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To cite this article: Rocío Zamora-Solé, Saul Alcaraz, Susana Regüela, Carme Viladrich & Miquel Torregrossa (2024) Choose your own story: creative non-fiction about athletes attempting to qualify for the Olympics, *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 16:5, 419-435, DOI: [10.1080/2159676X.2024.2348446](https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2024.2348446)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2024.2348446>



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Published online: 06 May 2024.



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Choose your own story: creative non-fiction about athletes attempting to qualify for the Olympics

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ABSTRACT

The Olympics qualification phase is a taxing process for elite athletes, and despite the fact that most do not achieve their goal of qualifying for the Olympics, little is known about how they make meaning from non-qualification. This longitudinal qualitative study describes the stories of athletes preparing for the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and interprets the athletes' meaning-making of their story of non-qualification. We conducted semi-structured interviews with seven elite athletes (a) during the COVID-19 lockdown, (b) after the COVID-19 lockdown, (c) pre-Tokyo, and (d) post-Tokyo. Results of a thematic narrative analysis are presented through creative non-fiction in the format of the 'Choose your own story' genre. Two main narratives are presented: a 'terminal' narrative, reflecting stories acknowledging the end of an unmade journey with no possibility of a future opportunity, and a 'maybe next time' narrative, reflecting stories that acknowledge the lost opportunity while still contemplating the possibility of future qualification. This study extends previous research by providing a deeper understanding of non-event transitions and proposing a review of existing transitional models in sports. We challenge the belief that not reaching a goal constitutes failure and propose alternative narratives. Lastly, we use the innovative 'Choose your own story' representation format to increase the impact of our findings on non-academic audiences.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 6 July 2023

Accepted 24 April 2024

KEYWORDS

Creative non-fiction; elite athletes; non-event transitions; non-qualification; qualitative inquiry

Thousands of athletes worldwide strive to reach the qualification standards set by international sporting organisations to obtain a place at the Olympic Games. Debois et al. (2012) sustain that the qualifying process is demanding, with a limited timeframe to reach the qualification standards. Moreover, due to the limited places, athletes may experience pressure and exhaustion. The qualification period is challenging in terms of striking the psychological balance between recovering from the pressure experienced during the qualification process and the need to keep fully focused on the Olympic goal (Debois et al. 2012). The Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games, in addition to the usual challenges, was marked by the difficulties resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic (see Alcaraz et al. 2022; Rogers and Werthner 2023; Zamora-Solé et al. 2022). After undergoing all the mentioned challenges,

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some athletes must also face disillusion when the expected goal is not reached. In this regard, Sarkar, Fletcher, and Brown (2015) reported that one of the most common adversities identified by elite athletes is failing to be selected for international competitions that determine qualification for the Olympics.

Non-qualification as a career transition

We understand non-qualification as a transitional process. Schlossberg (1981), who defines a transition as an event or non-event that changes assumptions about the world and oneself and requires changing one's behaviours and relationships, distinguishes between three types of transitions: anticipated events, unanticipated events, and non-events. Anticipated events refer to the 'normative' gains and losses that predictably occur in life; unanticipated events refer to 'non-scheduled events' that are improbable in the life course that create a less ideal context to prepare and make decisions; and non-events are events that were expected but did not occur. Adapting this model to the sports context, Stambulova (2003) defined transition as a coping process where relevant coping strategies – configured by internal and external resources and barriers – are confronted with a set of transition demands. One of two primary outcomes is predicted: a successful transition or a crisis transition. In this model, career transitions are classified according to the life domain where the transition is initiated and according to transition predictability (Stambulova 2017). In life-domain terms, transitions can be athletic (e.g. junior-to-senior), non-athletic (e.g. becoming a parent), or related to dual careers (e.g. simultaneous transition to university and to senior level). As for predictability, three categories are possible: normative (i.e. predictable and derived from the logic of the athlete's development, e.g. retirement), non-normative (i.e. less predictable, e.g. injury), and quasi-normative (i.e. predictable for a particular category of athletes, e.g. cultural transitions). Torregrossa (2022) recently described a taxonomy of four transitions in sports considering the degree of predictability and specificity: predictable level-specific transitions, such as junior to senior or retirement; predictable holistic transitions, such as sports migration; unpredictable level-specific transitions, such as disruption to the Olympic cycle; and finally, unpredictable holistic transitions, such as the lockdowns associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. This model classifies transition outcomes in terms of adaptiveness; thus, rather than define an outcome as successful or unsuccessful, the focus is on the athlete's adaptation to the outcome.

Although non-normative transitions and non-event transitions play a key role in athletic careers, they are significantly underrepresented in the current literature. Specifically, a better understanding is needed of how athletes story and make meaning from non-qualification from a transitional and holistic perspective. We believe it is important to identify how non-qualification affects not only the athletic domain but also other life domains and life events.

Using narrative inquiry to understand athletic non-qualification stories

Narrative inquiry is both a theoretical and methodological approach that aims to carefully study and interpret stories and narratives as they evolve and unfold over time (Monforte and Smith 2023). Storytelling, the object of inquiry, is understood as a fundamental condition of human life, basic to the survival of the human species (Harari 2014). A story can be viewed as a specific tale told or performed by an individual or group (Monforte and Smith 2023). According to Phoenix and Sparkes (2009), through stories we learn, construct identities, impose order on our experiences, and make sense of the actions in our lives. Narratives, meanwhile, are understood as a social-cultural plotline that individuals rely on to construct their own stories (Smith and Sparkes 2009). Frank (2010) understands narratives as actors, in that they do things for, in, and with people by teaching them what to pay attention to and how to respond to events in their lives. Narratives give meaning, purpose, and motivation to our psychosocial worlds. In giving meaning, narratives make us human (Papathomas 2016). Smith and Sparkes (2009) sustain that the more narratives an individual has access to, the

more flexibility they have in experiencing life in diverse and meaningful ways. If a particular narrative becomes dominant, alternative ways of being come to be silenced and difficulties may arise; this is because individuals are restricted to one storyline with which to express, frame, and understand both their own and others' experiences.

Within elite sports, a dominant narrative identified by researchers is the performance narrative (Douglas and Carless 2009), a script that involves athletes adopting a 'single-minded dedication to sports performance to the exclusion of other areas of life and self' (215). Barker et al. (2014) argue that this storyline follows an investment logic in that athletes are investors who expect a return for the time, energy, and effort spent on their sports. Athletes may, however, be confronted with an event or non-event (e.g. non-qualification) that can dislocate them from the performance narrative (Barker-Ruchti et al. 2019). Recently, Tamminen, Lau, and Milidragovic (2022) proposed a master biographical narrative of forward momentum, characterised by a focus on continual progress, perpetual improvement, and an orientation towards upcoming challenges and away from current accomplishments and experiences. Failures were positioned as adversities to be overcome by refocusing attention and efforts on future training and so resuming the forward momentum. When hard work does not pay off, athletes express feeling confused, upset, and insulted.

Focusing on non-qualification experiences from a socio-narratological framework, Barker-Ruchti et al. (2019) examined the case of an elite male athlete who, aiming to qualify for the 2016 Rio Olympic Games, sustained several injuries and was forced to abandon the qualification process. Exploring how the athlete storied the qualification process and how he made sense of not qualifying, the researchers evidenced that the athlete initially aligned his life with the 'sport performance investment narrative', but this strategy failed to provide the needed resources to overcome the obstacle of unexpected disruptions (i.e. injuries). To re-align with the performance narrative, he adopted a series of restitution strategies (e.g. dismissal of injuries, quick return to training from injuries), but ended up compromising his wellbeing and had to abandon the qualification process. From an interpretative phenomenological perspective, Mitchell et al. (2021) explored the transitional experiences of six British swimmers as they attempted to qualify for the Olympic Games and obtain a place in the British Swimming World Class Performance Programme. Their study used a prospective design, which meant that it was not possible to know whether or not the participants would qualify for the Olympics; ultimately, none managed to qualify. The study results show that the qualification transition was extremely challenging since the athletes encountered numerous demands and perceived limited access to resources. One particularly pervasive and consistent aspect of their experience was the ever-present self-doubt and low self-confidence regarding qualification. The athletes viewed their non-qualification as a failure since they had committed to attempting this transition.

Previous research has demonstrated that exploring the ways that athletes relate their experiences and challenges can provide insight into how they make meaning from these experiences (Tamminen, Lau, and Milidragovic 2022). As Barker-Ruchti et al. (2019) point out, only rarely do media and members of the sports entourage (e.g. athletes and coaches) present stories that challenge the heroic performance investment narrative. Missing are complementary narratives that focus on how athletes integrate non-qualification into their life stories.

Thus, our research aims to expand current knowledge of how athletes story and make sense of non-event transitions (i.e. non-qualification). Given that transitions unfold over time, we describe a longitudinal study, with both prospective and retrospective perspectives, to explore how meaning and stories evolve over time. Knowing that stories can induce reflection in tellers and listeners and expand the possibility for change and awareness (McMahon and McGannon 2016), we present our results through creative non-fiction using the 'Choose your own story'

genre, a form of interactive narrative that enables readers to participate in decision-making as the story evolves.

Method

Philosophical positioning

We tell the stories of non-qualified athletes from a narrative lens underpinned by ontological relativism (i.e. reality is multiple, created, and mind-dependent) and by epistemological constructionism (i.e. knowledge is constructed, subjective, and fallible). The general assumption is that people re-construct identities through the stories they tell, the stories they have access to, and the stories they feel part of in their current situation (Smith 2010).

Ethical considerations

The project was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Universitat Autònoma of Barcelona (CEEAH 5180). Candidate athletes were then invited by Susana (third author) to participate, and those who agreed received information about the study. Relational ethics were of utmost importance; it was made clear that others (e.g. coaches and staff of the High-Performance Centre) would not have access to any information shared by the athletes, who were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time. All participants signed an informed consent before participation in the study.

Participants

Seven elite athletes took part in this study (two women and five men, aged $M = 26.57$ years, $SD = 4.61$). All the athletes were on Olympic performance programmes and had athletic grants to support their road to the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games. At the time of the first interview: (a) two athletes trained and lived in a High-Performance Centre, while the other five lived in their own homes in nearby cities, (b) all seven athletes had a dual career (i.e. combining sports with either studies or work), (c) none of the athletes had previously participated in an Olympic Games, (d) three of the athletes had previously tried to qualify for an Olympic Games and Tokyo represented the last Olympic cycle of their athletic careers, and finally, (e) all seven athletes were from individual athletics or gymnastics disciplines (for confidentiality reasons, more specific information on the disciplines cannot be provided). All athletes were able-bodied, white, and middle-class.

Following the information power model proposed by Malterud, Siersma, and Guassora (2016), we considered seven participants to be a suitable number, specifically from the perspective of sample specificity (i.e. a sample conformed by high-performance athletes from a specific high-performance centre holding experiences from which little is already known), researcher-participant dialogue quality (i.e. strong quality enhanced by the researcher's previous experience on interviewing and the confidence co-created between researcher-participant throughout the longitudinal interviewing process), and the analysis strategy (i.e. the number of participants allowed to present both in-depth case analysis and cross-case analysis to present potentially relevant patterns).

Data collection

We collected data through 22 semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom at four meaningful timepoints during the Tokyo qualification process: (a) during lockdown: April-May 2020, (b) on the road to Tokyo: July-October 2020, (c) pre-Tokyo: June-July 2021, and (d) post-Tokyo: February-March 2022. Those periods were selected based on two criteria: (a) the evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic and the disruption to the Tokyo Olympic Games, and

(b) contextual knowledge provided by the third author regarding the most suitable moments to reengage with the athletes. Online interviews allowed us to adapt to the challenges imposed by the pandemic (e.g. lockdown and preventive social distancing). All participants were interviewed at least twice (two participants had two interviews, two participants had three interviews, and three participants had four interviews). Interviews lasted 30–90 minutes ($M = 46.18$ minutes; $SD = 17.19$). An interview guide was used to elicit stories related to different moments of the process (i.e. qualification, disruption to Tokyo 2020 from a holistic perspective, and later, reflections on how the athletes storied their non-qualification). Questions were informed by both the literature and the contextual knowledge of the authors. Participants were invited to talk about their experiences (e.g. tell me about your life as an athlete trying to qualify for Tokyo, tell me about your fears about the COVID-19 pandemic, tell me how you are living your non-qualification for Tokyo 2020). All interviews were audio- and video-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis

Both story analyst and storyteller approaches to non-qualification were adopted regarding the interview data. From the story analyst perspective, stories are treated as 'objects of study', with the narratives that frame them placed under analysis. From the storyteller perspective, stories and the corresponding meaning-making are communicated. To produce an accessible and engaging story, our analysis is communicated through Creative Analytical Practice (CAP; Richardson 2000), defined as an umbrella term for research practices that utilise creative forms of representation to show layers of lived subjectivity and theory in research findings (McMahon 2016).

Phase 1: story analyst perspective

Thematic narrative analysis (Riessman 2008) was selected as the most appropriate analytic approach to focus on content rather than on the 'how' of stories. Our analysis, which followed the guiding principles proposed by Smith (2016), was conducted cyclically and interactively. First, we commenced with narrative indwelling, reading the transcripts, and listening to the recordings several times while making notes in an independent document to document initial feelings, questions, and potential points of interest. As per Frank (1995), the aim was to think with and not just about the stories. After this immersion process, we collected 'big' stories (i.e. lengthy stories that entail considerable reflection on an experience or event) and 'small' stories (i.e. fleeting conversations about everyday experiences) from the dataset (Smith and Monforte 2020). We identified narrative themes across stories in a manner that allowed us to keep the stories intact, while seeking both manifest and latent meaning. Once themes were identified, we assigned tags that condensed the interpretation of their stories (e.g. stories about 'bouncing back', about 'lowering the curtains', etc). To enhance interpretation, we engaged critically with the stories, existing career transition theory, and narrative inquiry.

Phase 2: storyteller perspective

Furthering our analysis was the shift to the storyteller perspective, which consisted of centralising the themes, as identified in the story analysis phase, to create a storied representation. Two overarching narratives were deemed to be especially important, considering both the stories and the current sport psychology literature: (a) the 'terminal' narrative, reflecting stories that acknowledge the end of an unmade journey and the impossibility of future realisation, and (b) the 'maybe next time' narrative, reflecting stories that acknowledge a lost opportunity while still allowing for the possibility of a future attempt. As storytellers, we aimed to communicate theory through stories.

Data presentation

To communicate theory through stories, we selected passages and vivid descriptions from the participants' interviews. With the aim of 'showing' rather than 'telling', we used CAP, more specifically creative non-fiction (CNF). CNF is the telling of a story that is grounded in research data and draws on literary conventions (Smith, McGannon, and Williams 2015). Stories are open to multiple understandings (A. W. Frank 2010), and CNF can encourage additional theoretical insights beyond what we, as researchers, consider (Smith, McGannon, and Williams 2015). Through CNF, we aimed to generate visceral and holistic stories that provide evidence of how athletes transition through non-qualification and that throw light on the process. Another key benefit of CNF is that it 'allows researchers to reach wider audiences and potentially ensure their research has an impact on the communities they conduct their studies with and for' (Cavallerio 2022, 143).

We opted to represent the stories through the 'choose your own story' genre, a form of interactive narrative. Interactive narratives are stories where readers first encounter introductory material and then reach a decision point. At this point, the story branches off in one of two (or more) directions, depending on the reader's decision (Jenkins 2014). It was precisely this reader decision-making process – not a feature of other genres (e.g. vignettes) – that motivated its choice for the data representation. Following the dynamic of this genre, the stories are narrated in the second person singular, to engage readers with the decision-making process and to facilitate cognitive and emotional immersion in the story (Green and Jenkins 2014). Thus, the readers are invited to take the driver's seat and decide the direction of the plot. Using the 'choose your own story' genre also allows us to highlight the diversity of experiences and multiple meanings of a single shared event (i.e. the qualification process) or non-event (i.e. non-qualification), and also to engage the non-academic public through the entertaining and playable nature of the genre.

The CNF was written by Rocío (first author), who extracted and merged stories and phrases through different scenes. To illustrate the longitudinal nature of the collected data, we developed stories that followed a chronological and cohesive plot, with a beginning, middle, and end. Rigour was enhanced using segments from the interviews and the words of the participants, thereby retaining the authenticity of their stories (McMahon and McGannon 2021). Throughout the whole creation process, the remaining authors acted as critical friends.

Ensuring rigour

We followed the recommendations of Levitt et al. (2017) to ensure methodological integrity. During data collection, we considered the adequacy of data not by aiming to generate a 'magic number' of interviews but rather by generating a longitudinal exploration that allowed us to comprehend how the stories evolved and unfolded over time. The stories were analysed to detect if new data was needed by Rocío and Miquel (fifth author) who acted as a critical friend during the process (Smith and McGannon 2018).

We improved the fidelity of our study by recognising how our perspectives shaped and influenced our work. All authors have a common background in Sport Psychology. Rocío is an early-stage qualitative researcher and applied sport psychologist and led and participated in the different stages of this study as a part of her PhD. Saul, Susana and Miquel are all applied sport psychologists and experienced qualitative researchers who participated in study design, data collection, and data analysis. Miquel also played an important role as a critical friend during CNF writing. Carme, a highly experienced researcher, participated in the analysis phase and as a critical friend throughout the study to ensure rigour in its development. All the authors engaged in meetings where reflective conversations were shared to question how the interpretation was being developed.

During data analysis, we chose the methods of narrative analysis and CNF as complying with the principle of meaningful contribution to the study goals and to existing gaps in the research field. Our specific meaningful contribution relies on our novel way of presenting our results using the 'Choose your own story' genre as an interactive means for readers to engage with our results, enabling their applied use.

Results

Based on our analysis, we propose a CNF presented in the 'Choose your own story' genre to show how a series of shared events (e.g. COVID-19 and non-qualification) can be integrated into a life story and mobilise different resources depending on the storyline guiding the plot of particular stories. We focus on two storylines: a 'terminal' narrative comprising less adaptative stories; and a 'maybe next time' narrative comprising more adaptative stories. This distinction between less or more adaptative stories is based on our interpretation of the performative effect of those stories and our understanding of how the stories fit within a person's belief system (A. W. Frank 2010). These ways of understanding and make-meaning of the world, oneself, and others are created by personal experiences and the different resources that culture and significant others provide. This writing aims to make visible different ways of storying and adapting when athletes do not achieve expected goals, through the different scenes we provide examples of the performative impact of stories.

Warning!

The following paragraphs invite you to play the role of a high-performance athlete committed to qualifying for the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games in the context of COVID-19. You will find scenes that will invite you to engage with different challenges along the qualification process. From time to time, as you read along, you will be asked to make a choice depending on your understanding and feelings of the situation; these can be related to a 'terminal' narrative or a 'maybe next time' narrative. The story will ultimately be the result of the decisions you make. Figure 1 shows an overview of the composition of the stories. After you make a decision, follow the instructions to see what comes next. Do not hesitate to come back to read all the possible combinations. Note that it is possible that none of the options may appeal to you; that too is fine. Enjoy!

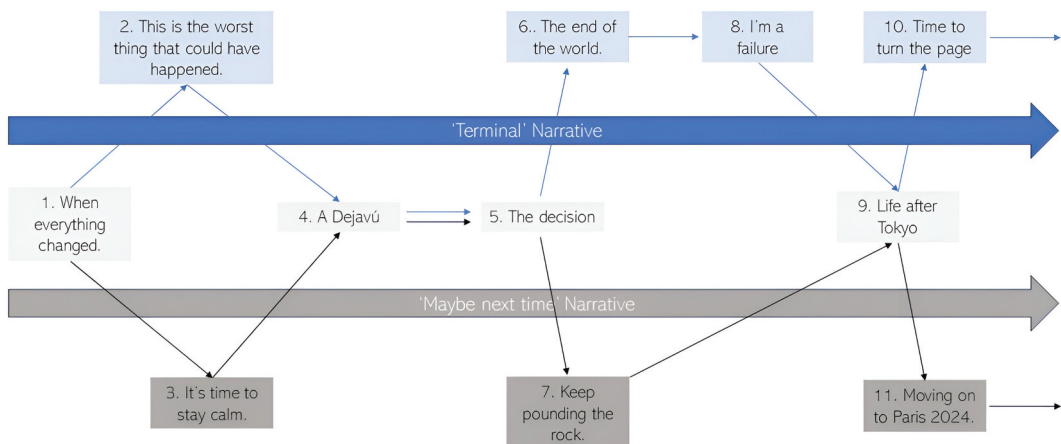


Figure 1. The produced strap joints and the manufacturing setup.

1. When everything changed

24 March 2020: final preparatory phase for the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games

You've reached the tenth day of lockdown and are going through your new routine; you wake up at 8:30 am and dedicate one hour to doing your yoga exercises. As the clock approaches 10 am, your culinary talents take centre stage, orchestrating a symphony of flavours. A delightful breakfast materialises in front of you: two avocado toasts crowned with perfectly scrambled eggs, complemented by the comforting aroma of freshly brewed coffee, a refreshing glass of orange juice, and a piece of fruit. Although this disruption is far from ideal, at times you are grateful for this 'break' after the past couple of months marked by never-ending days in which each muscle seemed to scream in protest at your demanding routines. Just a couple of days ago, you would wake up at 7 am and rush from morning training and recovery sessions to late-night studies. You operated like a machine. At night, feeling like your batteries were worn down, you would collapse into bed, desperate to recover.

As you prepare to enjoy the meal, you grab the remote control and put the TV on to keep you company. As you're zapping through the channels, something catches your attention. You switch over to a sports channel, and you identify the president of the International Olympic Committee. Underneath his image you see the words: 'Tokyo Olympics POSTPONED until 2021'.

WHAT! (You say out loud as you jump out of your seat)

If you feel that this is the worst thing that could have happened, please go to Section 2.

If you believe it's time to stay calm, please go to Section 3.

2. This is the worst thing that could have happened

You turn the volume up to maximum and stare at the television for what seems like ages. Your heart is beating fast, and you feel a rush of heat in your cheeks. From the discourse of the president, you can only focus on specific words. You knew that this was a possibility. After all, it wouldn't be responsible to go through with the Games in such a context, but right now it all feels like a science fiction movie, as though reality has been fractured.

Days go by and you still don't understand how the world got into this situation. You open your WhatsApp and each day find it filled with messages from your coach, athletes from other parts of the world, and members of your team. Since this all started you've spent hours and hours in video calls. Although some don't want to admit it, you all share the fear that the postponement will lead to cancellation of the Games. You are aware that more important things are happening right now, and lives are at risk, but you can't help feeling preoccupied with the impact that all this will have on your own life and dreams.

As you lay on your bed, trying to fall asleep, your thoughts run rapidly as if your mind was a busy highway – your thoughts battle between wanting to be optimistic and feeling so much negativity about the future. You try to stay calm and convince yourself that you should go one day at a time. You don't want to anticipate and nurture your fears, but you can't help thinking how unfair it would be to lose a chance to accomplish the dream of becoming an Olympian!

Why did this have to happen to you now?

Please go to Section 4

3. *It's time to stay calm*

Rapidly you grab your phone and call your coach.

You: Hey! Have you heard the news!?

Coach: I'm watching the news right now. How do you feel?

You: I'm in shock! The other day when we were saying that this was a possibility, I didn't want to believe it. I understand that there are bigger and more important things than the Games right now, but I'm still in shock.

Coach: Yes, I feel the same way. I think we should take some time to process this.

You: Yes, you are right!

After a couple of days reflecting on and digesting this news, you are ready to reengage with your coach.

You: Hey coach! How are you?

Coach: I'm so glad to hear from you! I'm OK, adapting to the new challenges but all of us are safe, that's the most important thing right now.

You: Yeah, you're right! I've been thinking about that a lot these days.

Coach: I think this can be a good time for you to focus on your studies, and we can also focus on all those aspects that I always tell you we should be training and never have the time to prioritise. I'm sure you'll be strengthened by this process if we carefully plan how to manage it.

You: Yes, these past few days I've been doing some general strength and stretching exercises, and, in the afternoon, I've been studying a lot. It's kind of ironic, but for the first time, I feel I have a real balance between careers.

Coach: Oh, wow! That's nice! I have drawn up a plan so that we can connect and train together. I'll invite other athletes as well so that we can stay connected, and all go through this together.

You: Yeah, I would love that!

Please go to Section 4.

4. *A déjà vu*

April 2021: pre-Olympic phase

Here we go again! You've been dreaming about this moment, when the goal of Tokyo would be near and ahead of you one more time. It feels like déjà vu, like a reset of a game. Once again you are ready to fight for your place at the Games.

You find yourself, after what seemed like an eternity, back in a competitive gymnasium. Something formerly so typical in your life now feels so strange. You slowly walk towards the changing room; your glasses fog up due to the face mask, and you look all around with your eyes wide open as if it were all new. You open your bag and start positioning each item on the bench beside you. As you organise your things, one thought repeatedly comes to the forefront: I MADE IT!

The feeling is so strange! For the first time in your career, you find a competition venue filled with silence. The high ceilings accentuate this unfamiliar sensation. On the walls, large plasma screens simulate a public so that the competition doesn't seem so cold (although they've failed to achieve that). Behind the face masks you see well-known faces as people fill the room. The blue and red mat that covers the floor is the only thing that seems to remain the same.

As you rapidly arrange all your material for the competition, you start to notice that you feel nervous, as if this was the first competition of your career. Your hands start to sweat, your heart beats rapidly in a way that you can almost hear, and your mouth starts to feel dry and pasty. You laugh to yourself and think: Wow, this hasn't happened for so long! Everything is ready. In just a couple of minutes, you will hear your name through the loudspeakers, and it'll be time to go back to competing, after everything that has happened.

It's happening! They call your name, and you head in to begin your exercise. You are ready to give your best at one of the most pivotal competitions of your career. You take

a deep breath, position yourself, and begin your performance with precision. A palpable tension is in the air, adrenaline rushes through you as you execute each move flawlessly, your focus and concentration are unbeatable. Your routine rapidly comes to an end, and you just know that your performance was one of your personal bests. An overwhelming sense of joy washes over you. This personal triumph follows the gruelling journey of battling COVID-19, adapting to unprecedented training conditions, and enduring uncertainty, all while striving to prove your merit for a place in Tokyo.

Your national federation has announced that the decision regarding the country's representatives will be made after the season's concluding international competition, scheduled for just a week from now. You're trying not to be too hopeful, but your coach and teammates have been expressing confidence in your chances, especially after witnessing your recent exceptional performance.

Please go to Section 5.

5. The decision

At last, the day of the official communication of the athletes selected to participate in Tokyo has come. While you are preparing lunch at home, you start reflecting on how these past couple of days seemed to have been paused; they are simply 'the days before the decision'. As if thinking about the expected decision acts as a kind of magnet, you suddenly hear a buzzing sound from your mobile phone. You sit down to check the screen and there you see it: you have an email from your national federation with the title '*Confirmed athletes and staff for the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games*'. Dropping your phone on the table, you perch on the edge of your seat, as your feelings alternate between hopeful optimism and crushing self-doubt. You grab your phone, and gnawing at your fingernails, you one-handedly scroll through the email. Your heart races with anticipation and your thoughts are consumed by the impending verdict. You reach the part where the decision is communicated.

You breathe deep ...

You prepare yourself ...

And suddenly ...

The athletes that have been selected to represent our country at the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games are:

...

You read and re-read, but your name is NOT there. You are overwhelmed by the surge of emotions welling up within you, and tears threaten to flow, convinced of the sheer injustice of it all and wanting an explanation. The urge to reach out to your coach tugs at you, but a part of you hesitates, not quite ready to listen to someone else's perspective just yet. While you were aware that this outcome was a possibility, right now you are gripped by frustration, anger, and sadness, leaving no room for anything else. You were the athlete with the best performance. That is a FACT! This is not FAIR!

If you feel that this means the end of your world, go to Section 6.

If you feel that this is hard to digest but you need to keep pounding the rock, go to Section 7.

6. The end of the world

Over several days, you receive at least ten calls a day from different members of your entourage. But you are not ready to allow somebody's else opinion or vision to colour your experience, so you decline them all, except for the only call that you can handle right now: from your coach. You are

angry and so you decide to prepare a statement to present to the Federation. You can't avoid feeling that this is not fair; this is not how you should be treated; you deserved better . . .

Please go to Section 8.

7. Keep pounding the rock

You are filled with sadness. You had high expectations regarding your possibility of participating in Tokyo. You knew this could happen, but you need time to digest the news. You know that you'll find the strength and motivation to fight back. After all, you see yourself like a stonecutter hammering a rock perhaps a hundred times without much to be seen, until the hundred and first blow takes place and completely splits the rock into two. You are convinced that someday all your hammering will pay off, but right now you need to deal with your emotions of this not being your time.

Please go to Section 9.

8. Am I a failure?

Days go by and, still feeling overwhelmed by the feeling of frustration, you suddenly remember an exercise that you used to do when in therapy. So you grab a notebook, find a quiet place at home, and put on some music, and then you start pouring your thoughts and emotions onto the pages.

Please go to Section 9.

Memories of a failed athlete

What's wrong with me? Should I have chosen a different path? Done more, pushed harder? I poured my heart into it, but I still fell short. Why do I keep pushing myself?

I believed this would be my moment, my shot at becoming an Olympian, but now it's all come crashing down. I guess that this is the confirmation that I'm just not worth this!

I can't bear to hear everyone telling me to find peace in giving my all; I can't keep smiling when they say that this too is part of the game, it only amplifies the feeling of failure within me. The thought of going through this all over again is daunting.

It's just not fair! In this world, there are absolutely no guarantees! And, for sure, you can't rely on others. The Federation let me down.

9. Life after Tokyo

September 2021: post-Tokyo Olympic games

A couple of months have elapsed since the disappointment of not qualifying for the Tokyo 2020 Olympics. At a session of indoor cycling, you look towards the crowded gym and start thinking that

maybe it's time to make an important decision: a new season is beginning, and you must decide what you want to do with your life.

If you believe it's time to 'turn the page', go to Section 10.

If you decide to work towards Paris 2024, go to Section 11.

10. Time to turn the page

Over these past months, you've had time to reflect on your life and your decisions. The non-qualification decision has left you struggling to find the motivation to commit to another Olympic cycle. You know that Paris is just three years away, but you feel that it's maybe too demanding a goal and you doubt whether it'll be worth it. All your life you've wanted to become an Olympian, but right now you feel that other aspects of your life are more important. As an athlete you've been told a number of times that 'you need to pay the price', but now you don't want to pay it anymore.

The bitter taste of the past cycle is still there, and you need more time to accept that this is the way that your athletic career will end. You decide that Paris won't be part of your journey, but you take time to plan a retirement that reflects all the happiness that your career has given you. You are at peace with who you are and what you did, with the commitment that you've shown over all those years of elite sport. You are grateful for the things that you've learned both inside and outside sport. Some would say that you failed because you did not reach your goal of becoming an Olympian, but even though you're sad and still grieving for that lost dream, you don't feel it as a failure. You hold on to the words of other athletes who came before you, the words of your coach and of your family: this too is part of the game.

You're ready to move on to the next dream. It's time to accept that you need to turn the page.

The End.

11. Moving on to Paris 2024

Putting things into perspective, you now realise that the COVID-19 pandemic has been a unique life experience, leading to your non-qualification. Having navigated the challenges of lockdown, adapted to new at-home training methods, and acclimatised to altered competition formats, and having managed the pervasive uncertainty stemming from ever-changing schedules and rules, you've found a sense of peace with how your Tokyo story concluded. How could you not?! You managed to overcome so many obstacles!

And so you decide to continue your journey to Paris 2024. You are ready to try again, you feel the need to bounce back. However, you are not the same person; after all you've lived, you're aware that, although sport is a big and important part of your life, it is not ALL your life. In this new cycle, you make a compromise with yourself to enjoy the process and focus solely on that.

The End.

Discussion

This study has qualitatively and longitudinally explored how elite athletes pursuing qualification for Tokyo's 2020 Olympic Games in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic storied and made meaning of their non-qualification. Our CNF, based on the 'Choose your own story' genre, enhances our understanding of transitions in sports in general, but especially of non-event transitions. Overall, our findings complement the dominant narrative of previous research that rates non-qualification as failure, but amplifies the available resources by showing other possible ways to make meaning of this non-event. Our study contributes to existing knowledge in the theoretical, methodological, and applied aspects.

Focusing on the theoretical aspects, from a narrative perspective, our results show that people do not make their stories by themselves, rather that stories have social aspects and are moulded by all the rhetorical expectations internalised by the storyteller (A. Frank 1995). Our results provide different examples of how perceived expectations, beliefs, and judgements regarding expected results, among other issues, can impact an individual's story (e.g. the perceived injustice of not being selected, the understanding that not qualifying is also part of the game).

Based on our analysis and interpretation, we propose a 'terminal' narrative and a 'maybe next time' narrative that show how athletes story their experiences based on the plotlines available to them. Our results, in line with the principles of narrative inquiry, reflect the understanding that storying is dynamic and temporary and that individuals may fluctuate between the available narrative scripts. Considering this idea, to avoid perpetuating dominant plotlines that tend to promote non-adaptative stories based on irrational beliefs of self-depreciation and catastrophism when a goal is not met, we believe it is crucial to communicate all different co-existing narratives. Stories are performative and *do* things (A. Frank 1995), so it is important to expand the number of potential narrative resources (Monforte, Pérez-Samaniego, and Devis-Devis 2017).

Also from a theoretical standpoint, and specifically focusing on non-qualification experiences, our results expand the possibilities of meaning-making when a goal is not achieved. Contrasting with previous research (e.g. Mitchell et al. 2021), we argue that not achieving an expected goal, such as participation in Olympic Games, can be integrated into a life story in multiple ways. For some, non-qualification, for instance, in the context of a global pandemic, can be part of the learning process and be integrated as the other side of the coin, enabling more adaptative narratives. Our results also show how specific narratives co-exist with other narratives. Elite athletes tend to align with the performance investment narrative (Douglas and Carless 2009) and the forward momentum narrative (Tamminen, Lau, and Milidragovic 2022); however, when the unexpected happens, these narratives do not provide the resources necessary to follow an adaptative pathway. In line with previous research on non-qualification experiences (Barker-Ruchti et al. 2019; Mitchell et al. 2021), our results also show that transition to the Olympics is extremely demanding and the qualification phase is volatile, leaving athletes facing a series of physical and mental challenges. In this regard, our study highlights the importance of considering socio-historical (e.g. COVID-19) and contextual (e.g. Spain's stricter lockdown in comparison with other countries) challenges, given that they play a pivotal role in presenting new challenges, and in their impact on motivation on the road to qualification.

Moreover, considering the theory of career transitions, our interpretation of the transition processes lived by the athletes in this study proposes rethinking the current transition models for the sports context. Taking Stambulova's (2003) model and focusing on predictability criteria, non-qualification does not necessarily adjust to the three types proposed (i.e. normative, non-normative, or quasi-normative). The same occurs with Torregrossa's (2022) model in relation to the interpretation of our results. Our findings show that multiple variables condition what an athlete may consider as predictable or not (e.g. athletic career stage, relationship with sporting federations), and, consequently, we believe that it is necessary to reconsider existing taxonomies for the sports context and include the category of non-event, as in Schlossberg's (1981) model. By including this category, non-event transitions could be classified according to three criteria: hopeful or hopeless, sudden or gradual, and in or out of one's control.

From a methodological perspective, our study proposes a novel way of representing results using CNF in the 'Choose your own story' format. This reflected our endeavour to generate an interactive way of engaging with our study findings and highlighting not *the* story but the existence of multiple stories within a series of shared events and non-events. The 'Choose your own story' genre allowed us to demonstrate that multiple possible paths exist when athletes aspire to take part in events for

which they may or may not qualify, and that meaning-making is dynamic and can plausibly change over time. We agree with Cavallerio, Wadey, and Wagstaff (2022) in that, by using arts-based research, we accept that our work is the result of co-creation between participants, readers, and researchers. This means that, although we may lack control regarding the readers' interpretations on immersing themselves in a story, this can enable multiple understandings and practical uses of the stories by both academic and non-academic audiences.

Finally, from an applied perspective, our study supports the need for athletes to voice the challenges lived during the different transitions in their athletic careers (both inside and outside sport), given that they can gain perspective and personal growth by having the opportunity to tell their stories (A. Frank 1998). In line with Barker-Ruchti et al. (2019), we agree that athletes can be significantly supported in managing uncertainty and reducing personal suffering if they are provided with a safe environment for storytelling sessions, especially when unexpected transitions occur, as happened with COVID-19 and the disruption of the Tokyo Olympic cycle. We believe that using resources such as CNF can contribute to sharing different ways of coping with non-event and unexpected transitions, thereby initiating meaningful conversations where different narratives and resources are made visible. At the same time, these resources can act as mirrors for athletes to become more aware of their belief systems and detect if these lead them towards adaptative or non-adaptative paths. It is not only important to confront athletes with the different existing narratives, but also their personal and athletic entourage. Storytelling, as exemplified here using 'Choose your own story', can help entourage members to better understand some of the possible experiences of athletes adapting to non-event transitions, and can provide them with more resources to enable adaptative paths. Future research, furthermore, might focus on exploring how entourage members experience and support athletes dealing with non-event transitions.

Strengths and limitations

This study explored how athletes story and make meaning from non-event transitions, such as non-qualification for the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games. The narrative inquiry approach and longitudinal perspective equipped the research with two distinctive strengths. First, from a theoretical perspective, we were able to explore how stories evolved over time and how they were influenced by different contextual factors (e.g. the constant changes wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact on the qualification process). In this way we were able to amplify the existing literature and understanding of how athletes experience a common and understudied transition, namely, non-qualification. Second, the presentation of our results as CNF, specifically using the 'Choose your own story' genre, represented a novel way of engaging readers with an interactive, entertaining, and potentially educational format. We are aware that some readers might find that to be a limitation of our study, as following the general format of the 'Choose your own story' genre, which presents stories in the second person, may, for some readers, represent a barrier to emotional connection with the plotline. Finally, some valuable aspects of participant stories had to be omitted to protect their anonymity.

Conclusions

Through 'Choose your own story', we proposed two possible narratives, one 'terminal' and the other 'maybe next time', that reflected how elite athletes storied and made meaning from their non-qualification for the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our results show how athletes' stories fluctuate dynamically between different possible narratives that lead towards adaptative paths or non-adaptative paths.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank the participants for their generosity in sharing their stories. They also would like to thank the anonymous reviewers, the Editors, and Ailish Maher for their constructive comments on earlier drafts of this paper. Finally, acknowledge the assistance of the members of the research group in Sport Psychology (GEPE), especially Marina García, José Mejías, Laia Bertran, and Martina Barcelo.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This study was supported by three research projects, 'Athletes' and sports entourage's longitudinal experiences on the disruption of the Olympic cycle Tokyo 2020' funded by the IOC Olympic Studies Centre (OSC). And by the projects 'HeDuCa: Healthy Dual Careers in Sport' (RTI2018- 095468) and 'HENAC: Healthy Environments throughout the Athletic Career' [PID2022-138242OB-I00 B100] of the Spanish Ministry of Science, Innovation, and Universities. Also, Rocío Zamora-Solé is a Ph.D. student at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB) and has a grant FISDUR [2021 FI SDUR00307] from the Generalitat de Catalunya.

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