as an athlete, which made him question his life  
460 without sport and worry about how COVID-19 might be fast-tracking his career:

461 I'm not used to having a proper job, like, working all day and having to learn stuff  
462 tired me out and it sort of took me like 2 weeks to figure everyone out I think, like I

## ATHLETE STORIES OF LOCKDOWN DURING COVID-19

463 sort of understand it as well, but it's the sort of people that do the same thing every  
464 day and I was there thinking like if this was my job I would just jump off a bridge or  
465 something, I could not do this, just, I don't know, I've never been able to do a job like  
466 that, it's like erm...these sort of people are like stuck if that makes sense? And I mean  
467 who am I to be the judge? But, it's just not for me and that worries me a bit because,  
468 like, I'm [*age*] now, I don't want to lose a year and a half of, you know, near my  
469 prime, you know, I've not got that long left really, I don't want to be fighting too late,  
470 you know. I want to have kids and stuff (Karl)

471 **Loss of Motivation.** Athletes experienced a loss of motivation to engage with their  
472 day-to-day activities and training schedules. This was due to a range of reasons, such as not  
473 having the typical support from teammates, lower intensity training sessions, not knowing  
474 when they would compete again, and being at home in their comfort zones:

475 Everything is intense [during normal training]. And bringing that intensity into your  
476 own home is not the same it's completely different you don't have that same intensity,  
477 you don't that same motivation. You don't have your teammates around, you don't  
478 have the facilities that's required to sustain the training that needs to be done while in  
479 quarantine because you're in your comfort zone you know (Ronald)

480 Some athletes questioned the purpose of training without knowing when they may return to  
481 sport, which impacted upon their motivation to continue:

482 I got to a point where I was like why am I doing this? Why am I working out every  
483 day really, really hard when we don't have a start date? So, the motivation completely  
484 dipped (Jen)

## ATHLETE STORIES OF LOCKDOWN DURING COVID-19

485           **Loss of Routine.** Lockdown forced day-to-day training and work schedules to a halt,  
486 imposing a sudden loss in routine. The simple nuances of normal life, such as going to their  
487 favourite coffee shop, were also missed:

488           And for me that [lockdown] was a complete whirlwind, my whole should we say life  
489 structure just changed all of a sudden. As an individual I like to go out, I like to enjoy  
490 myself and go to visit a restaurant. I like treating my wife you know and I love doing  
491 all these lavish things with friends and family and whatnot. And erm being told you  
492 can't do none of that or that's been cut away from you. It kind of just puts into  
493 perspective erm that you are kind of deprived to do what you love to do (Ronald)

494 Other athletes were aware of how this loss of routine led to emotional highs and lows:

495           I've come from a life that's quite scheduled to them not know next week if I'm going  
496 to be here you know so I can understand that my emotions are going to be up and  
497 down and I'll have low peaks (Meghan)

498 **Attempting to Overcome the Negative Impact of COVID-19**

499           As the lockdown progressed, most athletes seemed to be able to adjust and adapt to  
500 their new reality. While the virus was still ever present in the athletes' lives, there seemed to  
501 be an acceptance of the things they could no longer control.

502 ***Strategies that Benefitted Athletes Psychologically***

503           Athletes attributed several strategies as useful in coping with lockdown. These  
504 included: 'Gaining Acceptance of the Situation,' 'Broadening their Identities by Trying New  
505 Activities,' 'Developing New Routines To Provide Structure'. 'Gaining Acceptance of the  
506 Situation' refers to athletes using acceptance to overcome the impacts of COVID-19 on their  
507 normal daily lives, 'Broadening their Identities by Trying New Activities' refers to athletes  
508 exploring new activities, such as yoga or spending more time with family, to support them

## ATHLETE STORIES OF LOCKDOWN DURING COVID-19

509 through lockdown and ‘Developing New Routines To Provide Structure’ refers to the new  
510 routines that athletes created for themselves in place of those that lockdown had taken away.

511 **Gaining Acceptance of the Situation.** An understanding that they had no control  
512 over the situation helped some athletes accept their inability to train or compete. This helped  
513 them to cope psychologically with what they viewed as a temporary loss of their sport:

514 But again, you can’t do anything, I can’t do anything. I think I’m now at the point,  
515 what are we two and a half months in? It’s like, I think I think I’ve just gone yeah and  
516 just accepted it [lockdown] and just going with the flow now (Josh)

517 There’s nothing like I can do about getting on court, like nobody can get on court  
518 right now. Once I started to realise those things it’s been easier to deal with. [...] but I  
519 think right now I’m OK with where I’m at and yeah basically, I’m OK (Shaun)

520 Most athletes acknowledged that competitors were in the same situation and that they were  
521 therefore not losing a competitive advantage. Gary compared this to sport injury:

522 But it’s not like um, I think if it was like if I got injured or if something else, or it was  
523 a selection issue then I think I’d be more disappointed with that than this because you  
524 can’t, you’re not in control of this and this is like a once in a lifetime thing really isn’t  
525 it so, everyone’s in the same boat it’s not just me so it was on that point it’s not, you  
526 can’t do anything about it (Gary)

527 The appreciation that “everyone was in the same boat” enabled some athletes to accept this as  
528 an uncontrollable exceptional circumstance, and to focus on what they could control:

529 Once you got control over that [your emotions] then things you just put into  
530 perspective and you’re able to line out, what can you do? What can’t you do? And

## ATHLETE STORIES OF LOCKDOWN DURING COVID-19

531 take care of the things you can control and the things you can't control just don't think  
532 about it, don't worry about it. Leave it to be (Ronald)

533 **Broadening their Identities by Trying New Activities.** Athletes coped with the loss  
534 of their athlete role by exploring new activities and identities. This looked different for each  
535 athlete. Some discovered novel ways to make money or find purpose, while others  
536 reconnected with simple tasks such as gardening or doing jobs around the house:

537 It's pushed me into different directions like personal training, mentoring, working  
538 with children, working with private sectors, you know working with people who have  
539 mental mind issues. You know coaching a group of individuals and the list goes on  
540 you know (Ronald)

541 I got a chance to clear my garage, garden [...] my mum's massive into her plants so I  
542 was like um there's a - I think a B&Q opened init last week? Like the second day it  
543 opened I went there and just sort of got like lots of pots and compost and stuff and just  
544 started planting some vegetable things and all sorts really so that's what I've been  
545 doing the past week (Gary)

546 This broadening of identity provided a buffer for Gary, who felt content despite not being  
547 able to train and compete:

548 It hasn't been too bad really. I'm sort of quite content. Obviously, I can't do things  
549 that you normally do but you sort of you're getting used to it now I suppose, and I've  
550 started doing more and more things (Gary)

551 **Developing New Routines to Provide Structure.** Athletes recognised the importance  
552 of creating a routine which would provide structure; without which many experienced low  
553 levels of motivation and dissatisfaction. Prior to lockdown, the athletes led highly structured  
554 lives; lockdown created a void whereby they had more free time than they were used to. The



## ATHLETE STORIES OF LOCKDOWN DURING COVID-19

555 athletes were given varying degrees of support from their institutions, with some expected to  
556 follow training plans and others to train autonomously. For some athletes, the lack of  
557 structure was challenging, and it was helpful to have others hold them accountable:

558       Yeah, I think I just if I don't have any sort of plan or structure I will just sit on the  
559 Xbox all day, eat loads of food, do nothing, and I'll just feel shit and won't get  
560 anything done. So, I like just sort of the sort of plans really are the only things that are  
561 keeping me sane and then once I've done those sorts of things I just sort of relax and  
562 just chill out and I just feel a lot more happier (Gary)

563       My S&C [strength and conditioning] coach has given me and [team] has given me  
564 day-to-day plans of what I need to do so then I have some sort of structure cos  
565 otherwise I would definitely not be leaving bed 'til about midday everyday cos you  
566 just get into a routine of doing that so... that's been helping me stick to the routine  
567 and like just try and keep going with training, keep motivation (Katie)

### 568 **Reflecting on and Adapting to the Effects of COVID-19**

569       By using some of these strategies and engaging in activities to broaden their identities, the  
570 athletes were attempting to create a positive from their lockdown experience. Athletes used  
571 their newfound time to engage with reflection, which allowed them to gain a new  
572 appreciation for their sport and undertake more positive behaviours.

### 573 ***Silver Linings***

574       Athletes expressed positive effects resulting from lockdown. The theme Silver  
575 Linings was co-constructed and comprises two subthemes: 'New Appreciation for Their  
576 Sport,' and 'A Chance To Recover and Improve Physically'. 'New Appreciation for Their  
577 Sport' refers to athletes reflecting on their appreciation for aspects of their sport that they  
578 would have complained about prior to lockdown, and 'A Chance To Recover and Improve

## ATHLETE STORIES OF LOCKDOWN DURING COVID-19

579 Physically' refers to athletes using their time during lockdown to allow previous injuries to  
580 heal and to spend time on their physical weaknesses.

581 **New Appreciation for Their Sport.** Prior to lockdown, athletes dedicated a  
582 significant amount of time to their sport. While there were unenjoyable aspects of training  
583 which often elicited complaints, some athletes gained a new appreciation for every aspect of  
584 their sport. Lockdown also gave them time to reflect and gain an understanding that their  
585 sport will not always be there:

586 I think I took a lot of things for granted before, and I'll agree to that one you know  
587 erm, before I'd complain about my practice or something and now like I'm thinking  
588 I'll never complain again when they make me do sprints, I'll quite happily do them  
589 (Meghan)

590 To be honest with you it's probably given me a bit of a reset in how I'm going to  
591 approach training and playing because I was constantly moaning [...] I was outside  
592 playing in the rain I was thinking I can't be bothered, this drill is crap I can't be  
593 bothered doing this. Whereas I think after being away from it for 2 months it's reset  
594 me, and I think actually I'm going to attack it. I'm going to enjoy it as much as I can  
595 because it's not going to be around forever (Josh)

596 **A Chance To Recover and Improve Physically.** After an initial loss in physical  
597 conditioning, some athletes were able to take advantage of lockdown to recover and improve  
598 on their physical weaknesses. While athletes generally adapt to play through minor injuries  
599 and niggles, there was an appreciation that having a significant break allowed their bodies to  
600 rest and heal properly, which is not always possible during the competitive season:

## ATHLETE STORIES OF LOCKDOWN DURING COVID-19

601 And obviously lots of other niggles and stuff but they've sort of gone away a bit you  
602 know like all the joints like my elbows and my knees and you know, it's probably  
603 done me a favour not fighting every week so that's been good (laughs) (Karl)

604 I probably feel better to be fair. Like physically. Physically and probably mentally in a  
605 bit of a better place because I'm not picking up injuries. It's let my body heal pretty  
606 well because I've been playing the last eight years or something non-stop playing  
607 with injuries and its sort of allowed me to heal up a little. So, well-being side of it I'm  
608 sort of in a bit of a better place than I was before-hand. Not waking up sore on a  
609 Monday morning is quite nice (laughs) quite nice actually (Josh)

610 Athletes spoke about how time away from formalised training and competition gave them a  
611 chance to work on areas of fitness and physique that they were unable to during the season:

612 Overall just size, sort of aligning everything better and core strength stuff like that  
613 which kind of gets missed when you're just working on physical development for  
614 sport sometimes because you know that's just the nature of it and you  
615 overcompensate in one area of the other, so just rebalancing things a little bit (Shaun)

616 Some athletes welcomed the opportunity to work on areas of physical weakness:

617 What I wanted to get out of it was strengthen stuff which I couldn't do in the season  
618 so, I have I managed to get a hold of some weight equipment from a gym near me so  
619 I'm trying to lift big in this time and also I'm rubbish at running so trying to get some  
620 running behind me and try and get fit that way (Katie)

## 621 Discussion

622 The purpose of this study was to explore elite athletes' stories of their experiences of  
623 the COVID-19 pandemic. We aimed to understand the athletes' beliefs about how the

## ATHLETE STORIES OF LOCKDOWN DURING COVID-19

624 COVID-19 pandemic may impact them as people and performers. After analysing the  
625 athletes' stories of lockdown, their narrative can be best described in four distinct sections: a)  
626 COVID-19 as a Threat to the Athletes' Goals, b) On-Going Consequences of COVID-19 on  
627 the Athlete's Personal and Professional Lives, c) Attempting to Overcome the Negative  
628 Impact of COVID-19, and d) Reflecting on and Adapting to the Effects of COVID-19. There  
629 were four narrative themes, co-constructed between the athletes and the research team, which  
630 reinforced each stage of the narrative structure: a) Factors Athletes Found Challenging, b)  
631 Loss, c) Strategies that Benefitted Athletes Psychologically, and d) Silver Linings.

632 One of the ways this study is novel is by exploring a currently unexplored and  
633 unprecedented global event and the impact this has had on athletes' personal and professional  
634 lives. There have been a number of commentaries (Mehrsafar et al., 2020; Schinke et al.,  
635 2020a: 2020b) that have described the pandemic as a 'crisis transition' or a 'critical  
636 situation'. In the introduction, we used the transition and critical moment literature in an  
637 attempt to understand how the pandemic is experienced by athletes and to provide a  
638 theoretical underpinning to the research. However, based on the experiences of the athletes in  
639 this study, we now propose that the current COVID-19 pandemic is better described as a  
640 *critical pause*; characterised by an abrupt end (or pause) to competition and training, a lack of  
641 control over the situation, and uncertainty over the future. Unlike a transition, the current  
642 experience is not defined by change or by a movement from one position to another  
643 (progressing to an elite level, retiring from sport etc.), but rather the absence of (long-lasting)  
644 change and a loss of movement altogether; the athletes' lives were put on hold. For example,  
645 the athletes' goals and ambitions (qualifying for the Olympic Games, winning Olympic gold  
646 etc.) were disrupted and postponed indefinitely as a consequence of the virus. This initial  
647 period meant the athletes experienced uncertainty and loss, but with time, were able to adapt  
648 to their situation and engage in new behaviours to cope and overcome this initial difficult

## ATHLETE STORIES OF LOCKDOWN DURING COVID-19

649 period. However, while this narrative does represent how the athletes adapted and changed  
650 throughout their lockdown experience, the data from this study do not support the notion that  
651 all of these changes would be long-lasting and so disputes the idea that the initial stages of  
652 this pandemic can be categorised as a transition. It is clear to see that the athletes experienced  
653 change as a result of the lockdown, but there was an overwhelming sense from the athletes  
654 that some of these changes (e.g., new routines, loss of meaning) were only representative of  
655 their current context and that any changes made would be undone by a return to training and  
656 their ‘normal lives’.

657         Despite the fundamental differences between a transition and our proposed *critical*  
658 *pause*, there are some similarities; with the experience being most like that of a long-term  
659 injury. Both the pandemic and a long-term injury have the potential to create a sense of loss:  
660 loss of conditioning, loss of routine, loss of motivation and a loss of identity. This sense of  
661 loss parallels with experiences of injury. However, athletes discussed that the pandemic  
662 experience was also dissimilar to injury in the sense that everyone was “in the same boat”.  
663 Furthermore, whilst sport injury rehabilitation is difficult, it is often accompanied by a  
664 carefully constructed and scientifically based strategy for recovery (Rees et al., 2015); a  
665 luxury not afforded to athletes during the initial phase of lockdown. It is important to  
666 highlight that like other critical moments or transitions, this *critical pause* was not always  
667 experienced as inherently negative. After an initial period of adaptation, where there needed  
668 to be an acceptance of the situation, most athletes experienced growth. The majority of the  
669 athletes seemed to have developed a new appreciation of their sport by reflecting on times  
670 when they had taken their sporting career for granted. Athletes were also able to recognise,  
671 and direct focus to, other areas of their lives (Schinke et al., 2020a) thus broadening their  
672 identity and creating new routines.

## ATHLETE STORIES OF LOCKDOWN DURING COVID-19

673           The findings of the current study have a number of implications for both athletes and  
674 sport psychology practitioners. For example, a number of athletes in the current study  
675 struggled with the uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic. Their early experiences were  
676 based around social isolation (lack of contact with teammates and support staff), uncertainty  
677 about career progression and qualification for major events, lack of motivation, and limited  
678 access to specialist training equipment (Schinke et al., 2020a). However, as the lockdown  
679 continued, athletes' responses varied. Some were able to adapt and accept their lack of control  
680 of the situation, whereas, some found themselves lacking a meaning and purpose in their life.  
681 It became apparent that while some athletes were able to cope, others experienced an inability  
682 to cope and consequently a negative response to the lockdown (Mehrsafar et al., 2020). This  
683 inability to cope led to an increase in stress and anxiety and had a debilitating effect on daily  
684 life. This increase in anxiety has the potential to lead to cases of short or long term depression  
685 (Frank et al., 2020). Arguably, there has never been a more important time for sport  
686 psychology practitioners to be accessible to their clients (Schinke et al., 2020a) and the  
687 current study provides an insight into the potential experiences of, and responses to, the  
688 COVID-19 pandemic, ensuring appropriate support can be provided. However, this  
689 heightened stress and anxiety, coupled with the high demand for sport psychology  
690 practitioners to provide online psychological counselling (Mehrsafar et al., 2020) may lead to  
691 maladaptive coping in the practitioner themselves. There has to be a recognition that there is  
692 an additional need for mental health support for both athletes and practitioners, which could  
693 involve telepsychological consultations (Toresdahl & Asif, 2020). Despite this, anecdotal  
694 reports suggest that some sport psychology practitioners had been furloughed due to the  
695 financial constraints on clubs and sporting organisations. This meant that there was no  
696 contact allowed between the sport psychology practitioner and athletes. For self-employed  
697 practitioners and those who have not been furloughed, there has been a shift in practice

## ATHLETE STORIES OF LOCKDOWN DURING COVID-19

698 towards online services. Telepsychology has many advantages over its face-to-face  
699 counterpart in that it is portable, relatively inexpensive, and can be conducted wherever  
700 suitable equipment and bandwidth are available. This means that sport psychology could be  
701 more accessible especially as sport psychology practitioners are typically confronted with the  
702 constraints of time and distance (Cotterill & Symes, 2014). Despite these benefits of online  
703 delivery, there have been a few concerns. Research amongst psychotherapists, whilst mostly  
704 positive, has also shown that they feel more tired, less confident, less authentic, and genuine,  
705 and less connected during online sessions (Bekes & Aafjes-van Doorn, 2020). This may be  
706 concerning as the relationship between the sport psychology practitioner and the client is one  
707 of the most important for effective practice (Henriksen et al., 2011). Cotterill (2020) argues  
708 that moving away from face-to-face interactions can compromise the quality of the explicit  
709 and implicit communication that takes place. Despite these concerns, it seems that this is a  
710 future direction that the industry will be forced to take.

711         The COVID-19 pandemic is an unexplored phenomenon and so the research team  
712 needed to act quickly to collect and analyse the data for the current study to provide an  
713 insight into the athletes' initial experiences of the lockdown. This strict time frame meant that  
714 the design of the current study only provides a snapshot of the athletes' experiences at one  
715 point in time. The research team plans to continue interviewing participants of the current  
716 study (phase two of data collection has already begun) as their journey throughout the  
717 COVID-19 pandemic evolves. Many professional sports organisations have considered a  
718 restart of their events due to serious financial issues, but run the risk of endangering the  
719 spectators, athletes, and associated staffs' health. A restart of training, competitions, and  
720 events mean it is highly likely that there will be further outbreaks, evidenced by a spike in  
721 cases and some local lockdowns in the UK. A longitudinal approach will capture this and  
722 provide practitioners with data to support their athletes through a potential second wave.

## ATHLETE STORIES OF LOCKDOWN DURING COVID-19

723 Furthermore, this longitudinal approach will allow the research team to capture athletes'  
724 stories that may have been initially silenced in an attempt to tell a more meaningful story. It is  
725 possible that other narratives exist that could provide us with key information about the  
726 athletes' experiences. However, these narratives may have been marginalised as a result of  
727 how the data were collected or because of what they reveal about the individual. Perhaps,  
728 these stories were not as positive or were perceived to provide less of a meaningful  
729 contribution. Also, the narratives represented within this study may not reflect the narratives  
730 of other athletes. Research should be conducted across a variety of athlete samples to see  
731 which elements of athletes' experiences are similar and unique across contexts.

732         The present study explored the stories of athletes during the COVID-19 pandemic and  
733 in particular their experience of lockdown. Participants' stories consisted of four distinct  
734 sections: a) COVID-19 as a Threat to the Athletes' Goals, b) On-Going Consequences of  
735 COVID-19 on the Athlete's Personal and Professional Lives, c) Attempting to Overcome the  
736 Negative Impact of COVID-19, and d) Reflecting on and Adapting to the Effects of COVID-  
737 19. Through the use of narrative analysis, we were able to critically examine how COVID-19  
738 impacted athletes as people and performers. Several themes were also co-constructed from  
739 athletes' stories which included: a) Factors Athletes Found Challenging, b) Loss, c) Strategies  
740 that Benefitted Athletes Psychologically, and d) Silver Linings. The present study presented  
741 applied implications for athletes and support staff including sport psychology practitioners to  
742 better assist in dealing with this *critical pause* and in particular; COVID-19. We recommend  
743 future research investigate the longitudinal effect of prolonged lockdown on athletes lives  
744 both in and out of sport and the adjustment of return to sport.

745

746

747



## ATHLETE STORIES OF LOCKDOWN DURING COVID-19

748  
749  
750  
751  
752  
753  
754  
755  
756  
757  
758  
759  
760  
761  
762  
763  
764  
765  
766  
767  
768  
769  
770

**References**

- Alderwick, H., Dunn, P., Dixon, J. (2020). England's health policy response to covid-19 *BMJ* 2020;369:m1937. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.m1937>
- Aquilina, D. (2013). A study of the relationship between elite athletes' educational development and sporting performance. *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, (30)4, 274-392. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09523367.2013.765723>
- Ardern, C.L., Taylor, N. F., Feller, J. A., and Webster, K.E. (2012). A systematic review of the psychological factors associated with returning to sport following injury. *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, 47(17), 1120-1126. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bjsports-2012-091203>
- BBC Sport. Coronavirus: How the virus has impacted sporting events around the world. (2020). Retrieved July 08, 2020, from <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/51605235>
- Becker, D., & Marecek, J. (2008). Positive psychology history in the remaking? *Theory & Psychology*, 18, 591–604. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0959354308093397>
- Békés, V., & Aafjes-van Doorn, K. (2020). Psychotherapists' attitudes toward online therapy during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Psychotherapy Integration*, 30(2), 238. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/int0000214>
- Bell, J. S. (2004). *Write Great Fiction-Plot & Structure*. Ohio: Writer's Digest.
- Booker, C. (2004). *The seven basic plots: Why we tell stories*. London: Continuum.
- Brewer, B. W., Selby, C., Linder, D., & Petitpas, A. (1999). Distancing oneself from a poor season: Divestment of athletic identity. *Journal of Personal and Interpersonal Loss*, 4, 149–162. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10811449908409723>

## ATHLETE STORIES OF LOCKDOWN DURING COVID-19

- 771 Brewer, B., Van Raalte, J., & Linder, D. (1993). Athletic identity: Hercules' muscle or  
772 Achilles heel? *International Journal of Sport Psychology*, *24*, 237–254.
- 773 Brewer, B.W. (2009). Injury prevention and rehabilitation. In B. W. Brewer (Ed.), *Sport*  
774 *Psychology* (pp. 83-96). Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.
- 775 Brown, G and Potrac, P (2009) You've not made the grade son: Deselection and identity  
776 disruption in elite level youth football. *Soccer and Society*, *10*, 143-  
777 159. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14660970802601613>
- 778 Cotterill, S. T. (2020). Social media and sport psychology practice. *Advancements in Mental*  
779 *Skills Training*, 109-122.
- 780 Cotterill, S. T., & Symes, R. (2014). Integrating social media and new technologies into your  
781 practice as a sport psychology consultant. *Sport & Exercise Psychology Review*, *10*(1),  
782 55-64.
- 783 Curtis, S., Gesler, W., Smith, G., & Washburn, S. (2000). Approaches to sampling and case  
784 selection in qualitative research: examples in the geography of health. *Social Science &*  
785 *Medicine*, *50*(7-8), 1001-1014. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0277-9536\(99\)00350-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0277-9536(99)00350-0)
- 786 Ermler, K. L., & Thomas, C. E. (1990). Interventions for the alienating effect of injury.  
787 *Athletic Training*, *25*, 269–271.
- 788 Frank, A., Fatke, B., Frank, W., Förstl, H., & Hölzle, P. (2020). Depression, dependence and  
789 prices of the COVID-19-Crisis. *Brain, Behavior, and Immunity*.  
790 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bbi.2020.04.068>.
- 791 Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1999). *Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for*  
792 *Qualitative Research*. New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203793206>
- 793 Henriksen, K., Diment, G., & Hansen, J. (2011). Professional philosophy: Inside the delivery  
794 of sport psychology service at Team Denmark. *Sport Science Review*, *20*(1-2),  
795 5. <https://doi.org/10.2478/v10237-011-0043-6>

## ATHLETE STORIES OF LOCKDOWN DURING COVID-19

- 796 Knights, S., Sherry, E., & Ruddock-Hudson, M. (2016). Investigating elite  
797 end-of-athletic career transition: A systematic review. *Journal of Applied Sport*  
798 *Psychology*, 28(3), 291–308. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10413200.2015.1128992>
- 799 Lally, P. (2007). Identity and athletic retirement: A prospective study. *Psychology of Sport*  
800 *and Exercise*, 8, 85–99. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2006.03.003>
- 801 Malterud, K., Siersma, V. D., & Guassora, A. D. (2016). Sample size in qualitative interview  
802 studies: guided by information power. *Qualitative Health Research*, 26(13), 1753-1760.  
803 <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732315617444>
- 804 Mehrsafari, A. H., Gazerani, P., Zadeh, A. M., & Sánchez, J. C. J. (2020). Addressing  
805 potential impact of COVID-19 pandemic on physical and mental health of elite  
806 athletes. *Brain, Behavior, and Immunity*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bbi.2020.05.011>
- 807 Murphy, G., Petitpas, A., & Brewer, B. (1996). Identity foreclosure, athletic identity and  
808 career maturity in intercollegiate athletes. *The Sport Psychologist*, 10, 239–246.  
809 <https://doi.org/10.1123/tsp.10.3.239>
- 810 Nesti, M., Littlewood, M., O'Halloran, L., Eubank, M., & Richardson, D. (2012). Critical  
811 moments in elite Premiership football: Who do you think you are? *Physical Culture*  
812 *and Sport Studies and Research*, 56, 23-32. [https://doi.org/10.2478/v10141-012-0027-](https://doi.org/10.2478/v10141-012-0027-y)  
813 [y](https://doi.org/10.2478/v10141-012-0027-y)
- 814 Park, S., Lavalley, D., & Tod, D. (2013). Athletes' career transition out of sport: A  
815 systematic review. *International Review of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 6(1), 22–  
816 53. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1750984X.2012.687053>
- 817 Podlog, L., & Eklund, R. C. (2005). Return to sport after serious injury: A retrospective  
818 examination of motivation and psychological outcomes. *Journal of Sport*  
819 *Rehabilitation*, 14, 20–34. <https://doi.org/10.1123/jsr.14.1.20>

## ATHLETE STORIES OF LOCKDOWN DURING COVID-19

- 820 Rees, T., Haslam, S. A., Coffee, P., & Lavalley, D. (2015). A social identity approach to  
821 sport psychology: Principles, practice, and prospects. *Sports Medicine*, 45, 1083-1096.  
822 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40279-015-0345-4>
- 823 Ronkainen, N. J., Tikkanen, O., Littlewood, M., & Nesti, M. S. (2014). An existential  
824 perspective on meaning, spirituality and authenticity in athletic careers. *Qualitative*  
825 *Research in Sport, Exercise, and Health*, (7)2, 253-  
826 270. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2014.926970>
- 827 Ronkainen, N. J., & Nesti, M. S. (2015). An existential approach to sport psychology: Theory  
828 and applied practice. *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 1-13.  
829 <https://doi.org/10.1080/1612197X.2015.1055288>
- 830 Ronkainen, N. J., & Nesti, M. S. (2017). An existential approach to sport psychology: Theory  
831 and applied practice. *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 15(1),  
832 12-24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1612197X.2015.1055288>
- 833 Santi, G., Pietriantoni, L. (2013). Psychology of sport and injury rehabilitation: a review of  
834 models and interventions. *Journal of Human Sport and Exercise*, 8(4), 1029-1044.  
835 <https://doi.org/10.4100/jhse.2013.84.13>
- 836 Schinke, R., Papaioannou, A., Henriksen, K., Si, G., Zhang, L., and Haberl, P., (2020a) Sport  
837 psychology services to high performance athletes during COVID-19, *International*  
838 *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 18(3), 269-272.  
839 <https://doi.org/10.1080/1612197X.2020.1754616>
- 840 Schinke, R., Papaioannou, A., Maher, C., Parham, W. D., Larsen, C. H., Gordin, R., &  
841 Cotterill, S. (2020). Sport psychology services to professional athletes: working through  
842 COVID-19, *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 18(4), 409–413.  
843 <https://doi.org/10.1080/1612197X.2020.1766182>

## ATHLETE STORIES OF LOCKDOWN DURING COVID-19

- 844 Smith, B. (2010). Narrative inquiry: Ongoing conversations and questions for sport and  
845 exercise psychology research. *International Review of Sport and Exercise Psychology*,  
846 3(1), 87–107. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17509840903390937>
- 847 Smith, B., & Sparkes, A. C. (2009). Narrative analysis and sport and exercise psychology:  
848 Understanding lives in diverse ways. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 10(2), 279-288.  
849 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2008.07.012>
- 850 Sparkes, A.C. (2000) 'Illness, Premature Career-termination, and the Loss of Self: A  
851 Biographical Study of an Elite Athlete', in R.L. Jones and K.M. Armour (eds)  
852 *Sociology of Sport: Theory and Practice*, pp. 13-32. London: Addison Wesley  
853 Longman.
- 854 Sparkes, A. C., & Smith, B. (2013). *Qualitative Research Methods in Sport, Exercise and*  
855 *Health: From Process to Product*. New York: Routledge.
- 856 Swann, C., Moran, A., & Piggott, D. (2015). Defining elite athletes: Issues in the study of  
857 expert performance in sport psychology. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 16, 3-14.  
858 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2014.07.004>
- 859 te Wierike, S.C.M., van der Sluis, A., van den Akker-Scheek, I., Elferink-Gemser, M.T. and  
860 Visscher, C. (2012). Psychosocial factors influencing the recovery of athletes with  
861 anterior cruciate ligament injury: A systematic review. *Scandinavian Journal of*  
862 *Medicine & Science in Sports*, 23, 527-540. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sms.12010>
- 863 Thomas, D. R. (2016). Feedback from research participants: Are member checks useful in  
864 qualitative research? *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 14(1), 23-41.  
865 <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2016.1219435>
- 866 Toresdahl, B. G., & Asif, I. M. (2020). Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19):  
867 considerations for the competitive athlete. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1941738120918876>

## ATHLETE STORIES OF LOCKDOWN DURING COVID-19

- 868 Tracy, S. J. (2010). Qualitative quality: Eight “big-tent” criteria for excellent qualitative  
869 research. *Qualitative inquiry*, 16(10), 837-851.  
870 <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800410383121>
- 871 Wiechman, S. A., & Williams, J. (1997). Factors affecting Athletic Identity and expectations  
872 in the high school student athlete. *Journal of Sport Behaviour*, 20, 199-211.
- 873 Wylleman, P., & Reints, A. (2010). A lifespan perspective on the career of talented and elite  
874 athletes: perspectives on high-intensity sports. *Scandinavian Journal of Medicine &*  
875 *Science in Sports*, 20(2), 88-94. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1600-0838.2010.01194.x>