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Olympic Games as Career Transitions

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Traditionally in sport psychology research and practice athletes’ performance in competitions is considered in a situational context that is with a focus on managing factors that influence the athlete before and during performance. In this presentation I am going to make a shift to considering performance in a broader developmental or career context. Narratives circulating in sporting culture and media stories provide anecdotal evidences that participation in Olympic Games or other subjectively important competitions might have a significant impact on athletes’ careers in sport, and often also in life. Career researchers have recently begun to explore important competitions, including Olympic Games, as career change-events or career transitions (Hollings, Mallett, & Hume, 2014; Samuel & Tenenbaum, 2011; Samuel, Tenenbaum, & Bar-Mecher, 2016; Schinke, Stambulova, Trepanier, & Oghene, 2015; Sigurgeirsdóttir, 2013; Stambulova, 2004; Stambulov, Stambulova, & Johnson, 2012; Wylleman, Reints, & Van Aken, 2012). This new trend in career transition research (see Stambulova, 2016 for the overview) considers how athlete career development and context influence, but also are influenced, by athletic performance.

A pioneering study in this area (Stambulova, 2004) dealt with junior Russian athletes’ retrospective views of their first (well-remembered) competition using a survey based on the athletic career transition model (Stambulova, 2003). The participants’ answers allowed to provide a description of the transition process with perceived demands (e.g., to reach their goals, to meet own and others’ expectations), resources (positive feelings, practice experiences, social support), barriers (a lack of competition knowledge, negative thoughts and feelings), coping strategies (“doing like in practice”, “observing how others do”, “searching for help if lost”), and consequences of the first competition (inspiration for continuation in sport vs. a fear of competitions that needed to be treated in the further career). The study confirmed that important competitions during the earlier athletic career stages might have an impact on motivating athletes to continue and invest in sport or to dropout. It is even possible to anticipate that the further athletes’ progress through the career stages and sport performance levels, the more impact important competitions might have on their athletic and non-athletic planning and development. Illustrative to this extrapolation is a study of Hollings et al. (2014) on experiences of New Zealand elite track-and field athletes in regard of the World Junior Championship in Athletics (WJC). The participants were interviewed before and after the WJC to understand its career impact. The authors concluded that the WJC was seen by the athletes as an opportunity to gain experience of world-class competition and test their performance but also as a key reference point in their decision making about further investment in sport and preparation for the junior-to-senior transition.

Another line in exploring the transitional nature of important competitions refers exclusively to Olympic Games. Extensive literature on athletes’ Olympic preparation and performance (e.g., Gould, & Maynard, 2009; Haberl, 2009; Pensgaard, & Duda, 2003) is now complemented by identifying phases in the Olympic Games transition process and investigating athletes’ experiences (e.g., perceived changes/ demands, resources, coping strategies) within each phase retrospectively or proactively. Several attempts were undertaken to structure the Olympic Games transition process as having three-five phases. For example, Wylleman et al. (2012) used interviews and athletes’ self-reports to describe changes in athletic, psychological, psychosocial and academic/vocational development experienced by four Belgian Olympians prior to the
Olympic Games-2008 phase (between the qualification and the Games), during the Games phase, and (two months) after the Games phase. In regard of each phase the participants reported changes covering all four developmental dimensions that allowed the authors to further promote the holistic developmental perspective as important in studying Olympic athletes. Sigurgeirsdóttir (2013) conducted narrative interviews to explore transition experiences of eight Icelandic Olympic athletes who participated at Olympic Games-2012. Their stories were then shaped using the five-phase Olympic preparation and Games structure (Stambulova et al., 2012) emphasizing major themes permeating to each phase. At the preliminary preparation phase the athletes struggled to gain international competition experiences and to get financial support. In the qualification phase they emphasized the importance of clear criteria for team selection and the benefits of early qualification. At the Olympic season phase, the highest priority was given to good relationships with coaches, energy management, overtraining prevention, and exploring the Olympic venue. The Games phase was marked by “hunger” for achievement, distraction awareness and coping, and expert support. The post-Games phase was related to analysis and evaluation of the Games, career change, and increased public attention and responsibility.

Another study related to the 2012 Olympic Games focused on Israeli athletes’ and coaches’ perceptions of the Games as a career change-event (Samuel et al., 2016) using the scheme of change for sport psychology practice (SCSPP – Samuel & Tenenbaum, 2011) as a theoretical framework and a survey as data collection method. The Olympic Games were perceived as a significant and positive change-event in the athletes’ and coaches’ careers regardless of formal results achieved during the Olympic tournament. The authors emphasized two important decisions made by athletes around Olympic qualification phase – a strategic decision to ignore or to address the change (e.g., independently or after consulting with others) and a subsequent decision to change (i.e., to make all necessary adjustments to effectively cope with the change). The study revealed that Israeli athletes mainly addressed the change independently, had high motivation for change, felt that they coped effectively and were satisfied with their coping efforts. The change-event outcomes (i.e., overall perception of Olympic Games experience) were measured through athletes’ motivation for sport after the Olympics and their perception of Olympic performance. Motivation was found to be decreased (as many athletes retired after the Games) and also predicted by athletes’ satisfaction with their coping effort. Athletes’ satisfaction with their performance was a more significant predictor of overall perception of the Olympic Games experience than actual results in the Olympic tournament.

The aforementioned retrospective studies shed light on the temporal structure and content of the Olympic Games transition process and might be used as a basis for working with Olympic athletes. But as shown in the recent study of Schinke et al. (2015), it is possible to plan psychological support system for Olympic athletes based on the proactive vision of their Olympic experiences as a sequences of phases and meta-transitions (i.e., transitions to, within, and out of the Olympic cycle). Precisely, “Psychological support for Olympic preparation of the Canadian Men’s Boxing Team” was planned for the boxers’ progression through the Own The Podium (OTP) program providing financial and expert support to medal hopefuls for the 2016 Olympic cycle. Six meta-transitions contributing to the Olympic Games transition are: (a) entering the OTP, (b) entering major games tournaments, (c) Olympic qualification, (d) focused preparation for the Olympics, (e) to the Olympic podium, and (f) to the post-Games. In relation to each of these meta-transitions, the athletes’ major anticipated demands (e.g., adaption to the national team staff and orientation in the resources available during the first meta-transition or analysis of the Games experience and plan or the future during the sixth one), and relevant psychological support services were outlined. The next expected step in this project is to follow the real
Olympic preparation and participation process and then to summarize the athletes/staff’s reflections in order to make necessary changes for the next Olympic cycle. This project can also serve as an example on how such work can be done in various sports and countries.

References:


