

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Method

Philosophical Assumptions

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

Participants

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

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

[insert table 1 here]

Information Power

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

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

Procedure

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

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

Data Analysis

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

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

Quality

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

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

[Insert table 2 here]

Results

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

[Insert table 3 here]

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

COVID-19 as a Threat to the Athletes’ Goals

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

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

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

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

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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

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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)

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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

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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)

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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

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

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

Loss

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

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

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

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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

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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)

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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

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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

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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

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

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

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

Reflecting on and Adapting to the Effects of COVID-19

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

Silver Linings

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

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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:

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)

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

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**

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

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

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

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

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

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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

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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.

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

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

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