

## **“A Blank Slate”: Preparing for Tokyo 2021 during COVID-19**

### **Abstract**

This article presents a case study of an applied consultancy experience with NG; an Olympic athlete preparing for Tokyo 2021. After medalling at a major international tournament NG experienced a significant reduction in their performance and well-being. The case study highlights the importance of supporting both the person and the performer. COVID-19 and the lockdown of the United Kingdom were highly influential to the consultancy process; providing NG with the opportunity to explore their identity in the absence of sport. NG framed their emergence from the lockdown as a ‘Blank Slate’, which was a critical moment allowing them to ‘find themselves on and off the mat’. The Sport Psychologist’s philosophy of practice is presented and discussed in detail throughout the case study. Furthermore, reflections are provided by NG’s Strength and Conditioning Coach about their decision to refer and by NG themselves about the efficacy of the support provided.

Keywords: COVID-19, identity, critical moments, authenticity, balance, control,

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### **Context**

#### **COVID-19**

With millions infected and billions forced to self-isolate (Buchholz, 2020), the consequences of the COVID-19 virus were felt by everyone around the world. As the Olympic qualifiers (originally scheduled to take place in Wuhan, China) were postponed, Olympic athletes faced uncertainty about the qualification process and their future in sport altogether (Schinke et al., 2020a). Many elite athletes experienced social isolation, loneliness, fear, anxiety, and a decrease in motivation, as they searched for meaning in absence of sport (Schinke et al., 2020b). This critical pause (Whitcomb-Khan et al., in review) forced athletes to stop, reflect, and adapt to an unprecedented period in their careers. During this period of adaptation, through reflection, some athletes were able to respond positively to the virus; gaining a new appreciation for their sport (Whitcomb-Khan et al., in review) and recognising gaps in their Olympic performance (Schinke et al., 2020a). However, others struggled to adapt to the ‘new-normal’ and experienced heightened anxiety (Mehrsafar et al., 2020), placing them at a higher risk of mental health challenges (Frank et al., 2020).

#### **The Practitioner**

My approach to practice has been highlighted in previous applied case studies (Wadsworth 2019; Wadsworth et al., 2020). However, this case study marked the start of my professional career as a Sport and Exercise Psychologist (Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) registered). I successfully passed my Professional Doctorate in Sport and Exercise Psychology on the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2020 and ‘celebrated’ this achievement during the strictest of lockdown periods in the United Kingdom. Successfully gaining chartered status did not change my approach to practice, but preparing for, and engaging in, the viva

examination did allow me to reflect on how I articulated this approach to others. The ‘ABC principle’ is one way of understanding my philosophy of practice.

The ABC principle (*Authenticity, Balance, and Control*) draws heavily from the Existential literature (Nesti, 2004). *Authenticity* is required from both the practitioner and the client, who must engage in the consultancy process together; bringing their true self to each session and engaging as best they can in an honest and transparent encounter. This meeting of two people, being unapologetically themselves, is not easy, but if achieved can create the necessary foundations for successful service delivery. Authenticity allows for the development of the necessary relationship required between the practitioner and client and often becomes the intervention itself. Practitioners who demonstrate complete presence in the encounter allow clients to confidently and comfortably engage with the support by telling their story. *Balance* draws on the identity literature (Wylleman et al., 2004) and highlights the importance of supporting the person and the performer (Frieson & Orlick, 2010) by appreciating the link between performance and well-being (Brady & Maynard, 2010). This is central to my philosophy and belief system; *we work with people who are very good at sport, but sport should not define them*. Clients unable to discuss who they are outside of a sporting context may be demonstrating a complete performance narrative (Douglas & Carless, 2009) or foreclosed identity (Nesti & Littlewood, 2011), which in some cases can be contributing towards the challenges they are experiencing. Broadening an individual’s identity can help provide them with perspective. As they start to view themselves as more than just an athlete, they are able to switch off from their sport and receive critical feedback. They are able to view good and bad performances in a more balanced way. Finding a balance between their sport and their broader life serves to improve both their performance and well-being. *Control* refers to another key aspect of the Existential literature and one of my own most strongly held beliefs about human beings; *we have free will*. This free will means we have freedom and

control, but it also means we must take responsibility for our actions. Taking responsibility can often cause anxiety (May, 1977). Athletes face a variety of critical moments throughout their careers (Nesti et al., 2012) and must acknowledge the control they have in these moments. This can often require the practitioner to ask some very challenging questions of the client, which can be deeply uncomfortable for both people involved. This type of support requires a very strong professional relationship between the practitioner and client and does not work without a level of authenticity discussed above. All elements of this philosophy of practice were required at different points throughout this consultancy process as both me and NG navigated the ever-changing COVID-19 pandemic.

### **The Client**

The client involved in this case study will be referred to as NG. NG has given verbal and written consent for this case study to be written and published. However, as NG is a high-profile athlete and easily identifiable within their sporting community and beyond, a variety of information (gender, age, sport etc.) has not been included in this case study. To maintain confidentiality, the context surrounding NG's situation will be presented broadly and some information will be excluded from the write-up. For example, NG's sport will be referred to broadly as a 'combat sport' for the purposes of this case study.

Prior to our first meeting, NG had finished in a podium position at a major international competition; their best professional achievement to date. However, in the period following this medal, they had experienced a reduction in performance, and a number of professional and personal challenges, which had subsequently prevented them from attaining the same level of performance in recent competitions and made them question their future in the sport.

### **Consultancy Process**

The consultancy process ran from the 18<sup>th</sup> February 2020 to 15<sup>th</sup> September 2020, during which time NG and I engaged in 12 sessions together. Only three of the sessions were

conducted face-to-face. The majority of the sessions were conducted online (Yang et al., 2020) due to lockdown restrictions and to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus. The boundaries between the different elements of the consultancy process are rarely linear in nature (Keegan, 2015) and the COVID-19 pandemic only served to increase the complexity of this process. The changing circumstances surrounding the virus meant that NG's needs were constantly changing too. NG was referred to see me prior to the start of lockdown, with needs unrelated to the COVID-19 virus. The national lockdown of the United Kingdom was announced on the 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020; three sessions into the consultancy process. This required us to adapt and use an online platform to conduct the sessions. Moreover, the consultancy process continued after the lockdown had ended and NG had returned to training. In an attempt to capture this ever-changing situation (and the changing needs of NG), the consultancy process is presented in two distinct sections below; pre and post lockdown. Throughout the following sections, NG's thoughts, and reflections (collected during an 'exit interview' at the end of the consultancy process) will be presented in quotes to provide an insight into the efficacy of the intervention. The reflections of Adam (NG's Strength and Conditioning Coach and my colleague from the University) will also be included as second author, because he was an integral part of the referral and intake process.

## **Pre-Lockdown**

### ***Intake***

NG was referred to see me by Adam. At NG's most recent competition (as a result of a change in nutritionist) NG had weighed in almost 10kg over their fighting weight. This meant NG had been forced, by their coach, to engage in dangerous weight loss strategies immediately prior to their competition. NG managed to make weight for the competition, but this experience, and their subsequent poor performance at the competition (due to severe dehydration), had made them question their future in the sport. NG had begun to dissociate

from their sport and was beginning to lose trust in the people around them. NG had a very strong professional relationship with Adam, which was strengthened by the weight loss experience, and only agreed to engage in sport psychology support if he was present at our meetings.

Adam's Reflections. Following NG's latest competition, NG and I had a number of discussions reflecting on what had happened. NG stated that, because of this experience, they felt apprehensive about the upcoming competitions scheduled for the remainder of 2020. Alongside this, NG's attitude also seemed to be shifting more dramatically in training too. Although the effort being applied to training was good, the optimism and positivity seemed to have faded somewhat. The point at which NG brought up the possibility of leaving the sport altogether, was when I felt NG's psychological needs outweighed the support I was able to offer. Whilst I felt I could provide support in terms of friendship; it was clear that expert help was needed. As NG's needs were now beyond the scope of my practice, I sought the support of Nick. Initially I went to Nick for advice and guidance about how I could support NG further. I made this decision because NG had previously stated they had trust issues (heavily influenced by recent events), which meant a referral might be met with scepticism. However, as the weeks went on, and NG was not improving, I decided to discuss the benefits of full psychological support with NG. After numerous conversations NG reluctantly agreed to attend an informal meeting with Nick, on the condition that I too attended. During the initial meeting, Nick clearly outlined his expectations of NG, and stated his approach to support and what he could offer. This seemed to strike a chord with NG, who seemed more positive about attending a more formal intake session. I had previously never attended a psychological session, such as this, because normally, meetings between a Sport Psychologist and the athlete are conducted in privacy and under strict confidentiality. However, due to the circumstances, Nick had agreed I could attend to ensure NG was comfortable. Prior to the

session, Nick and I agreed that I would also engage in the session by answering the questions asked. The thought behind this process was, if I were engaged in the process and demonstrated emotion, vulnerability, and acted in an honest manner, this would encourage NG to be more open and trusting of Nick and the process as a whole. There was an immediate effect, as NG began to engage in discussions once I had initially answered questions. Over the proceeding weeks, NG became confident enough and trusting enough in Nick, where they felt I did not need to be present at the sessions. Since engaging with psychological support, I have noticed a marked improvement in NG, who is now more reminiscent of their old self.

***Intake (Continued...)***

Despite agreeing to attend, NG was still very resistant and sceptical in engaging with psychological support. This highlights just how important Adam's support and encouragement were in these early stages:

Well, I was resistant against it because I couldn't really see how anyone else could help my problems, because to me, it was my problem and my situation and nobody else could understand or...fix it...also I'd had previous help with other circumstances before and never really found that helpful and I've never really been open to talk to people, so that was a big step for me...the reason why I ended up finally coming, was, well it was a really big push from Adam really, because he was obviously thinking that it would really help and I think it was because I'd reached such a low that I kind of felt like I had no other branch to reach out for, for help, because I was very close to quitting my sport and I was pretty much done and the one last chance that I had really was this...

Agreeing that Adam could attend the meetings with NG had the potential to provide a different dynamic to the intake session. Engaging with an athlete and a member of their

174 support staff was not something I had ever experienced before and so I took some time,  
175 before the first session, to reflect on how I would approach the meeting and what ethical  
176 implications this could have. It had quickly become apparent that NG was uncomfortable  
177 with the idea of seeking sport psychology support. I needed to find a way to make NG feel  
178 more comfortable and so decided to conduct an intake session with NG and Adam  
179 simultaneously. As Adam has suggested, the idea behind this approach was that if NG saw  
180 Adam engaging openly with the questions, they would feel more comfortable to do the same.  
181 For this to work, I had to explain that the boundaries of confidentiality existed between all  
182 three parties present. I also decided to ask Adam the questions first to allow NG time to  
183 reflect on the question and feel more comfortable when it was their time to answer. This  
184 approach seemed to work well, based on NG's engagement with the session. Adam played a  
185 vital role in the initial success of the consultancy process. His openness and vulnerability in  
186 discussing his own life and challenges was fundamental to NG allowing themselves to fully  
187 engage with the first two sessions. As a result, I was able to gain a comprehensive insight into  
188 NG's background and journey and we began to establish a good professional relationship.

189       When asking my opening question (*"can you tell me about your journey, in and*  
190 *outside of sport, which has led you to this point?"*) NG struggled to discuss anything other  
191 than their life as an athlete. It immediately became apparent that their identity was strongly  
192 associated with their role as an athlete (they were unable to demonstrate the *balance* that was  
193 so fundamental to my philosophy of practice) and even when promoted was unable to  
194 articulate who they were away from their sport. It was at this point in the session that I  
195 decided to use a 'value card' activity to encourage dialogue and increase self-reflection. This  
196 activity involves an athlete placing value cards into one of three columns; (a) *very important*  
197 *to me*, (b) *important to me*, and (c) *not important to me*. This seemingly simple task has been  
198 highly effective in previous sessions and worked well here. To begin with, it engages the



client by encouraging them to ‘do’ something, which seemed to make NG more comfortable. Furthermore, the physical act of moving the cards, and having a visual, seemed to stimulate dialogue. Something I had not anticipated was just how important Adam would be to this process. He had known NG for three years and so was able to reflect and articulate how NG had changed during this time. For example, when NG placed ‘risk’ (“*to take risks and chances*”) in the *very important* category, Adam was able to challenge this and state that taking risks might have been something NG used to do but that they had moved away from this since their podium finish at their last major competition:

I liked seeing it [the cards], because then I could categorise it and break it down and then when Adam was there, it was great, because he obviously knows me from before this and was like ‘wow, hold on...you’re not’ and then that made me think, well I think I am this, but clearly I’m slipping, even though I used to be one of those qualities...I was very appreciative that Adam was there for that, because it was kind of like having that outsiders view...obviously knowing me well enough over the last three years, as an athlete, and I’ve been training with him for years, and for him to actually see the differences in me...that made me more aware of them...so that set me goals to get that quality back, if I felt it was important

### ***Needs Analysis***

The use of these value cards continued across two sessions (at NG’s request) and soon the intake progressed into the needs analysis. One of the most significant parts of this progression through the consultancy process was when NG requested to attend the third session alone. It was at this point that I knew I had developed a good relationship with NG, because, despite still being uncomfortable, they agreed to attend on a one-to-one basis. A more traditional approach to confidentiality (between sport psychology practitioner and client), my lack of connection with their sport, and the relationship we were able to build in

224 the previous sessions, provided NG with the confidence that no information would get back  
225 to their sporting community and that they could continue the sessions alone:

226 Obviously we've got confidentiality as long as everything is safe, so I felt quite  
227 confident that you would upkeep that as well, even if you were considered to be work  
228 colleagues or friends with Adam, like I knew that it wouldn't go anywhere, and then  
229 there was some stuff that I don't really like talking about, like my history, even with  
230 Adam, even though he is a friend and someone I can trust, he is very involved with  
231 [sport], whereas you had no connection to [sport] you know, the coaches didn't mean  
232 anything to you, they were just a name that you'd kind of met, whereas he was a big  
233 part of their programme, so even though I knew he wouldn't tell anyone, it was  
234 just...there was just some stuff that I didn't want him to know or judge me ever  
235 for...so I was nervous to go to the third session on my own...very nervous [laughter]  
236 and uncomfortable, but because you were understanding it and listening, it was easier  
237 to come to the sessions...and the relationship was so important, for me personally,  
238 because I don't have many people that I have a connection with that I feel  
239 comfortable talking to, like I am a very closed off person, so I think building up that  
240 relationship was going to be really big, otherwise it just wouldn't have happened, I  
241 just shut people out

242 The relationship NG and I had been able to develop ensured they were completely open with  
243 me in the third session and I was able conduct a comprehensive needs analysis.

244 Increased Expectation. NG described their recent medal as going from 'invisible to  
245 visible'. Suddenly NG found themselves in the spotlight. Expectation (from themselves, their  
246 coaches, their governing body, and their parents) about subsequent performances had  
247 increased dramatically. This increased expectation was causing NG to experience heightened  
248 anxiety at both training and competitions, which was preventing them performing to their

potential. In addition to this, NG felt they were now being ‘pulled in different directions’ by their coaches. Coaches, who had not previously engaged much with NG, were now ‘attaching’ themselves to NG (as a way to increase their own reputation), which meant NG was now receiving more feedback and at times contradictory advice during training and competitions. NG admitted to wanting to avoid conflict and so decided not to address this problem with their coaching staff (one example of how NG was avoiding risk as Adam had stated in the second session). However, NG now felt they were beginning to perform the sport for other people and not for themselves. Furthermore, as a way of trying to meet the heightened expectations being placed on them, NG felt that they now needed to be training all the time, so other athletes could not gain a competitive advantage. The increased pressure NG was placing on themselves also meant they rarely (if ever) switched off from their sport and would regularly think about mistakes and worry about critical feedback from their coaches. NG summed these challenges up towards the end of the session: “I’ve lost myself on and off the mat”.

Aim(s) of the Intervention. Before engaging with sport psychology support, NG was almost certain that they no longer wanted to continue their career as an athlete. Based on the needs of NG, it was clear that a focus on the person behind the performer was initially required here. NG and I agreed that the initial aim of the intervention needed to be a focus on their well-being and happiness. We decided to concentrate on exploring who they were away from their sport so that NG could be more *authentic* (be more like the person they wanted to be) and find *balance* (understand who they were in the absence of their sport). NG simply wanted to be happier and, secondary to that, potentially start enjoying the sport again. To meet the needs of NG (“I’ve lost myself on and off the mat”), we decided to describe this phase of the support as; “finding yourself off the mat”.

### **Lockdown (as Intervention)**

On Monday 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020 (three sessions into the consultancy process), the United Kingdom was forced into a national lockdown because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Like many athletes, NG found the initial stages of the lockdown to be very challenging (Whitcomb-Khan et al., in review). NG was becoming increasingly frustrated at not being able to train. Despite many other countries also being in a national lockdown at the time, NG still seemed to worry that their opponents would be using this time to improve and gain a competitive advantage. NG also admitted that only speaking to family and friends during this time meant they were unable to engage in ‘meaningful conversation’. Perhaps most importantly (in relation to the agreed aims of the intervention) was the idea that NG felt they had completely lost their athletic identity. Subsequent sessions were used to explore this further and to support NG in navigating the ever-changing COVID-19 circumstances. After an initial period of adaptation, we worked hard to frame the lockdown as an opportunity to meet the aims we had discussed in our previous sessions (“finding yourself off the mat”). There would simply be no better opportunity to focus on who NG was away from sport than a complete lockdown of the country where NG had no access to their sport:

As we’ve discussed before, when the lockdown happened, it was actually quite beneficial, because then everything got pulled away, so I had time to focus on who I was and like you had said, one of the big things was trying to find who I was outside of being an athlete, whereas before all I would ever do is define myself as a [athlete] and all anyone would ever talk to me about was [sport] and nothing else; including my family and friends and everyone...so I think the lockdown really helped, because, whereas before, I wasn’t enjoying practice... during lockdown I was getting frustrated, I was starting to miss [sport] and that was a really big sign for me...I was really happy with the idea of being frustrated and missing training, which gave me that branch to hold, that I don’t actually hate the sport and want to quit...I think I just

299           need to figure a lot of stuff out and to be honest, when I did stop [sport] I did feel like  
300           I lost a part of my identity, of who I was...even though I didn't want it to be all of me,  
301           I still find my sport to be a big part of who I am and that has developed me to be who  
302           I am and who I want to be as well

303   This was a defining moment for NG. Being forced to disengage from their sport and having  
304   time away from training and competitions made them realise just how much they would miss  
305   it if they decided to stop. This glimmer of hope was all NG needed to realise that they wanted  
306   to continue their professional career. The lockdown had given us a perfect opportunity to  
307   work towards, and meet, the initial aim of the intervention. When the national lockdown was  
308   lifted, NG returned to training and we agreed to review the aim of the intervention and start  
309   working towards Tokyo 2021. NG excitedly described this moment as a "Blank Slate". This  
310   description became a critical moment in the consultancy process, as it symbolised hope,  
311   progress, change, and allowed us to begin focusing on the next chapter of NG's professional  
312   career.

### 313   **Post-Lockdown**

#### 314   *Needs Analysis*

315           The "Blank Slate" became a regular feature of our subsequent meetings. For NG the  
316   "Blank Slate" allowed them to reconnect with the meaning and purpose they had previously  
317   attributed to their sport. Post-lockdown, NG was happy and excited to return to training  
318   (despite having some anxiety about being rusty, lacking fitness, and potentially gaining  
319   weight). NG reflected positively on their return to the sport and was now beginning to focus  
320   on the Olympic qualifiers in 2021. NG had even requested (politely and respectfully) to not  
321   be weighed on their immediate return to training, which was another significant moment,  
322   demonstrating NG's increased authenticity and alignment to the person they wanted to be:

I'm now really wanting to give this a try again...obviously I won't forget what's happened in the past, but use it to kind of create a clean slate, a blank slate, so with my head coach, I created the blank slate to try and move on, but also to better myself from it, so instead of just having this hatred towards him and shutting him out each time and then going back into this hole of..."he's doing this and I hate the sport", it was more "well what can I do about it? Even if I can't change him, I can change myself to make it better for me" so I wanted to be able to stand up for myself and do what was right for me as an athlete, whilst also being respectful to the coaches...so I kept blank slating everything, so I'm trying to blank slate my competitions now and I was trying to build my old self back, you know, with my attitude and being happier and enjoying practice, but then bettering my old self by having more respect for myself as an athlete, which I realised that I really needed to do...I think I lacked that, I had so much trust in everyone else that they knew the best thing for me, when really I needed to listen to myself...obviously keep my eyes and ears open to them, because they can guide me, but at the end of the day, I know me better than anyone else, as you said...

NG and I both agreed that this was an opportune moment to adapt the focus of the sessions and start working towards "finding yourself on the mat". Since their biggest success (medalling at a major international tournament) NG had performed poorly at subsequent competitions. The expectation and pressure surrounding their performances was causing NG to experience significant anxiety immediate before and during their fights. NG described how they had previously and successfully been able to adopt a 'fuck-it' attitude in fights, which allowed them to be reactive, aggressive, and on the front foot. However, now NG admitted that they had become hesitant, afraid of making mistakes, and lacked the concentration required to win fights consistently. To gain a better understanding of NG's specific

performance related needs, I introduced them to a ‘Control Map’ activity (Martin Turner).

The ‘Control Map’ requires an athlete to reflect on what they believe are the most important factors influencing their performance and how much *control* they have over these specific factors. Using sticky notes, NG colour coordinated these factors (green, orange, and red). NG then placed these factors on a whiteboard, with the green factors placed closest to their name in the middle of the board (symbolising a factor NG had most control of), the orange factors placed slightly further away (symbolising a factor NG had some control of), and the red factors placed furthest away (symbolising a factor NG had no control of) (see Figure 1.).

*Insert Figure 1. here*

The dialogue surrounding this activity (“are you doing everything you can to control the greens?” “are you able to take more control for the oranges?” “is there anything you can do to control the reds?”) allowed us to decide on the next aim of the consultancy process, which we described as; *regulate anxiety to maximise performance*. We agreed to break this overall aim down into three smaller aims: (a) understand what level of anxiety is required to maximise performance, (b) understand what aspects (internally and externally) impact and alter this anxiety, and (c) understand what techniques/strategies can be used to regulate this anxiety:

I really liked the control map...I think it helped break down what I felt was important to performance in competition...and then comparing my successful competitions, which was [international competition] to my not so successful competitions recently made me realise I was letting other people dictate to me, whereas at [international competition] it was all about me, I did what I needed to do, whereas now I let someone dictate to me, so I really liked seeing the factors important to performance and colour coordinating them really helped...the reds ones, were the factors that had massive impact on performance, but a lot of it is due to an external source, which I

can't actually control, but I needed to find ways to help myself without that external having an effect, so family or coaches, I can't change them, but I can change how I take the pressure and the expectations and stuff and obviously that set me goals to start working towards that area

### ***The Intervention***

In the absence of competitions (because of a further rise in COVID-19 cases globally), NG and I were unable to directly work on most of the factors discussed on the 'Control Map', as we lacked the competitive context. Despite this, NG did highlight that they felt self-talk had been a huge part their podium performance, so I introduced NG to the concept of storytelling as a form of self-talk. I explained to NG that this form of self-talk required an individual to create and take *control* of their own narrative, by actively adopting the role of both narrator and main character within their own story. The narrator writes the story and the main character does everything they can to live out this story in the real-world. The most important idea here was that, no matter which role NG adopted, they had *control*. NG practiced this in the following weeks and reflected positively on the impact it was beginning to have:

The way you described that with the narrator and main character was really helpful...at first I thought "this is really cheesy" [laughter], but I was actually portraying it back and was like "this is actually really true" and a good way to look at it and like I've said before I used to use self-talk, and I think I started taking critique so negatively and it started to build and build that the self-talk sort of disappeared and it was a bit tricky at first to try and be positive, but I was able to take almost like a step back and breathe and be like "look, yes you missed it here, but next time will come easier" and I think my self-talk has had a very positive outcome because I've noticed a lot of compliments from my coaches...they've noticed that I'm trying new



398 moves and even if I miss the move they're like "unlucky you'll get it next time" and  
399 I'm catching all those comments, whereas before they'd say it and all I'd hear was the  
400 negative side

401 NG is now approaching training with more of a purpose and most importantly enjoying the  
402 sport again. It is difficult to know, because of the unpredictable situation surrounding  
403 COVID-19, if and when competitions will resume for NG any time soon. Nevertheless, we  
404 have agreed to stay in touch until the next competition is confirmed and then continue work  
405 towards Tokyo 2021.

### 406 **Evaluating the Intervention(s)**

407 Gaining subjective feedback from my clients is, for me, the most important way to  
408 judge the quality of the support I have provided. As part of the 'exit interview', I asked NG to  
409 reflect on what they felt had changed the most as a result of the support I had provided:

410 I'm happier as a person...I was very low...obviously athletes have high stages and  
411 low stages, but it was how long that low stage had gone on and that was worrying  
412 me...I don't feel that anymore... I still have my downs, like I had a low not that long  
413 ago, but I got out of it straight away, which was good...so I'm happier, which is  
414 probably one of my biggest things...I've found yet again my passion for  
415 training...I'm happy that I'm nervous about competing, because that means I  
416 care...more than anything I'm just happy that I've started to notice some of my own  
417 attributes are coming back, like I'm taking more of a risk in training, which will  
418 hopefully come out in competition...I think my biggest one is standing up for  
419 myself... I used to let a lot of people walk all over me, as an athlete, because I just  
420 held too much respect, whereas now, I'll ask myself, "is this worth fighting for?" And  
421 I think that's one of the biggest things, because that was the thing that was killing my  
422 career as an athlete the most, was that I was just not expressing my own opinion,

whereas if I think I'm not ready for a competition now, I would probably...no I would, not probably [laughter]...go to my coaches and say "look, I'm not ready to step back on the mat yet, because of this this and this" so I'm confident enough to speak up for myself, but still be really respectful, which is one thing I never wanted to lose. In all honesty, I've appreciated the way you approached it, like we worked on the personal level first and then you started digging more into performance and why I was getting this anxiety and when you asked me for my best competition and then my worst competition and the way I felt...I think that was one of the biggest realisations and helpful things that you'd done, because it made me remember back to how I was during [international competition] and then see where I'm at now and knowing that you're trying to help me get back to that, it's really good

### **Conclusion**

This case study highlights the importance of supporting both the person and the performer. Both the practitioner and the client used COVID-19 and the lockdown of the United Kingdom as an opportunity to explore the client's identity in the absence of sport. Adopting a 'Blank Slate' approach to their emergence from the lockdown allowed the client to achieve the aims of the intervention by 'finding themselves on and off the mat'. The practitioner's philosophy of practice (the *ABC* principle) and approach to the consultancy helped support the client in navigating their experiences. The importance of an athlete's wider support staff in the referral process is also highlighted. The athlete would not have sought psychological support without the encouragement and help of their strength and conditioning coach.

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