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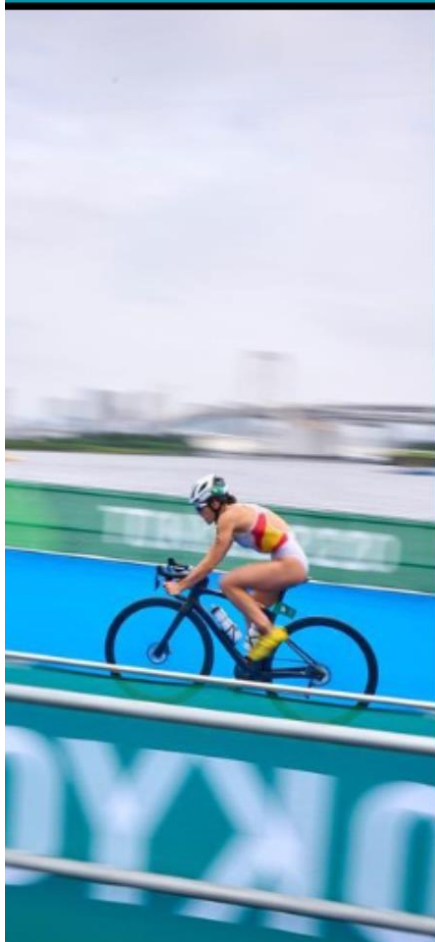
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Tesis Doctoral

# RELATOS DEL DEPORTE EN TIEMPOS DE INCERTIDUMBRE: TRANSICIONES IMPREDECIBLES Y NO- EVENTOS

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# **TESIS DOCTORAL**

## **Relatos del Deporte en Tiempos de Incertidumbre: Transiciones Impredecibles y No-Eventos**

**Rocío Zamora Solé**

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## Resumen

En esta tesis doctoral presentamos un estudio de caso intrínseco, basado en la investigación participativa, y en particular, en la coproducción. El objetivo general es explorar los relatos del deporte en tiempos de incertidumbre, más específicamente las experiencias de deportistas de alto rendimiento y su entorno durante la pandemia de COVID-19 y la disrupción del ciclo Olímpico de Tokio 2020. Para cumplir este objetivo, adoptamos un enfoque filosófico interpretativo/constructivista, y nos sustentamos en los principios teóricos de la investigación participativa, la teoría narrativa y la teoría de las transiciones en la carrera deportiva.

De este objetivo general se derivan tres objetivos específicos, abordados a través de tres artículos. En el artículo "De Barcelona a Tokio" presentamos y describimos un modelo de intervención coproducido para acompañar a un centro de alto rendimiento durante la pandemia y la disrupción del ciclo Olímpico. En el artículo "Experiencias de Disrupción" exploramos y detallamos las experiencias de las deportistas de alto rendimiento durante la fase aguda del confinamiento y el aplazamiento de los Juegos Olímpicos. Por último, en el artículo "Elige tu propia historia" recogemos los relatos y narrativas de deportistas que no lograron clasificarse para los Juegos Olímpicos en el contexto de la pandemia, con el fin de comprender cómo interpretan y otorgan significado a esta experiencia.

Esta tesis doctoral aporta varios avances significativos. En primer lugar, ofrece un ejemplo de intervención organizacional y longitudinal, utilizando los enfoques participativo y narrativo. También documenta las experiencias de deportistas que enfrentaron transiciones impredecibles y transiciones de no-evento, dos categorías poco estudiadas en la literatura científica. A partir de esta documentación, reflexionamos sobre la aplicabilidad y representatividad de los modelos teóricos existentes, sugiriendo la

inclusión de una categoría específica para los no-eventos. Además, se cuestionan las narrativas de éxito y fracaso predominantes en la literatura científica y en el ámbito deportivo, proponiendo una ampliación de las narrativas que asocian la no-clasificación con el fracaso. Finalmente, con el objetivo de suavizar la asimetría de poder entre investigadoras y participantes, se presenta una forma creativa de comunicar los resultados mediante el formato "Elige tu propia historia", una obra de no ficción creativa.

## Abstract

This doctoral thesis presents an intrinsic case study based on participatory research focusing on co-production. The overall aim is to explore narratives in sports during times of uncertainty, focusing on the experiences of high-performance athletes and their environment during the COVID-19 pandemic and the disruption of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic cycle. To achieve this goal, we adopted an interpretive/constructivist philosophical approach, drawing on the theoretical principles of participatory research, narrative theory, and career transition theory in sports.

Three specific objectives are derived from this general objective and addressed through three articles. The article "From Barcelona to Tokyo" presents and describes a co-produced intervention model designed to support a high-performance center during the pandemic and the disruption of the Olympic cycle. The article "Experiences of Disruption" explores and details the experiences of high-performance athletes during the acute phase of lockdown and the postponement of the Olympic Games. Finally, the article "Choose Your Own Story" collects the narratives of athletes who did not qualify for the Olympic Games in the context of the pandemic, aiming to understand how they interpret and make sense of this experience.

This doctoral thesis makes several significant contributions. First, it offers an example of organizational and longitudinal intervention using participatory and narrative approaches. It also documents the experiences of athletes who faced unpredictable transitions and non-event transitions, two categories that are under-researched in the scientific literature. Based on this documentation, the applicability and representativeness of existing theoretical models are considered, suggesting the inclusion of a specific category for non-events. Furthermore, it challenges the dominant success and failure narratives in both scientific literature and sports, proposing an expansion of narratives

that associate non-qualification with failure. Lastly, to reduce the power asymmetry between researchers and participants, a creative approach to communicating the results is presented through the "Choose Your Own Story" format, a work of creative non-fiction.

## Resum

Aquesta tesi doctoral presenta un estudi de cas intrínsec, basat en la recerca participativa, i en particular, en la coproducció. L'objectiu general és explorar els relats de l'esport en temps d'incertesa, més específicament les experiències d'esportistes d'alt rendiment i el seu entorn durant la pandèmia de COVID-19 i la disrupció del cicle Olímpic de Tòquio 2020. Per complir aquest objectiu, adoptem un enfocament filosòfic interpretatiu/constructivista, i ens basem en els principis teòrics de la recerca participativa, la teoria narrativa i la teoria de les transicions en la carrera esportiva.

D'aquest objectiu general se'n deriven tres d'específics, abordats a través de tres articles. L'article "De Barcelona a Tòquio" presenta i descriu un model d'intervenció coproduït per acompanyar un centre d'alt rendiment durant la pandèmia i la disrupció del cicle Olímpic. L'article "Experiències de Disrupció" explora i detalla les experiències de les esportistes d'alt rendiment durant la fase aguda del confinament i l'ajornament dels Jocs Olímpics. Finalment, l'article "Tria la teva pròpia història" recull els relats i les narratives d'esportistes que no van aconseguir classificar-se per als Jocs Olímpics en el context de la pandèmia, amb l'objectiu de comprendre com interpreten i donen significat a aquesta experiència.

Aquesta tesi doctoral aporta diversos avenços significatius. En primer lloc, ofereix un exemple d'intervenció organitzacional i longitudinal, utilitzant els enfocaments participatiu i narratiu. També documenta les experiències d'esportistes que van afrontar transicions imprevisibles i transicions de no-esdeveniment, dues categories poc estudiades en la literatura científica. A partir d'aquesta documentació, es reflexiona sobre l'aplicabilitat i la representativitat dels models teòrics existents, suggerint la inclusió d'una categoria específica per als no-esdeveniments. A més, es qüestionen les narratives d'èxit i fracàs predominants en la literatura científica i en l'àmbit esportiu, proposant una



ampliació de les narratives que associen la no classificació amb el fracàs. Finalment, amb l'objectiu d'ajudar a equilibrar l'asimetria de poder entre investigadores i participants, es presenta una forma creativa de comunicar els resultats mitjançant el format "Tria la teva pròpia història", una obra de no-ficció creativa.

## Glosario de abreviaturas y términos

CAR	Centre d'Alt Rendiment Esportiu de Sant Cugat
CNF	Creative Nonfiction
COVID-19	SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus
GEPE	Grup d'Estudis en Psicologia de l'Esport i de l'Activitat Física
IOC	International Olympic Committee
JJ.OO.	Juegos Olímpicos
OSC	Olympic Studies Centre
PBE	Práctica Basada en la Evidencia
De Barcelona a Tokio	Artículo "From Barcelona to Tokyo: Counseling a High-Performance Center Through the Disruption Caused by COVID-19 Pandemic and the Postponed Games".
Experiencias de disrupción	Artículo "Vivencias de aspirantes olímpicas en la disrupción del ciclo Olímpico Tokio 2020".
Elige tu propia historia	Artículo "Choose your own story: creative non-fiction about athletes attempting to qualify for the Olympics".

## Prefacio

Esta tesis busca compartir un proceso de aprendizaje, reflexión y co-construcción del conocimiento, centrado en relatos surgidos en tiempos de incertidumbre, protagonizados por deportistas y figuras clave de sus entornos, como entrenadoras<sup>1</sup> y personal técnico. A lo largo de la tesis mostraremos este proceso reflexivo y crítico alternando la utilización, en momentos, de la primera persona del singular; y, en otros, el plural.

El origen de este viaje se remonta a principios de 2020. Gracias a mi incorporación al Grup d'Estudis en Psicologia de l'Esport (GEPE), tuve la oportunidad de conocer historias como la de Susana Regüela, referente del Centre d'Alt Rendiment Esportiu de Sant Cugat (CAR), quien compartía los desafíos que enfrentaba como responsable del centro en los primeros días de la pandemia de COVID-19 y la disrupción del ciclo de Tokio 2020. Al escuchar su historia, me vi "atrapada" (Frank, 2010) por sus relatos. En ese momento, aún no había considerado la posibilidad de desarrollar una tesis doctoral. Recuerdo que Miquel, en una reunión del equipo de investigación, planteó una pregunta abierta, invitando que alguien liderara un proyecto para explorar la situación impredecible que comenzaba a cobrar relevancia. Después de reflexionar, decidí expresar mi interés en implicarme en dicho proceso.

A partir de la constante colaboración entre el GEPE y el CAR, comenzamos a coproducir un proyecto para acompañar al centro y, en particular, a deportistas y entrenadoras durante la transición provocada por la pandemia y la disrupción del ciclo de Tokio 2020. Este proyecto, que más tarde obtuvo el respaldo del Centro de Estudios Olímpicos (OSC, por sus siglas en inglés) del Comité Olímpico Internacional (IOC, por

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<sup>1</sup> En esta tesis se utiliza el plural femenino.

sus siglas en inglés), no solo comenzó a tomar forma, sino que también me brindó la oportunidad de iniciar mi formación doctoral.

Basándome en los conocimientos desarrollados en el GEPE sobre la carrera deportiva y sus transiciones, y guiada por mi curiosidad por las historias y la forma en que se da sentido a los acontecimientos vitales, esta tesis se gestó con un enfoque narrativo, centrado en explorar las experiencias de deportistas de alto rendimiento que afrontan transiciones impredecibles y no-eventos.

Esta tesis doctoral se estructura como un compendio de publicaciones que sigue una lógica de lo global a lo particular, abarcando tres artículos y tres productos anexos como material de difusión. El artículo 1 “De Barcelona a Tokio” actúa como un artículo paraguas que abraza al resto de productos de esta tesis. En él presentamos el relato de la coproducción de una intervención basada en la evidencia, diseñada para acompañar a un centro de alto rendimiento durante las transiciones impredecibles generadas por la pandemia de COVID-19 y la disrupción del ciclo Olímpico de Tokio 2020. En el artículo 2, “Experiencias de disrupción” nos enfocamos en explorar y describir las vivencias de las deportistas de alto rendimiento durante la fase aguda de la pandemia. En el artículo 3 “Elige tu propia historia”, exploramos las experiencias de las deportistas que no lograron clasificarse para los JJOO de Tokio 2020, definiendo la no-clasificación como una transición de tipo no-evento y analizando el significado que estas deportistas le otorgan. Finalmente, en el apartado de “Anexos” presentamos una comunicación oral titulada “Recalculando ruta” en donde nos centramos en explorar las narrativas de las deportistas a lo largo de las diferentes fases de la disrupción del ciclo de Tokio 2020. Además, presentamos dos posters, uno titulado “Despertares” en donde realizamos una exploración inicial a las narrativas de no-clasificación de cuatro deportistas de alto rendimiento y otro

titulado “Somos un equipo” en donde exploramos las experiencias de parejas de alto rendimiento en el afrontamiento de transiciones impredecibles.

Con el objetivo de socializar los procesos de conceptualización, reflexión, análisis y construcción de conocimiento, la tesis se presenta en el siguiente orden: introducción, aspectos metodológicos globales, resultados, discusión, conclusiones y anexos. En la “Introducción” presentamos los conceptos clave que fundamentan la temática de estudio, como la investigación participativa, el enfoque narrativo y el estudio de las transiciones en la carrera deportiva. Luego, abordamos los aspectos metodológicos transversales a toda la tesis, omitiendo detalles específicos de cada artículo, ya que estos pueden encontrarse en cada uno de ellos. A continuación, exponemos los tres artículos que componen esta tesis. En la sección de “Discusión” analizamos las principales aportaciones del trabajo desde una perspectiva integral, sintetizamos las aplicaciones prácticas, proponemos líneas de investigación futura y mencionamos las limitaciones de la tesis. Las “Conclusiones” las presentamos siguiendo la normativa para la obtención de la “Mención de Doctorado Internacional”, y por eso las ofrecemos en castellano e inglés. Finalmente, en los “Anexos” incluimos los estudios complementarios.

### **Artículos que forman esta tesis doctoral:**

#### **Artículo 1:**

Zamora-Solé, R., Alcaraz, S., Viladrich, C. y Torregrossa, M. (2024). From Barcelona to Tokyo: Counseling a high-performance center through the disruption caused by COVID-19 pandemic and the postponed Games. *Journal of Sport Psychology in Action*. 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21520704.2024.2371605>

#### **Artículo 2:**

Zamora-Solé, R., Alcaraz, S., Regüela, S., y Torregrossa, M. (2022). Experiences of Olympic hopefuls of the disruption of the Olympic cycle at Tokyo 2020. *Apunts Educación Física y Deportes*, 148, 1–9. [https://doi.org/10.5672/apunts.2014-0983.es.\(2022/2\).148.01](https://doi.org/10.5672/apunts.2014-0983.es.(2022/2).148.01)

**Artículo 3:**

Zamora-Solé, R., Alcaraz, S., Regüela, S., Viladrich, C., y Torregrossa, M. (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. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2024.2348446>



# INTRODUCCIÓN

## Introducción

En esta tesis doctoral relatamos un estudio de caso intrínseco (Hodge y Sharpe, 2016), realizado desde la orientación de la investigación participativa (Rich et al., 2024) y más específicamente, desde la coproducción (Smith et al., 2021). Respondemos así al llamado a un giro participativo (Schinke et al., 2013) y avanzamos desde la investigación sobre las participantes hacia la investigación para, por y con las participantes, buscando que la investigación se ajuste a las necesidades de las usuarias, incluya sus conocimientos y experiencias y tenga un mayor impacto.

Específicamente, nos hemos enfocado en continuar los avances realizados en los últimos 50 años en el estudio de la carrera deportiva, adoptando una perspectiva de toda la carrera, toda la persona y todo el entorno; comprendiendo las transiciones como un proceso en lugar de un evento único (Stambulova, 2016). Por ello, hemos co-creado una intervención práctica basada en la evidencia (Ramis et al., 2019) para acompañar a un centro de alto rendimiento durante el afrontamiento de la pandemia de COVID-19 y la disrupción del ciclo de Tokio 2020 (Artículo 1). Además, hemos explorado los relatos y narrativas de las deportistas olímpicas del mismo centro en relación con las transiciones impredecibles del COVID-19 y la disrupción del ciclo Olímpico de Tokio 2020 (Artículo 2), así como la transición poco documentada en la literatura de la Psicología del Deporte, pero muy común en la vida de las deportistas: la no clasificación a unos Juegos Olímpicos (JJ.OO., Artículo 3).

En la introducción, presentamos los principales ejes temáticos que nos han guiado a lo largo de este camino: la orientación hacia el trabajo *con* las personas usuarias a través de la investigación participativa, el enfoque narrativo como teoría que permite conocer la importancia de los relatos y las narrativas en la construcción del sentido, y finalmente, el



estudio de las transiciones de la carrera deportiva, haciendo especial énfasis en la falta de conocimiento respecto a aquellas transiciones impredecibles o de carácter de no-evento.

### **La investigación participativa: una aproximación dialógica**

Este es, quizás, el apartado que más me ha costado escribir. He pasado horas, días, e incluso semanas buscando una conclusión clara sobre el enfoque seguido. No puedo negar que la duda me ha acompañado, incluso a lo largo de estos últimos años. En julio, en un momento crítico de la redacción de este documento, asistí a la Conferencia de la Sociedad Internacional de Investigación Cualitativa en Deporte y Actividad Física (QRSE, por sus siglas en inglés) y, en particular, a la charla de mi colega Javi Monforte sobre la distinción entre coproducción y co-diseño. Su exposición reavivó una pregunta que ya me rondaba: ¿Es legítimo llamar coproducción al proceso seguido en esta tesis?

Al regresar a Barcelona y enfrentarme nuevamente a la redacción, el tiempo seguía pasando sin que lograra alcanzar un consenso conmigo misma. En un nuevo momento de crisis, decidí recurrir a Javi como referente y amigo crítico. Le presenté, a modo de cuadro comparativo, los puntos por los cuales consideraba que el proyecto realizado podría “cumplir con los principios” de una coproducción (ver Smith et al., 2021), así como mis dudas acerca de hasta dónde se habían cumplido dichos principios. También le expuse mis reservas sobre si el proceso pudiera entenderse como co-diseño, aunque con poca convicción. Tras reflexionar juntos, comencé a darme cuenta de que mi búsqueda estaba mal encaminada. En mi intento de evitar etiquetar incorrectamente el proceso (Williams et al., 2020), estaba perdiendo la oportunidad de compartir nuestra experiencia y permitir que esta contribuyera al avance en este campo de investigación.

Lo que sí tuve claro en todo momento es que esta tesis se enmarca en la orientación de la investigación participativa. En los últimos años, los enfoques de investigación participativa han ganado gran prominencia e interés en el estudio del deporte y la

actividad física (Rich et al., 2024). Siguiendo el llamado “giro participativo” (Smith et al., 2023), las investigadoras hemos buscado formas de desafiar los métodos positivistas de producción de conocimiento, involucrando en su lugar a las personas usuarias a lo largo de las diferentes fases del proceso de investigación y generación de conocimiento (Rich et al., 2024).

Dentro del amplio campo de la investigación participativa, se encuentran diversos enfoques, entre ellos la coproducción (Smith et al., 2023) y el co-diseño. Estos enfoques, entre otros, comparten fundamentos filosóficos subyacentes y se caracterizan por un desplazamiento del poder desde el equipo de investigación hacia las personas usuarias y/o con experiencias vividas a lo largo del proceso de investigación (Cornwall y Jewkes, 1995).

Entiendo que algunos podrían ubicar nuestro proyecto dentro de uno u otro de estos enfoques, o incluso verlo desde perspectivas que yo misma no he considerado. A continuación, ofreceré una aproximación dialógica sobre el proceso realizado. Aunque las conceptualizaciones no deben verse como productos finales, es innegable que conceptualizar y definir son pasos cruciales (Smith et al., 2021).

Esta tesis, por tanto, presenta una aproximación hacia el enfoque de coproducción. Según la tipología presentada por Smith et al. (2021), existen tres tipos de coproducción: (a) la contribución de ciudadanas a los servicios públicos; (b) la traducción integrada del conocimiento, y (c) la investigación equitativa y basada en la experiencia. En este caso, se optó por un proceso de traducción integrada del conocimiento, un proceso colaborativo en el cual las personas con experiencia de vida (i.e., miembros del CAR) trabajaron juntamente con el equipo de investigación a lo largo del proyecto, con el objetivo de adecuarlo a sus intereses y necesidades, aumentando así la utilidad y el impacto (Smith et al., 2021). Esta decisión estuvo fundamentada en los objetivos del proyecto (acompañar

al CAR durante la pandemia y la disrupción del ciclo de Tokio 2020), las experiencias del equipo de investigación (dado que este proyecto constituye parte de los primeros pasos en el camino de la coproducción), la disponibilidad de recursos (inicialmente el proyecto no contó con financiación, pero durante su transcurso logramos recibir apoyo del Centro de Estudios Olímpicos del COI), y los beneficios y desafíos asociados con cada enfoque, los cuales serán presentados en esta sección y en la Discusión.

Entre los muchos beneficios de la coproducción, los que están más estrechamente relacionados con nuestro proyecto incluyen la creación de intervenciones más efectivas gracias al trabajo colaborativo entre las personas usuarias y el equipo de investigación (i.e., Artículo 1). Además, las personas con experiencias de vida pudieron identificar prioridades y preguntas de investigación que fueran relevantes y significativas para ellas. En nuestro caso, la creación del grupo de coproducción fue fundamental para lograr estos beneficios. A lo largo del proyecto, llevamos a cabo varias sesiones con la metodología de grupos focales con este grupo, lo que nos permitió discutir y delimitar temas de interés, establecer plazos y definir aspectos formales del proyecto. Otro beneficio importante fue la oportunidad de acceder a personas del entorno CAR y, con ello, influir en la organización.

Sin embargo, surgieron diversas barreras al coproducir. Una de las más significativas (y que se retomará en la Discusión) fue la dificultad de alinear los tiempos académicos con los no académicos. Coproducir un proyecto de investigación en el contexto de un proceso doctoral ha sido, en ocasiones, complicado. Considero que esto limitó la posibilidad de una mayor coherencia en el proceso, como incluir a las integrantes del equipo de coproducción como coautoras de los artículos presentados en esta tesis.

Como resultado de la coproducción, este proyecto (y la tesis en particular) se centró en explorar las vivencias del CAR como organización y de las deportistas en ciclo

Olímpico. Siguiendo los intereses tanto de las personas usuarias como del equipo de investigación, se adoptó un enfoque narrativo, partiendo de la idea de que los relatos son fundamentales para dar sentido a nuestras experiencias. Además, la naturaleza longitudinal del proyecto nos permitió acompañar, explorar y documentar cómo estos relatos evolucionaban, se contradecían y reflejaban la construcción de significado que estas personas realizaban a lo largo de las diferentes fases de la pandemia y la disrupción del ciclo de Tokio 2020.

### **El enfoque narrativo**

Esta tesis se fundamenta en relatos y narrativas. La capacidad de contar historias, imaginar y usar mitos para entender el mundo es esencial para la supervivencia de nuestra especie (Harari, 2014). A través de los relatos, las personas damos sentido a nuestras experiencias (Polkinghorne, 1988). Como sugiere Frank (2013), las historias son especialmente útiles para comprender eventos traumáticos y confusos en nuestras vidas.

Los relatos que presentamos en esta tesis se abordan desde un enfoque narrativo. La indagación narrativa comprende una variedad de enfoques centrados en las historias, que buscan explorar cómo las personas narran sus experiencias para comunicar significado (Riessman, 2008). Según Smith (2013), la indagación narrativa se basa en los supuestos filosóficos del Interpretativismo, que sostiene que las realidades son múltiples, creadas y dependientes de la mente (ontología relativista). Además, se considera al conocimiento como socialmente construido, falible y subjetivo (epistemología construccionista).

Quienes investigamos desde este enfoque, nos interesamos por conocer las verdades subjetivas, ya que entendemos que la verdad objetiva no existe, y accedemos a estas verdades a través de la exploración de las experiencias personales (Papatomas, 2016). El ser humano es considerado como un creador de sentido que utiliza las narrativas

para interpretar, comunicar y dirigir su vida, experiencias e identidad (Smith y Monforte, 2020).

Desde el enfoque narrativo, se diferencian los conceptos de relatos y narrativas. Los relatos son las historias específicas que las personas cuentan, mientras que las narrativas son recursos culturales y sociales que funcionan como plantillas para crear y entender esos relatos (Smith y Monforte, 2020). Aunque las narrativas no son relatos en sí mismas, generan relatos y establecen similitudes entre ellos (Frank, 2010). Esto implica que, aunque los relatos que las personas cuentan parezcan personales, en realidad surgen a partir de las narrativas a las que tienen acceso. Es decir, cuando una persona cuenta un relato, selecciona elementos de un conjunto de narrativas disponibles en su cultura y relaciones sociales. Por ejemplo, cuando una deportista relata cómo impacta la gran dedicación de horas de entrenamiento en su vida y las renunciaciones que realiza en función de obtener determinados resultados deportivos; si bien dichos relatos tienen matices personales, se sustentan en una matriz más amplia, como, por ejemplo, la narrativa de rendimiento (Douglas y Carless, 2015). Por lo tanto, los relatos deben entenderse como construcciones culturales y relacionales. Además, mientras que las narrativas tienden a ser estables, los relatos son dinámicos y cambiantes, y no tienen un final fijo, lo que significa que pueden modificarse con el tiempo (de ahí la relevancia de la exploración longitudinal planteada en esta tesis).

Las narrativas no solo actúan como recursos para construir relatos personales, sino que también son agentes activos (Frank, 2010). No son pasivas; tienen la capacidad de influir y actuar sobre las personas y para las personas (Smith y Monforte, 2020). Las narrativas nos proporcionan un mapa o una dirección a seguir y nos enseñan a qué debemos prestar atención y cómo responder a ciertas situaciones (Frank, 2010). Las narrativas en las que nos apoyamos dan forma a cómo entendemos nuestras experiencias,

influyendo en nuestros pensamientos, emociones, comportamientos y bienestar psicosocial (Douglas y Carless, 2015). Además, las personas podemos desafiar o resistir las narrativas dominantes en nuestra cultura (Lindemann, 2001).

### ***El enfoque narrativo en la psicología del deporte***

Smith y Sparkes (2009) sostienen que el enfoque narrativo es una herramienta valiosa dentro del ámbito del deporte y la actividad física. Este enfoque nos permite entender los relatos que las personas comparten sobre sus experiencias. Además, nos ayuda a explorar las plantillas narrativas o recursos que utilizan para dar sentido a sus vivencias. En la literatura deportiva, se han identificado diversas narrativas. Una de las contribuciones más importantes en este campo es la de Douglas y Carless (2015), quienes identificaron tres tipos de narrativas en las trayectorias de deportistas de élite: la narrativa de rendimiento, la narrativa relacional y la narrativa de descubrimiento. La narrativa de rendimiento, la más común, se enfoca en la dedicación exclusiva al éxito deportivo, a menudo en detrimento de otras áreas de la vida. Esta narrativa puede resaltar aspectos negativos del deporte competitivo, como las dificultades al no alcanzar los objetivos o los desafíos en la transición fuera del deporte. En contraste, la narrativa relacional pone el énfasis en el cuidado y las relaciones, en lugar de en el rendimiento y las victorias. Por su parte, la narrativa de descubrimiento se presenta como una alternativa a la narrativa de rendimiento, destacando el valor de explorar experiencias que aporten una vida plena y rica, mientras se busca el éxito deportivo.

Por otro lado, Gotwals y Tamminen (2021) exploraron las experiencias de éxito y fracaso en deportistas de alto rendimiento a lo largo de una temporada y propusieron la narrativa del impulso hacia adelante. Esta narrativa se caracteriza por una visión de progreso continuo, donde se espera una mejora constante y se enfoca simultáneamente en los próximos desafíos, evitando centrarse en los logros ya conseguidos. Bajo esta

narrativa, los fracasos se consideran momentos de impulso estancado y se ven como adversidades a superar mediante la reorientación de la atención y los esfuerzos hacia el entrenamiento y la competencia futura para retomar el impulso. En casos donde las deportistas percibían que el trabajo realizado no había dado sus frutos, expresaban sentirse molestas, insultadas, confundidas y con expectativas no cumplidas. La falta de "resultado exitoso" invalidaba sus esfuerzos.

En los estudios destacados (Douglas y Carless, 2015; Gotwals y Tamminen, 2021), se demuestra cómo las narrativas ofrecen diversas posibilidades para las historias que las deportistas utilizan para entender y representar sus vidas y experiencias en el deporte. Además, se muestra que el enfoque narrativo es efectivo para comprender no solo las experiencias personales de las deportistas, sino también el contexto sociocultural más amplio en el que estas se desarrollan (Williams, 2020).

Existen numerosos estudios que exploran los relatos y narrativas de las deportistas durante distintas transiciones en sus carreras deportivas (e.g., Book et al., 2021; Cavallerio et al., 2017; Douglas y Carless, 2009; Ely y Ronkainen, 2021). Sin embargo, pocos se han enfocado en las transiciones impredecibles y los no-eventos (e.g., Ivarsson et al., 2018; McGannon et al., 2021). Por lo tanto, es importante aumentar el conocimiento sobre cómo las deportistas interpretan estos sucesos inesperados que afectan tanto sus carreras deportivas como sus vidas personales. Además, es crucial explorar cómo evolucionan estos significados y cómo influyen en su salud mental y en sus percepciones de éxito o fracaso.

A continuación, presentamos el concepto de transición que hemos adoptado para el abordaje de esta tesis doctoral y mostramos diferentes modelos teóricos con sus taxonomías. A su vez, explicamos por qué consideramos que el COVID-19, la disrupción

del ciclo Olímpico de Tokio 2020 y la no-clasificación a unos JJ.OO., pueden ser comprendidos como ejemplos de transiciones.

### **Las Transiciones de la Carrera Deportiva**

Nancy Schlossberg (1981), en su modelo transicional, define a las transiciones como cualquier evento o no-evento que produce un cambio en las percepciones y atribuciones de una persona sobre el mundo, los demás y sobre sí misma. Estos cambios generan modificaciones en sus comportamientos, rutinas y relaciones. Ya sea que esta etapa de cambio se perciba como una crisis o como un ajuste de desarrollo, las transiciones representan un proceso con desafíos únicos y oportunidades de crecimiento y transformación (Schlossberg et al., 2012). Independientemente de la naturaleza del cambio, las transiciones requieren un proceso de afrontamiento. Atravesar una transición implica dejar atrás aspectos del yo, abandonar roles antiguos y aprender nuevos. Esta negociación entre lo viejo y lo nuevo puede representar tanto ganancias como pérdidas (Schlossberg et al., 2012).

Schlossberg (1981) identifica tres tipos de transiciones: (a) las previsibles, (b) las imprevistas y (c) los no-eventos. Las transiciones previsibles abarcan eventos de ganancias o pérdidas que suelen ocurrir a lo largo de la vida, como el ingreso al mundo laboral. Las transiciones imprevistas se refieren a eventos inesperados y disruptivos que no son consecuencia del curso habitual de la vida, como la muerte prematura de un ser querido. Este tipo de transición presenta desafíos únicos porque no permite anticiparse y prepararse adecuadamente. Los no-eventos se refieren a aquellos eventos que una persona esperaba que ocurrieran, pero que no sucedieron, alterando así su vida, como el deseo de maternidad no cumplido.

El concepto de transiciones ha sido aplicado también en la Psicología del Deporte. Una de las áreas que más ha evolucionado en las últimas cinco décadas es el estudio de



la carrera deportiva (Stambulova et al., 2021). En este ámbito, se considera al deportista de manera integral, reconociendo que, además de su carrera deportiva, desarrolla otras identidades y aspectos personales, como el trabajo y los estudios. Su desarrollo es multidimensional (Wylleman y Lavallee, 2004; Wylleman, 2019) y ocurre en un entorno holístico (Henriksen et al., 2010). Dentro del estudio de la carrera deportiva, se exploran dos áreas interrelacionadas: el desarrollo de la carrera y las transiciones en la carrera. Un marco teórico destacado en el estudio del desarrollo de la carrera es el Modelo Holístico de la Carrera Deportiva (Wylleman y Rosier, 2016; Wylleman, 2019), que propone que la carrera deportiva se desarrolla a través de diferentes fases y transiciones (ver Figura 1).

EDAD	10	15	20	25	30	35
Desarrollo deportivo	Iniciación	Desarrollo	Maestría			Discontinuación
Desarrollo psicológico	Infancia	Adolescencia		Adultez		
Desarrollo psicosocial	Familia Compañerxs	Compañerxs, entrenador/a, familia		Pareja, entrenador/a, personal de apoyo, compañerxs, familia		
Desarrollo académico-vocacional	Educación primaria	Educación secundaria	Carrera deportiva semi-profesional			Post carrera deportiva
			Educación superior			
Desarrollo económico	Familia	Familia, CSD, CCAA	COE/CSD/Institución gubernamental/clubs/sponsors			Familia, trabajo
Desarrollo legal	Minoría de edad		Mayoría de edad			

*Figura 1.* Modelo Holístico de la Carrera Deportiva (Wylleman, 2019)

Siguiendo la Figura 1, se pueden hacer dos lecturas: una horizontal y una vertical. La lectura horizontal permite identificar las diferentes etapas y transiciones dentro de cada área de desarrollo, como la transición de júnior a sénior en el ámbito deportivo. La lectura vertical, por su parte, muestra cómo los distintos niveles de desarrollo están interconectados e influyen entre sí, destacando cómo los cambios en un nivel pueden afectar a los demás.

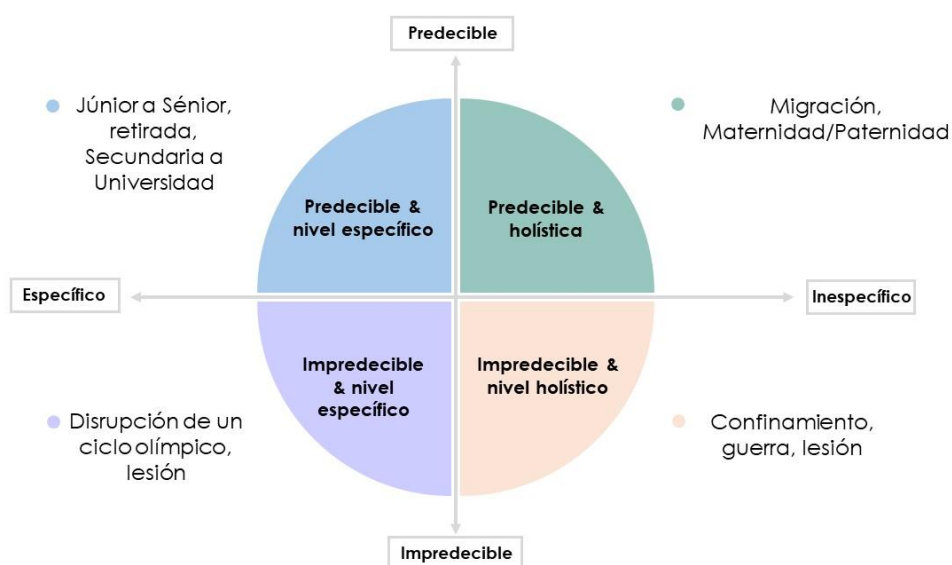
En el estudio del desarrollo de las carreras deportivas, Stambulova (2003) adaptó el concepto de transiciones de Schlossberg (1981) al ámbito deportivo. Según esta perspectiva, las transiciones se entienden como fases de cambio a lo largo de la carrera deportiva, que implican procesos de evaluación y afrontamiento. Estos procesos pueden llevar a resultados variados y a cambios significativos en la trayectoria profesional de una deportista (Alfermann y Stambulova, 2007).

Las transiciones de carrera se clasifican en base a dos criterios: (a) el área de desarrollo en donde se inicia la transición y, (b) su grado de predictibilidad. Siguiendo el primer criterio, una transición puede ser de tipo deportiva (e.g., la convocatoria en la selección nacional), no-deportiva (e.g., la maternidad) o de carrera dual (e.g., la transición simultánea de ingreso a la universidad y al nivel sénior). Siguiendo el segundo criterio, una transición puede ser normativa (i.e., relativamente predecible y lógica para el desarrollo, e.g., la retirada deportiva), no-normativa (i.e., difícilmente predecible, e.g., una lesión de larga duración) o cuasi-normativa (i.e., únicamente predecible para determinado grupo de deportistas, e.g., la migración deportiva). En tanto el primer grupo de transiciones y el último admiten cierto grado de preparación para realizar un mejor afrontamiento de las demandas y desafíos propios de la transición, el segundo grupo, debido a su naturaleza impredecible, no admite preparación y por ello es entendida como potencialmente más desafiante y suele requerir un trabajo curativo o de afrontamiento de las potenciales consecuencias (Torregrossa et al., 2016).

Stambulova (2003) propuso un modelo de afrontamiento para el desarrollo de la carrera deportiva. En este modelo, las demandas y barreras que surgen durante las transiciones pueden crear un conflicto entre la realidad actual de la deportista y sus aspiraciones o expectativas. Para manejar este conflicto, las deportistas deben movilizar recursos y encontrar maneras de afrontar la situación. Según el modelo, una transición es

exitosa cuando la deportista ajusta efectivamente sus recursos y estrategias a las demandas de la transición. Por el contrario, una transición se considera una crisis si la deportista no puede enfrentar las barreras debido a la falta de recursos adecuados. Alfermann y Stambulova (2007) sostienen que no superar estos desafíos puede poner en riesgo la salud mental de la deportista.

Recientemente, Torregrossa (2022) revisó el modelo de transiciones predominante en la Psicología del Deporte. En su nuevo enfoque, en lugar de clasificar las transiciones según el área de desarrollo y su grado de predictibilidad, Torregrossa propone clasificarlas según dos dimensiones: especificidad y predictibilidad (ver Figura 2).



*Figura 2. Modelo de Transiciones de la Carrera Deportiva (Torregrossa, 2022).*

De acuerdo con esta clasificación, las transiciones podrían ser: (a) específicas y previsibles (e.g., la transición de júnior a senior, la transición del secundario a la universidad), (b) holísticas y previsibles (e.g., la migración, la paternidad/maternidad), (c) específicas e imprevisibles (e.g., las lesiones o la disrupción del ciclo olímpico) y (d) holísticas e imprevisibles (e.g., una guerra, la pandemia del COVID-19). Este modelo

más allá de proponer una manera diferente de clasificar las transiciones reflexiona sobre las implicaciones psicológicas de definir las transiciones como exitosas o fallidas desde una perspectiva retrospectiva, y propone un enfoque más racional para definir las como adaptativas o no adaptativas, tanto desde puntos de vista prospectivos como retrospectivos.

A continuación, presentamos dos ejemplos de transiciones impredecibles: la pandemia del COVID-19 y la interrupción del ciclo Olímpico de Tokio 2020; y un ejemplo de transición de no-evento: la no-clasificación a unos Juegos Olímpicos.

### **La pandemia del COVID-19 y la interrupción del ciclo Olímpico de Tokio 2020**

Hacia finales de diciembre del año 2019 se descubre un nuevo coronavirus del síndrome respiratorio agudo grave de tipo 2 (i.e., SARS-CoV-2). Dicha infección fue denominada popularmente como el COVID-19 y debido a la facilidad de propagación para inicios de marzo ya era considerada por la Organización Mundial de la Salud como una pandemia (Organización Mundial de la Salud, OMS, 2020). El COVID-19 continuó expandiéndose a lo largo del mundo y fue así como hacia finales de octubre ya se habían reportado 44,8 millones de casos en más de 214 países del mundo; sumada a la confirmación de más de 1,1 millones de muertes a causa de esta infección (OMS, 2020).

Para intentar reducir el número de contagios, numerosos países se vieron obligados a tomar estrictas medidas nacionales. En la mayor parte de países la medida tomada fue la implementación de un estricto confinamiento. Dicha acción implicaba el cierre de espacios públicos interiores (e.g., gimnasios, restaurantes) y tiendas consideradas como no esenciales; la cancelación de diversos eventos (e.g., festivales, eventos deportivos), y la orden de que las personas solo debían salir de sus hogares por razones limitadas, tales como necesidades médicas, compra de alimentos y

desplazamientos por trabajo, en caso de ser considerado un trabajo esencial y de naturaleza únicamente presencial (Grix et al., 2020).

Hacia finales del año 2020 se produce, lo que algunas personas han considerado como un hito en la historia de la pandemia, la autorización del uso de emergencia de diferentes vacunas. Para diciembre de dicho año ya se habían administrado millones de vacunas contra el COVID-19 en diferentes países del mundo.

### ***La pandemia del COVID-19 en el deporte de alto rendimiento:***

Entre las múltiples afectaciones causadas por la pandemia de COVID-19, una de las más significativas para el mundo deportivo fue la postergación de los JJ.OO., de Tokio 2020. Tras la declaración del COVID-19 como pandemia por la OMS, el COI debía decidir el destino de los Juegos, que estaban programados para julio de 2020. El 24 de marzo, el primer ministro de Japón anunció la postergación de los JJ.OO., hasta el año siguiente.

La pandemia alteró drásticamente la preparación para los Juegos. Deportistas y otros miembros del entorno deportivo enfrentaron numerosos desafíos, como el aislamiento social, la incertidumbre sobre la posible cancelación de competiciones, la necesidad de ajustar los planes de entrenamiento, la pérdida potencial de ingresos y las dificultades para acceder a instalaciones de entrenamiento y mantener el contacto con compañeras de equipo y entrenadoras (Reardon et al., 2020).

Siguiendo el modelo de asesoramiento a deportistas en transiciones de crisis de Stambulova (2011), Stambulova et al. (2022) plantearon tres escenarios que podrían ser considerados por aquellas deportistas en la fase final de preparación para los Juegos de Tokio: rechazo, aceptación, y lucha. Dichos escenarios consideraban el momento de la

carrera deportiva y planteaban los principales desafíos que representaba cada modo de afrontamiento (ver Figura 3).

<b>Escenario 1 – RECHAZO</b> “Es un buen momento para retirarme”	<b>Escenario 2 – ACEPTACIÓN</b> “Puedo tomar una pausa y prepararme para los próximos Juegos”	<b>Escenario 3 – LUCHA</b> “La pandemia no me va a impedir que me prepare para Tokio”
Deportistas en fases avanzadas de sus carreras deportivas, cuentan con experiencia previa en Juegos Olímpicos.	Deportistas en fases iniciales o a mitad de sus carreras deportivas. Cuentan con tiempo para buscar la participación en próximos Juegos Olímpicos.	Deportistas con experiencia y recursos que se encuentran a mitad o finales de sus carreras deportivas.
<b>Desafíos:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• La transición hacia la vida post deporte.</li> <li>• El reposicionamiento social.</li> <li>• El cambio en la identidad.</li> <li>• La reorganización de su estilo de vida.</li> </ul>	<b>Desafíos:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Modificación de los planes de entrenamiento.</li> <li>• Lidar con una identidad deportiva comprometida.</li> <li>• Planificar cómo utilizar la “pausa” para adquirir recursos y habilidades.</li> </ul>	<b>Desafíos:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Monitorear la evolución del COVID-19 y ajustar sus planes de entrenamiento.</li> <li>• Adaptarse a situaciones de entrenamiento inhabituales (e.g., planificación a corto plazo).</li> </ul>

*Figura 3.* Adaptación del modelo de asesoramiento a deportistas en transición de crisis de Stambulova et al. (2022).

Desde nuestra perspectiva, y siguiendo el modelo de Torregrossa (2022), la pandemia del COVID-19 más allá de ser entendida como una barrera, puede ser comprendida como un ejemplo de transición impredecible de tipo holístico, en tanto es un evento con la capacidad de producir un proceso de cambio en las percepciones y atribuciones que realiza una persona sobre el mundo, los otros y sobre sí misma; generando un cambio en sus comportamientos, rutinas y relaciones. A su vez, la disrupción del ciclo Olímpico de Tokio 2020, puede ser entendida como un ejemplo de transición impredecible de tipo específico (entendiendo que afecta principalmente al ámbito deportivo).

### **La no clasificación a unos JJ.OO.**

Otra de las transiciones escasamente exploradas es la de la no-clasificación a un JJ.OO. No obstante, se sabe que el proceso de búsqueda de clasificación es altamente demandante y agotador (Barker-Ruchti et al., 2019). Los estándares y reglas de

clasificación son rigurosos, el tiempo para cumplirlos es corto, y esto genera una gran presión sobre las deportistas. Además, las plazas disponibles son limitadas, lo que a veces provoca tensiones entre compañeras de entrenamiento (Debois et al., 2012). Investigaciones anteriores han mostrado que estas condiciones pueden poner en riesgo la salud de las deportistas, ya que algunas recurren a métodos de entrenamiento extremos y potencialmente dañinos, como aumentar la carga de entrenamiento, reducir la ingesta de alimentos para adaptar la composición corporal, y/o el uso de sustancias potencialmente nocivas para la salud (Barker-Ruchti et al., 2019).

Complementariamente, investigaciones recientes han comenzado a explorar cómo las deportistas viven el proceso demandante de búsqueda de clasificación y el impacto de no lograr el objetivo (Barker-Ruchti et al., 2019; Mitchell et al., 2021). Generalmente, las investigaciones muestran narrativas en donde las deportistas entienden que no clasificar supone un fracaso (e.g., Mitchell et al., 2021). Ninguna de estas investigaciones ha abordado la no clasificación desde el marco teórico de las transiciones en la carrera deportiva. Según el modelo de Schlossberg (1981), la no clasificación puede considerarse como un "no-evento". Este concepto se refiere a eventos que una persona esperaba que ocurrieran pero que no sucedieron, y que potencialmente pueden alterar su vida (e.g., decidir finalizar su carrera deportiva tras no lograr la clasificación).

Por tanto, a pesar de las primeras descripciones sobre las experiencias de las deportistas durante el proceso de clasificación, nuevas perspectivas desde el enfoque teórico de las transiciones de carrera deportiva pueden ayudar a generar una imagen más comprehensiva del fenómeno. Ya que la no clasificación puede desencadenar profundos cambios en la vida de las deportistas, desde su identidad hasta la decisión de continuar o finalizar su carrera deportiva, explorar esta transición desde una perspectiva teórica narrativa y transicional no solo enriquecería la literatura existente, sino que también

proporcionaría herramientas más efectivas para apoyar a las deportistas en estos momentos potencialmente críticos de sus trayectorias.

### **Objetivos de la Tesis**

El objetivo general de esta tesis doctoral es explorar los relatos del deporte en tiempos de incertidumbre. Estos "relatos del deporte" abarcan tanto a las deportistas de alto rendimiento como a las organizaciones deportivas a las que pertenecen. Al hablar de "tiempos de incertidumbre", nos referimos específicamente a la pandemia de COVID-19 y la disrupción del ciclo Olímpico de Tokio 2020. Para alcanzar este objetivo, se presentan tres objetivos específicos:

1. Acompañar a un centro de alto rendimiento durante la pandemia y la disrupción del ciclo Olímpico. Este objetivo se aborda en el artículo 1 “De Barcelona a Tokio”.
2. Explorar y describir las experiencias de las deportistas de alto rendimiento durante las fases iniciales de las transiciones impredecibles concurrentes del confinamiento y el aplazamiento de los Juegos Olímpicos. Este objetivo se aborda en el artículo 2, “Experiencias de disrupción”.
3. Explorar y recoger los relatos y las narrativas de deportistas que vivieron el no-evento de la no-clasificación a unos Juegos Olímpicos en el contexto de la pandemia, con el propósito de comprender cómo interpretan y atribuyen significado a esta experiencia. Este objetivo se aborda en el artículo 3, “Elige tu propia historia”.





# **ASPECTOS METODOLÓGICOS**

## Aspectos Metodológicos

### Diseño:

La tesis está pensada y diseñada íntegramente desde la metodología cualitativa. El paradigma cualitativo puede ser considerado como un término general que abarca una serie de enfoques, métodos, y prácticas de análisis interpretativo en constante evolución (Denzin y Lincoln, 2005). Desde este paradigma se considera que existen múltiples versiones de realidades, incluso para una misma persona, y que éstas están íntimamente ligadas al contexto en el que se desarrollan; por tanto, el conocimiento debe considerarse dentro del contexto en que fue generado (Braun y Clarke, 2013). Siguiendo a Braun y Clarke (2013) el aspecto central que distingue a este tipo de metodología es el interés en los procesos y los significados. La investigación cualitativa captura la complejidad, el desorden y las contradicciones que caracterizan al mundo, permitiéndonos dar sentido al patrón de significados (Braun y Clarke, 2013).

A su vez, considerando la estrecha relación existente entre esta tesis y el proyecto *'Athletes' and sport entourage's longitudinal experiences on the disruption of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic cycle'* otorgado por el OSC del IOC, la tesis también constituye un estudio de caso intrínseco del CAR de Sant Cugat. Es decir, es producto de “una exploración en profundidad desde múltiples perspectivas de la complejidad y singularidad de una persona, grupo, comunidad, proyecto, política, programa o sistema particular en un contexto delimitado” (Hodge y Sharp, 2016, p. 63). Y, como se explicitó en el apartado de la Introducción, la tesis en sí misma es producto de la investigación participativa (Rich et al., 2024) y más específicamente de un proceso de coproducción, particularmente de traducción integrada del conocimiento (Smith et al., 2021).

### **Posicionamiento filosófico:**

Aunque cada artículo detalla específicamente el enfoque filosófico que guía su construcción y diseño, la tesis en su conjunto se enmarca en el Constructivismo/Interpretativismo. Esto significa que el objetivo principal es comprender los significados que las personas construyen y atribuyen a sus experiencias. Para lograrlo, se adopta una ontología relativista (i.e., no existe una realidad externa independiente de las personas, sino que las realidades son construidas por ellas) y una epistemología subjetiva y transaccional (i.e., el conocimiento es co-construido entre las participantes y las investigadoras).

### **Consideraciones éticas:**

Se siguieron las pautas establecidas por el Comité de Ética de la Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (CEEAH 5180). Con la ayuda de la investigadora principal del CAR, se contactó con las participantes y se explicaron los objetivos del estudio y lo que implicaba su participación. Aquellas participantes que accedieron a participar voluntariamente, sin retribución, firmaron un documento de consentimiento informado.

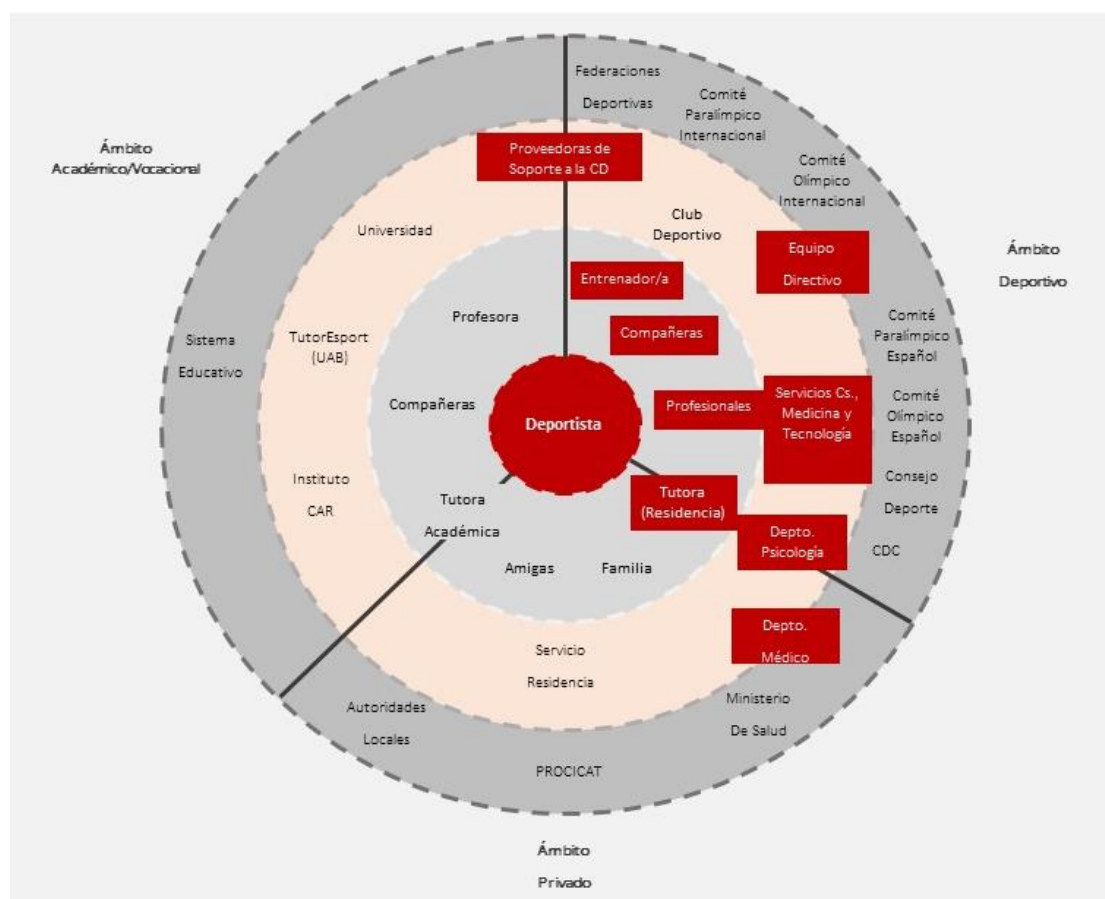
A lo largo de las publicaciones realizadas, se utilizaron pseudónimos para guardar la confidencialidad de las participantes. A su vez, se omitieron datos que podrían haber resultado de utilidad o interés para las lectoras, pero que hacía peligrar la confidencialidad (e.g., modalidad deportiva, edad).

### **El Centre d'Alt Rendiment Esportiu de Sant Cugat:**

El CAR de Sant Cugat es una organización que acompaña a las deportistas para que puedan competir a nivel internacional. Para ello brinda recursos de la más alta calidad técnica y científica. El CAR no solo centra su atención sobre el desarrollo deportivo, también considera al desarrollo académico y personal como igualmente importantes, por

lo que ofrece los servicios y herramientas necesarias para su crecimiento. Las deportistas en edad escolar cuentan con un instituto educativo ubicado dentro de sus instalaciones para facilitar la compaginación entre estudios y deporte. A su vez, el CAR cuenta con un servicio de residencia disponible para aquellas deportistas que viven lejos o que requieren esta instalación.

El CAR, siguiendo la taxonomía española presentada por Mejías et al. (2019), es una entidad pública considerada como un entorno desarrollador de carrera dual. Como tal, está regulada por la Secretaría General del Deporte de la Generalitat de Cataluña, la cual tiene un acuerdo de financiación con el Consejo Superior de Deportes. El CAR tiene autonomía organizativa y se estructura en dos áreas: (a) Administración y (b) Deportes. Esta última área es la responsable de los temas de deporte de alto rendimiento y está dividida en cuatro subáreas: (a) Ciencia, Medicina y Tecnología, (b) Educación, (c) Deportes y (d) Relaciones Internacionales y Nuevos Desarrollos. En la Figura 4 presentamos una adaptación del Modelo Ecológico planteado por Henriksen et al. (2020) al entorno del CAR. En rojo resaltamos las figuras y áreas que participaron tanto en el grupo de coproducción como así también a lo largo de la intervención.



*Figura 4.* Adaptación del Modelo Ecológico de Henriksen et al. (2020) al CAR de Sant Cugat

### **Comentario reflexivo:**

Considero que presentar una tesis diseñada y realizada desde la investigación cualitativa sin añadir una nota personal que explique cómo influyó y fue influenciada por este proceso sería, en pocas palabras, un error. Aunque la investigación es el resultado de una colaboración y creación conjunta, creo que es necesario hacer explícito cómo este trabajo me ha permitido desarrollar, repensar y manifestar diferentes aspectos de mi identidad como psicóloga, investigadora y, sin duda, como persona.

En primer lugar, es importante recordar que esta tesis se realizó (en parte) no solo sobre el COVID-19, sino también durante la pandemia. La crisis sanitaria no solo afectó al CAR y a sus miembros, sino que también me impactó profundamente. Explorar las

vivencias y el significado que deportistas, entrenadoras y miembros del Centro, con diferentes niveles de poder, dieron a las distintas etapas de la pandemia y a la disrupción del ciclo de Tokio, me permitió en ciertos momentos desviar la atención de lo que la pandemia significaba para mí personalmente: un cambio radical en mi concepción del mundo. Como persona migrante, viví este proceso a más de 10,000 kilómetros de la mayoría de mi familia y amigas. Al igual que las personas a las que acompañé, yo también enfrenté un proceso de incertidumbre, miedo y reconceptualización de mis intereses, deseos y visión del mundo. No puedo ignorar este aspecto fundamental de la experiencia. Aparte de apoyar a las personas en sus propios procesos de afrontar la incertidumbre, yo misma atravesé un proceso de autoconocimiento y de cuidado de mi salud mental. Uno de los mayores desafíos, por ejemplo, fue trabajar sobre mis propias distorsiones cognitivas, animarme a debatir mi propia falacia de control que en numerosas ocasiones de este proceso de aprendizaje me ocasionó la adopción de conductas desadaptativas.

Por otro lado, realizar un doctorado en colaboración con una entidad como el CAR, considerando mi experiencia como psicóloga en el ámbito aplicado, me exigió ser consciente de las expectativas y creencias personales que proyectaba sobre este centro. Para alguien que desea desarrollar una carrera en la psicología de alto rendimiento, el CAR podría representar una especie de parque temático de ensueño, lo que puede llevar a una idealización que en algunos momentos pudo haber influido en mi forma de investigar. A lo largo de las diferentes fases de la investigación, he tenido que ser consciente de este sesgo personal para poder abordarlo de manera crítica. Por ejemplo, esto implicó reconocer mis fantasías sobre el CAR, poder asumir mis prejuicios y mis “debería” respecto a una organización deportiva de excelencia.

Otro aspecto fundamental que enfrenté, debido a la naturaleza de la investigación participativa y, en particular, al principio de la coproducción que destacan Smith et al.

(2021) sobre la construcción de relaciones de confianza con las personas con quienes se coproduce, fue el dilema ético que surge en otros enfoques filosóficos donde las relaciones entre participantes e investigadora no se fomentan e incluso se consideran un error en el proceso de investigación. En mi caso, tuve que reflexionar y manejar la complejidad de investigar con, para y por personas con las que también desarrollaba vínculos de trabajo, confianza y, en algunos casos, amistad. En numerosas ocasiones conversé con compañeras del ámbito académico para conocer sus posicionamientos al respecto, y elaboré mi propio posicionamiento sobre los vínculos entre investigadora-participantes.

Otro punto para destacar es el camino de reflexión que he recorrido sobre las narrativas que predominan en mi vida. A raíz del artículo “Elige tu propia historia”, me vi obligada a cuestionar mis propias creencias sobre qué constituye éxito y qué constituye fracaso. El mismo proceso doctoral me ha llevado, en múltiples ocasiones, a reflexionar sobre mis propias narrativas de rendimiento, progreso continuo y narrativas terminales o de próximas oportunidades. Este proceso dinámico de reflexión, que me permite mirar desde dentro y desde fuera, sigue en curso y continuará, ya que no es un proceso finito.

Finalmente, aunque la nota de reflexividad describe cómo la investigación me ha afectado y cómo he influido en ella, es importante destacar que este proceso no ha sido en absoluto solitario. Aunque soy yo quien escribe estas líneas y no puedo hablar por el equipo de dirección de tesis en cuanto al impacto que esta investigación haya tenido en ellas, no quiero dejar de mencionar la influencia significativa que su participación ha tenido en mis reflexiones. Su apoyo ha sido clave para desarrollar los aprendizajes necesarios que me han permitido presentar este trabajo.



# RESULTADOS



## Resultados

**Artículo 1 - From Barcelona to Tokyo: Counseling a High-Performance Center through the disruption caused by COVID-19 pandemic and the postponed Games.**

Zamora-Solé, R., Alcaraz, S., Viladrich, C. y Torregrossa, M. (2024). From Barcelona to Tokyo: Counseling a High-Performance Center Through the Disruption Caused by COVID-19 Pandemic and the Postponed Games. *Journal of Sport Psychology in Action*.

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# From Barcelona to Tokyo: Counseling a High-Performance Center Through the Disruption Caused by COVID-19 Pandemic and the Postponed Games

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## From Barcelona to Tokyo: Counseling a High-Performance Center Through the Disruption Caused by COVID-19 Pandemic and the Postponed Games

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### ABSTRACT

As part of a growing line of interventions, sports psychology practitioners focus on supporting organizations and their members to better cope with the demands of career transitions. The aim of this article is to share our experience of counseling a High-Performance Center through two concurrent non-normative transitions: the COVID-19 pandemic and the disruption to the Tokyo Olympic/Paralympic Games. We report our reflections on what it means to consult for an organization rather than for individuals, and what adaptation to a period of constantly changing circumstances means in and for an organization. We also describe the lessons learned and share our evaluation of strengths and points of improvement for future interventions.

### KEYWORDS

Counseling; intervention; non-normative transition; pandemic; sport organization

March 2020, Beth (pseudonym, representative of the High-Performance Center) seeks our intervention as sport psychology practitioners (SPP) and explains how they are living the initial phase of the pandemic:

Only two weeks ago, in the echoing halls of our High-Performance Center, you could listen to the symphony of muscles and ambition, all moving in perfect harmony toward one goal: the Tokyo Games. Athletes, coaches, and staff would run up and down the different spaces of the Center. But then, like a sudden storm, the pandemic hit. These days there is one unique shared question: *How long will this last?*

First came the whispers of uncertainty, then the deafening silence as the Center had to shut its doors. Athletes dispersed to their homes, coaches vanished from their usual training spaces, and the once bustling gym fell into stillness. Training sessions became solitary endeavors, conducted through pixelated screens and makeshift home setups. The camaraderie you used to see at the locker rooms and cafeteria, was now replaced by the solitude of isolation.

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The past Tokyo Olympic/Paralympic cycle was marked by the pandemic. Beth's story shows how beyond the challenges typically associated with the pre-Games phase (e.g., increased competitive demands, lack of recovery and self-care, fear of failure), athletes, coaches, and support staff had to deal with new stressors, such as social isolation, recalibrated training plans, potential loss of income, difficulties in accessing training facilities, and general uncertainty related to postponed or canceled competitions (Reardon et al., 2020).

The concurrent non-normative transitions of the pandemic and the disruption to the Tokyo Olympic/Paralympic cycle had the potential to increase vulnerability to mental health problems. Mental health is recognized as an essential component of an elite sports culture of excellence (Henriksen et al., 2019), and, according to Reardon et al. (2020), sports organizations have the responsibility of creating environments that support athletes' mental health and resilience. Indeed, "mental health is everybody's business" (Henriksen et al., 2019, p. 6), so a holistic and preventive approach is necessary to equip athletes, coaches, and support staff with the skills that will enable them to deal with both predictable and unpredictable transitions.

In this study, we share our experience of counseling a High-Performance Center (HPC) through the different phases of the pandemic and along the road to and in the aftermath of Tokyo 2020. Adopting a collaborative perspective as non-members of the HPC, we describe the strategies we developed in response to the HPC request for support.

## **Setting the stage: Contextualization**

### ***The pandemic in Spain***

In Spain, the COVID-19 pandemic broke out initially toward the end of January 2020. By early March, the proliferation of cases was such that the national government declared a state of alarm that lasted from 14 March to 21 June (14 weeks). The resulting lockdown affected population mobility and necessitated adjustments to service provision and production operations. On 24 March, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and Tokyo 2020 Organizing Committee announced that the Tokyo Games would be postponed to 2021.

After eight weeks of strict lockdown, high-performance athletes were permitted by the national government to train in public places (e.g., mountains, beaches, etc.) with none of the time restrictions imposed on the general population (i.e., the general population could only go outside for 2 h, either in the morning or the afternoon).

Once the "new normal" was declared on 21 June 2020, HPCs were allowed to re-open their doors and to continue supporting the ongoing

goal of participating in the Tokyo Games. To avoid re-closure, it continued to be crucial to manage and reduce the possibility of infection in the HPCs.

By May 2021, a new milestone was the agreement reached between the IOC and Pfizer pharmaceutical company, whereby national athletes, coaches, and their support staff were authorized to receive the vaccine that would enable them to participate in the Games. At that time, when the Games seemed to be constantly at risk of cancellation, athletes and coaches felt that this was a demonstration of the future realization and, on a personal basis, felt more secure with the vaccine. Finally, 326 Olympic athletes (10 participated in our intervention) and 142 Paralympic athletes (five participated in our intervention) represented Spain at the Tokyo Games.

### ***The High-Performance Center and the pandemic challenges***

The HPC to which our intervention was directed is a public organization dedicated to empowering athletes to achieve international competitiveness while also providing education. In its commitment to holistic growth, the HPC places significant emphasis on sporting, academic, and personal development, and so makes available the corresponding services and facilities (e.g., career assistance programs and residence services), provided without distinction to Olympic and Paralympic athletes and staff (e.g., sports psychologists, medical doctors, biomechanists).

Because of the pandemic, the HPC faced the unprecedented challenge of having to temporarily shut down. The repercussions of closure were significant, and decisions had to be made immediately. Because the Games had not yet been postponed, it was strategically decided to focus resources and efforts on just 70 Olympic and Paralympic-level athletes of the 378 athletes in the HPC. Athletes in residence had to swiftly devise their own plan for navigating the lockdown (e.g., to return to their homes or seek shelter with friends). The fact that coaches and other support staff found themselves unable to maintain their usual proximity to the athletes presented a unique set of challenges, as it was necessary for everyone to quickly adapt to novel remote coaching and support methods.

Once the strict lockdown ended, the HPC had to adapt to new rules and create new protocols that allowed athletes and staff to slowly reengage with the functioning of the HPC in their pursuit of the Tokyo Games. This was one of the most stressful phases for the organization as it had to adapt its existing philosophy and know-how to a challenging and uncertain context. In this regard, one of the main aspects that were disrupted was the proximity that the HPC has as a key resource for providing their services with quality (i.e., educational, athletic, and health services are all 5 min away from each other, facilitating the interdisciplinary work and the assistance of athletes). Due to the pandemic, they had to create new



ways of maintaining the same services, now at a distance. As each of the different pandemic phases was navigated, internal HPC organization became key to maintaining fluid communications, providing information, and notifying management decisions to representatives of different sports and departments, and to athletes, coaches, and their support staff.

### ***The practitioners***

Rocío is an applied sports psychologist with experience of working with a range of individual and team sport athletes and coaches, at different participation levels (recreational to Olympic), and involving a wide variety of sports (e.g., soccer, sailing). In the past 4 years, she has enriched her applied experience with research experience through PhD studies focused on career transitions. She participated in the design, planning, implementation, and evaluation of different stages of the intervention. Saul and Miquel are both experienced SPPs and researchers on the topic of career transitions. They contributed with their expertise to the intervention design and to the counseling sessions with athletes and coaches. Carme, an experienced researcher in sports psychology, contributed to the elaboration of this manuscript.

All four authors are scientist-practitioners who have collaborated closely with the HPC over recent years, developing evidence-based interventions focused on topics of interest (e.g., developing dual-career competencies). Given the initial difficulties occasioned by the pandemic for the Spanish population in general and the high demand that it placed on mental health professionals, the authors provided their sports psychology services in support of athletes and coaches at risk, considering the goal being pursued. As both practitioners and researchers, they considered the pandemic to represent a unique opportunity to help the HPC to better cope with the kind of unexpected demands imposed by non-normative transitions.

### ***The intervention model***

We followed the Research Group in Sport and Exercise Psychology (GEPE) model of evidence-based practice (Ramis et al., 2019). This model is structured in five steps: (a) literature review, (b) needs analysis, (c) intervention, (d) evaluation, and (e) follow-up. Further, in Table 1, we summarize how, in response to that HPC request, those steps were implemented and our intervention's outcomes (see Table 1).

### ***The High-Performance Center request***

While the HPC employs professionals (e.g., coaches, teachers, psychologists) to take care of routine tasks and everyday challenges posed by the pursuit

Table 1. Summary of the intervention.

Phase	Purpose	What we did	Who participated	What we accomplished
Literature review	To identify current trends that would enable us to respond to the support request.	We reviewed key literature on career transitions (e.g., Stambulova & Samuel, 2020), and on counseling for adults in transitions (e.g., Schlossberg, 1981). Considering the HPC characteristics, we also consulted the literature on participatory interventions (e.g., co-production, Smith et al., 2022).	First, second, and fourth authors.	We conceptualized the pandemic and the disruption to the Tokyo Games cycle as concurrent non-normative transitions.
Needs analysis	To explore the main needs of the HPC and determine what was expected from our intervention and how we could contribute.	Through an interview with Beth (HPC representative), we detected the need to support athletes and coaches who were preparing for the Tokyo Games and had to cope with disruption to their planning. Considering the preexisting resources available in the HPC (e.g., the sports psychology department), we were asked to provide support as external SPPs, therefore we focused our intervention on the power of storytelling (e.g., cathartic effect and meaning-making resource) and created spaces for athletes and coaches to reflect and share their stories.	First, second, and fourth authors, and Beth.	We designed our intervention following a qualitative approach (focusing solely on narrative theory) and the co-production approach, to include users in designing the intervention.
Intervention	To establish actions to support athletes, coaches, and staff through the different phases of the disruption.	Collaborative group: We designed a holistic counseling strategy that considered the different HPC members and created a collaborative group whose members participated in five focus group sessions (videoconference meetings). The 3-fold goal was to collect insights from participant experiences to guide the project, provide feedback on the general conclusions after each phase, and adapt the project to the participants' main needs (e.g., timings) to increase utility and impact.	Two HPC management team members, three athletes, and two coaches, were selected by Beth considering representativeness in terms of gender, roles, and Olympic/Paralympic realities. The first, second, and fourth authors guided the focus group sessions.	The collaborative group allowed us to create an interview guide pertinent to the main topics that worried or challenged participants at each phase. It also allowed us to detect if a different approach was needed (e.g., considering the time between interviews we decided to provide participants with a set of self-assessment reflexive tools to engage with them in that time frame).

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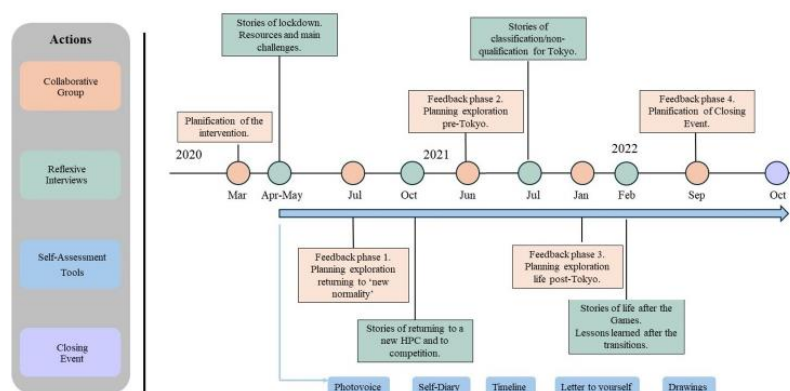
Table 1. Continued.

Phase	Purpose	What we did	Who participated	What we accomplished
		<p>Reflective interviews: Participants were invited to reflect on their mental health from a holistic perspective (see Figure 1 for a summary of the different interview phases and topics).</p> <p>Self-assessment tools: Given the time gaps between interviews, participants were issued a booklet describing five techniques designed to facilitate reflection and documentation of emotions and thoughts throughout the various transition stages (i.e., photovoice, timeline, drawings, a letter to yourself, and self-diary).</p> <p>Closing event: At the end of the intervention, a participatory concluding event was organized at the HPC to share the stories of athletes, coaches, and support staff, through a round table with the HPC community and the public</p>	<p>27 athletes (13 female) and 13 coaches (two female) participated in four semi-structured interviews. 10 members of the support staff participated in one semi-structured post-Tokyo interview.</p> <p>Athletes and coaches are interested in enhancing awareness in the intervals between the reflective interviews.</p> <p>Round table: three athletes (two female), two coaches, and an HPC management representative. The collaborative group helped design the event and the first author conducted the event. Public (i.e., HPC members not targeted by our intervention, students, non-HPC students, mental health professionals, and coaches). All four authors participated in the event.</p>	<p>For some participants, the intervention represented a first experience with a mental health professional. The intervention proved to be a resource for mental health literacy and was an invitation to reflect. Some considered including a mental health professional (from inside or outside the HPC) as part of their team. Our contributions as SPP were acknowledged as valuable.</p> <p>During the acute phase of the lockdown, the reflection and documentation of emotions and thoughts throughout the transitions were found useful.</p> <p>The photovoice and self-diary techniques were the techniques that engaged more participants over longer periods of the intervention.</p> <p>We distinguished two main outcomes: (a) For the participants: In communicating their stories, lessons learned, and reflections, participants were empowered. Their initial perceptions of powerlessness and passivity in the initial pandemic and Tokyo Games disruption phases changed to a more proactive stage when they shared stories of rearranging values and focusing on what they could control and integrating this resource into their everyday life. (b) For the public: The participating public could ask questions of the athletes, coaches, and HPC staff and so deepen their understanding of their experiences in this challenging period.</p>

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued.

Phase	Purpose	What we did	Who participated	What we accomplished
Evaluation	To evaluate intervention success.	Evaluation was ongoing throughout the entire intervention, informal interviews with Beth and with the collaborative group members were done, once the final stage concluded, we evaluated, using qualitative methods, participant satisfaction and how new resources were acquired and implemented.	The first, second, and fourth authors.	Besides the expected outcomes for athletes, coaches, and HPC staff (e.g., increased reflection and awareness of own emotions), we perceived an unexpected outcome for the HPC as an organization. Thanks to the collaborative group and the concluding event, members of the HPC were able to socialize their experiences and acknowledge not only their experiences but also the experiences of members with different roles within the organization. This exchange allowed them to increase their sense of belonging. Members of the management team and the coaches positively valued the opportunity to count on external support throughout the whole transition, during this process, they dealt with increased pressure and were grateful for the cathartic space that the interviews provided.
Follow-up	To gain continuity of the earned resources.	To provide continuity of the promotion of mental health through the organization, participation through different educative, applied, and scientific-based research projects was proposed (e.g., Dual Careers for Mental Health, Promoting Mental Health through the Entourage in High-Performance Sport).	All authors and the HPC.	Mental health literacy and mental health self-care were promoted in athletes, coaches, and members of the support staff through different workshops.



**Figure 1.** Timeline of the intervention process at the High-Performance Center. *Note.* The different actions undertaken through our intervention at the High-Performance Center are shown. We present a timeline indicating when each strategy took place and the principal topics that were addressed at each stage.

of excellence, it was not equipped to cope with the unprecedented situation resulting from the pandemic. A member of the HPC management team (Beth, a pseudonym) consequently requested our support regarding the concurrent non-normative transitions. Given the preexisting services available at the HPC, we aimed to adopt a holistic and collaborative approach that would not interfere with routine tasks and everyday work. Thus, rather than provide specific psychological care, we adapted our intervention model to the principles of narrative theory understanding that human experience can be made meaningful through storytelling (Polkinghorne, 1988). In Figure 1, we present the timeline of the different intervention strategies we introduced to explore the stories and meaning-making of the participants (see Figure 1).

### **The participants**

Our counseling was provided to 10 HPC professionals (medical staff, tutors, sports psychologists, management team members), 22 Olympic athletes (12 female) and five Para-athletes (one female) preparing for the Tokyo Olympic/Paralympic Games, and 13 coaches (two females) of those athletes (11 Olympics and two Paralympics).

### **The intervention outline**

In response to the request for support, we conducted a longitudinal intervention, summarized in Table 1. The first column labels the five phases of our intervention (GEPE model; Ramis et al., 2019), namely, literature review,

needs analysis, intervention, and evaluation; the second column outlines the purpose of each phase; the third column describes the implemented actions; the fourth column describes participants and their roles; and finally, the fifth column describes the main outcomes of each phase. In Figure 1, we present the sequence of the specific actions proposed during the 23 months of our intervention and the main topics discussed at each phase.

### Reflections and lessons learned

To provide a glimpse of the stories collected through our intervention and lessons learned, we provide a short creative nonfiction (see Cavallerio, 2022) that shares the experiences of a management team member: Luca (pseudonym). This is his story:

Today, I have been invited to participate in a round table where athletes, coaches, and staff members will share their experiences of navigating the uncertainties brought by the pandemic. I'm wrestling with what to say, what to share. Should I focus on the challenges and hardships? Should I open up at all? It's difficult to decide because it's all part of an ongoing journey.

As I run through my thoughts one thing comes to mind: there's no doubt that through it all I've fallen even more in love with my job and role. Who would have thought that in this chaotic, challenging, upsetting scenario I would have found the sense of what I do?

If you ask me, of course, I wouldn't have chosen to go through this. But somehow, amid the chaos, I discovered new strengths and found ways to contribute more meaningfully to the organization I love so much. I believe that as an institution we now have more resources that will help us improve our services. After years and cycles of working here, I feel that this time, I truly helped us reach our goals. Now, I genuinely feel like a part of the journey to Tokyo. I feel more connected than ever with each team member. I know there were times when they were frustrated with me, especially when I sent emails with new rules that disrupted their routines. But thanks to my role, thanks to OUR collective efforts, we are back on track.

I now know that if we had to go through it all once more, we would be better prepared. This Center is not the same, I am not the same. I hope that as time goes by, we remain aware of what we've conquered. I think I've found my answer, this is what I should share.

### What does it mean to consult for an organization?

A main feature of our intervention was the need to switch from an intervention targeted to individuals as part of an organization (i.e., mostly athletes and coaches) to an intervention targeted to the organization itself. This meant not only targeting a wider population (i.e., including other relevant members of the organization), but also exploring how new challenges were impacting not only individuals but also the philosophy, culture, and values of the organization.



While supporting HPC members playing different roles and with varying levels of power, we could observe how differing needs and goals sometimes caused conflicts. For example, as Luca's story shows, while the management team was focused on implementing strict protocols aimed at avoiding HPC closure, athletes and coaches were uncomfortable because these sometimes interfered with their training). As practitioners, we helped the organization reflect on how the pandemic experience helped members reinforce their working philosophy and equipped them with the resources necessary to maintain their know-how even in challenging conditions (e.g., maintaining connectedness despite the virtuality of communications). It is worth mentioning, that those who took part in the collaborative groups and the closing event, had the opportunity to share their stories with the members of the HPC, thus strengthening relationships within the organization.

As SPPs, we also had to reflect on our own understanding of our role and decide which form of consultation we were undertaking: expert consultation or process consultation. The former implies that the consultee needs advice or a service that the counselor can provide, while the latter implies a less directive intervention aimed at helping the consultee examine how a problem is being addressed rather than on the problem itself (Anderson et al., 2022). Due to our less directive approach and our emphasis on storytelling and the cathartic effect that the interview itself can have as an intervention, we recognize that our overall intervention strategy had a distinct impact compared to others where SPPs adopt the role of teachers or experts. As we too were transitioning through the challenges brought on by the pandemic, we provided support through the creation of reflexive spaces and believe that through this action we were able to demonstrate how powerful these spaces and storytelling itself can be.

### **What does it mean that an organization is in transition?**

We understand that equally to athletes, organizations face transitions too. Organizations undergo processes of change that can be more or less predictable and because of these, can transform the attributions of their goals, philosophy, etc. From our experience of counseling the HPC, we observed that the multifaceted nature of the phenomenon required us, as SPPs, to develop skills and knowledge across different domains of practice. In terms of organizational psychology, we observed that a key factor in the pandemic context was that organizational change occurred mainly by adaptation (Choflet et al., 2021). The unpredictable nature of the pandemic, coupled with the need for rapid and effective decision-making amidst limited information, necessitated cooperation in sharing knowledge to address complex and emerging issues. From this reflection, we found the dyad of trustworthy leaders plus trusting followers to be key factors in the HPC's capacity for

organizational change. As shown in Luca's story, due to the new demands, not only did the members of the HPC change, but also the organization itself. New protocols, relationships, and resources (e.g., online sessions allowing follow-ups while athletes are outside the HPC) were gained.

Regarding future interventions, we believe that it is important to focus on evaluating readiness and capacity for change; moreover, in situations of high uncertainty, it is important to explore two factors in particular: a tolerance for ambiguity and an acceptance of not being able to control everything.

### ***Positive aspects of the intervention***

1. Considering that transitions are processes navigated over time; to comprehend and provide support to organizations it is crucial to assess the transitions at multiple points in time. The longitudinal design of our intervention that delimited different moments to intervene through focus group sessions and interviews enabled us to identify how the different HPC members adapted to the challenges posed by the pandemic and the disruption to the traditional Olympic/Paralympic cycle. This approach also allowed us to explore how stories evolved and allowed the HPC members to reflect on and become aware of their capacity to adapt to the unexpected.
2. Including a collaborative group allowed us to incorporate the users of the generated knowledge in all the intervention parts, thereby enhancing the utility of the intervention, most especially in empowering the participants. The inclusion of the users' knowledge was also found to be crucial to shaping the interview guide and designing the concluding event.
3. Since participation in this project represented a first contact with sports psychology for some of the HPC members, we believe that the intervention served not only as a support resource but also as a mental health literacy resource. Along the same line, we were able to provide follow-up to the organization and its members through the invitation to participate in subsequent educational and research-based applied projects aimed at promoting mental health literacy and self-care.

### ***What we learned for future interventions***

1. We initially focused the intervention mainly on athletes and coaches, considering that they were at higher risk of mental health issues. However, we realized the importance of including other members (e.g., support staff) in the intervention in the reflective interviews, especially management team members, given their responsibility for the overall response to the non-normative transitions and the ongoing need to

adapt to new demands. In other words, the intervention needed to consider the importance of “caring for the caregiver.”

2. Although self-assessment tools offered autonomy regarding the management of emotions during challenging moments, we believe that they were more suitable for individuals who had already worked with mental health professionals and less useful for individuals with less emotional awareness. Future interventions might benefit from a more extensive explanation of how to engage with these tools.
3. In cases where we detected a need for therapeutic intervention (e.g., symptoms of anxiety or depression), as external SPPs, we were aware of having to act sensitively regarding those individuals, to avoid intruding or interfering with HPC staff roles. In future interventions, it would be advisable to ensure absolute clarity regarding our role as external practitioners.

## Conclusions

In this article, we described our experience of counseling an HPC facing the concurrent non-normative transitions of the COVID-19 pandemic and disruption to the Tokyo Olympic/Paralympic cycle. Our intervention in support of a sports organization adopted a holistic perspective, a longitudinal design, and different specific interventions, including a collaborative group, focus group sessions, reflective interviews, self-assessment tools, and a concluding event to share stories. By sharing our proposal and the lessons learned, we hope to stimulate reflection and creativity regarding different ways of providing support to organizations experiencing unprecedented situations. We especially note the importance of including and strengthening collaborative work to empower participants and produce more impactful research and interventions.

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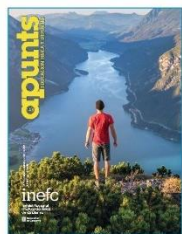
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**Artículo 2 - Vivencias de aspirantes Olímpicas en la disrupción del ciclo Olímpico  
Tokio 2020.**

Zamora-Solé, R., Alcaraz, S., Regüela, S., y Torregrossa, M. (2022). Experiences of Olympic Hopefuls of the Disruption of the Olympic Cycle at Tokyo 2020. *Apunts Educación Física y Deportes*, 148, 1-9.

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## Experiences of Olympic Hopefuls of the Disruption of the Olympic Cycle at Tokyo 2020

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### Abstract

Lockdown due to COVID-19 and the postponement of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games meant Olympic hopefuls experienced an uncertain and changing Olympic cycle. This paper describes the experiences of high-level and high-performance athletes amidst the disruption of the Olympic cycle caused by the concurrent non-normative transitions of coronavirus lockdown and the postponement of the Olympic Games. Twenty-five athletes (14 females and 11 males; age  $M = 26.2$ ,  $SD = 6.99$ ) were interviewed via videoconference during the eighth week of confinement. An inductive reflexive thematic analysis was carried out to organise the results into four thematic axes: (a) pre-confinement, (b) confinement, (c) post-confinement and (d) Tokyo 2020 + 1. The announcement of the postponement of the Olympic Games was recognised as a milestone that changed the lockdown experience, transforming the perception of lockdown as a threat into an opportunity. While the transitions were experienced in a variety of ways, the presence of sport identity psychological resources (i.e., frustration tolerance and resilience), the development of extra-sport identities (i.e., dual careers) and sport lifestyle (e.g., experiences at meets) are highlighted as facilitating factors in coping with and managing these concurrent transitions. The results obtained can help sports psychology professionals and others in the field to aid athletes in coping with the disruption of the Olympic cycle, as well as in coping with other unexpected situations.

**Keywords:** athlete, coronavirus, lockdown, non-normative transition, olympic games, qualitative methodology.

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## Introduction

The 32nd Olympic Games were scheduled to be held in July 2020 in Tokyo. To this end, athletes from all over the world were preparing to face the final phase on the road to Olympic qualification. Towards the end of 2019, the first cases of infection from a new coronavirus strain causing COVID-19, were announced and, due to the evolution of the situation, a global pandemic was declared by the World Health Organisation (WHO) on 11 March 2020. COVID-19 disrupted the daily lives of a large part of the world's population and in doing so, also caused major disruption to the Olympic cycle. Like the rest of the population, athletes faced lockdown enforced by the authorities of their countries and, in their specific case, they also had to deal with the postponement of the Olympic Games, a sporting goal for which they had been preparing for at least four years. In this paper the experiences of high performance athletes (DAR) and high level athletes (DAN) will be explored, as they underwent these two transitions concurrently (i.e., lockdown and postponement of the Olympic Games).

To this end, the paper will adopt the position of the International Society of Sport Psychology (ISSP) on the career development and transitions of athletes (Stambulova et al., 2020a). In it, transitions are defined as phases of change and are highlighted as one of the main conceptualisations in the discourse on sport careers. Career transitions have been classified into three categories, according to their predictability: (a) normative, those that are relatively predictable and derived from the logic of athlete development; (b) non-normative, those that are difficult to predict; and (c) quasi-normative, those that are predictable for a particular group of athletes. The former includes the transition from junior to senior (Torregrossa et al., 2016) and retirement from elite sport (Torregrossa et al., 2015; Jordana et al., 2017), the latter include aspects such as sport injuries (Palmi & Solé-Cases, 2014), in addition to sport migration (Prato et al., 2020). Lockdown due to COVID-19 and the postponement of the Olympic Games can be conceptualised as non-normative transitions; the former is an event while the latter is not (see Schlossberg, 1981). Stambulova (2003) points out that non-normative transitions are more likely to turn into crises (see also Stambulova et al., 2020a), due to the inherent difficulty of anticipating them.

Focusing on the experience of lockdown due to COVID-19, Odriozola-González et al. (2020) conducted a quantitative study to analyse the short-term psychological effects of the COVID-19 crisis and lockdown on the Spanish population. Specifically, the study sought to assess symptoms of anxiety, depression and stress, which

were measured through a questionnaire. The results showed that, out of a total of 3550 participants, 32.4% showed symptoms of anxiety, 44.1% of depression and 37.0% of stress. Pons et al. (2020) sought to describe and characterise the overall impact that lockdown had on young athletes. The results of this quantitative study showed that the assessment of lockdown was negative in terms of impact on both mental health and different spheres of life (e.g. dual career). Clemente-Suárez et al. (2020) conducted a study of 175 Olympians and Paralympians with the understanding that this population faced an additional barrier: the postponement of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games. The study aimed to analyse the effect of psychological profile, academic level and gender on the perception of personal and professional threat in the run-up to the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games. It demonstrated that both Olympians and Paralympians had a negative perception of lockdown in relation to their training routines, but not in their performance in the run-up to the Games. At the same time, quarantine did not have a significant impact on athletes' anxiety responses, which they attributed to the experience and coping strategies that athletes develop.

The Olympic Games constitute the pinnacle event for many sports and it is common for athletes and sports organisations alike to plan their activities around the Olympic cycle (Wylleman et al., 2012; Solanellas and Camps, 2017; Henriksen et al., 2020a). The disruption of the Olympic cycle resulted in the postponement of the Olympic Games for a year and complete suspension was threatened up until a few days before it was due to take place. This alteration occurred in the last phase of preparation for Olympic qualification, causing career disruption potentially resulting in a loss of motivation, identity and meaning (Henriksen et al., 2020b). Oblinger-Peters & Krenn (2020) conducted a qualitative study with the aim of exploring subjective perceptions of Austrian athletes and coaches surrounding the postponement of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games. It was discovered that postponement was experienced in various ways and that the immediate emotional responses ranged from confusion, disappointment and relief. The main consequences associated with postponement included: prolonged physical and psychological strain, concern about performance impact, loss of motivation, as well as opportunity for recovery and improvement.

In analysing the impact of the concurrent non-normative transitions of lockdown due to COVID-19 and the postponement of the Olympic Games, Stambulova et al., (2020b) differentiate between three possible scenarios depending on the stage of the athlete's sporting career. The



first scenario is rejection of the situation and it is considered typical of athletes who are towards the end of their careers and who have already participated in an Olympic Games and even won medals. They therefore do not want to face the uncertainty that comes with the disruption of the Olympic cycle and decide that it is an opportune time to retire. The second scenario is acceptance of the situation, representing early/mid-career athletes who are less affected by the disruption of the Olympic cycle, whether the intermediate postponement or even the complete suspension, because they still have the possibility of preparing for later cycles (e.g. the 2024 Olympic Games). This group of athletes would prefer to take a break and prepare strategically for the next Olympic Games as they do not consider that they have the resources to cope with the demands imposed by COVID-19 and the postponement of the Games. The final scenario constitutes one of struggle and represents athletes who are in the middle or towards the end of their careers, who have accumulated numerous resources and experiences, and decide to face COVID-19 with an active struggle to adapt and become stronger in this transition.

Taku & Arai (2020) point out that COVID-19 sets a precedent with regard to the certainty of holding sporting events, such as the Olympic Games. Investigating into the history of the Olympic Games, Constandt & Willem (2021) recall that in 1920 the Olympic Games took place in Antwerp. These Games took place in the aftermath of the First World War and the Spanish flu pandemic. Little is known about the experiences of the athletes, but like the current pandemic, the Games took place during a public health crisis. Symbolically, these Games represented the rebirth of the Olympic movement.

As has been observed, the studies that have been carried out to date have focused mainly on exploring COVID-19 lockdown and the postponement of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games in a quantitative manner. In contrast, few studies have used qualitative methodology to explore experiences related to the disruption of the Olympic cycle, resulting from lockdown and postponement. In order to provide insight into the experiences of aspiring male and female Olympians who underwent these concurrent non-normative transitions, this study presents an account through a retrospective exploration (of lockdown) and a prospective one (in relation to the eventual hosting of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games in 2021).

### Methodology

In this paper, qualitative research from a constructivist philosophical position was conducted. In other words, the research sought to understand the meanings that people attribute to lived experiences. To this end, two assumptions

were made: (a) there is no external reality independent of people, but reality is shaped in relation to experiences and (b) knowledge is jointly constructed through interactions between participant and researcher (see Poucher et al., 2020).

### Participants

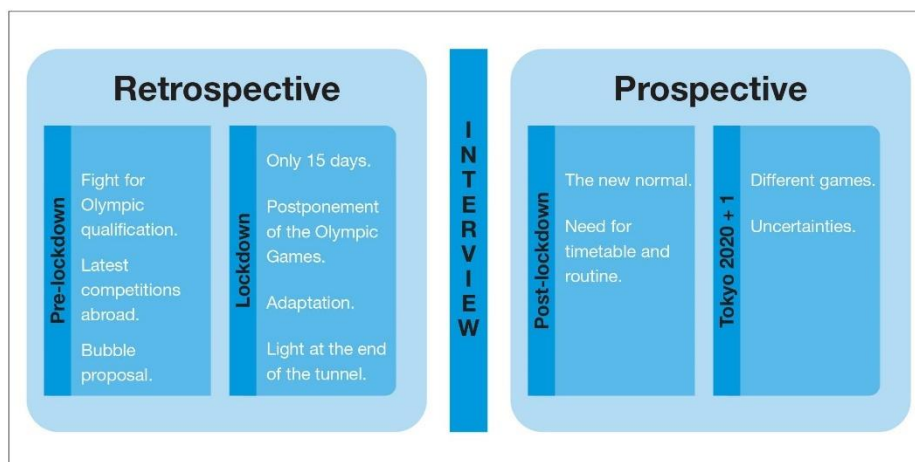
A convenience sampling was carried out and 25 DAN and DAR athletes linked to a High Performance Sports Centre participated on a voluntary basis: 14 women and 11 men ( $M = 26.2$   $SD = 6.9$ ). 88% participated in individual sports and 12% in team sports. 84% were pursuing a dual career, i.e. combining sport and studies or work (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2015). The selection criteria was to either have qualified or be in the process of qualifying for the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games (qualifiers: 4 and in the process of qualifying: 21).

### Instrument

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to enable a detailed account of the participants' experiences. The interviews were conducted by the authors RZS and SR and the authors MT and SA. An interview script (see supplementary material) was prepared for the exploration of the following thematic axes: (a) sporting career, (b) importance of the Olympic Games, (c) lockdown experience, (d) vision of the post-lockdown world and (e) deferred pathway to Tokyo 2020. During the interview, participants were invited to share their stories about lockdown and the postponement of the Olympic Games.

### Procedure

After obtaining approval from the University Ethics Committee (CEEAH 5180), participants were selected and convened. Once participation was agreed, the project information sheet and the informed consent form were sent out. All participants signed the informed consent form before participating in the study. Each participant took part in a semi-structured synchronous interview conducted via videoconference, lasting between 30 and 90 minutes. Interviews were conducted in May 2020, following eight weeks of lockdown, as permission for outdoor physical activity began to be authorised. The time slots allocated for sporting activities were longer for DAN athletes and they also had the right to travel outside the municipality. All interviews were audio and video recorded and then transcribed following Jefferson's methodology (Bassi-Follari, 2015). Due to the possibility of identifying the participants, pseudonyms were used to preserve confidentiality.



**Figure 1**  
Result of the reflective thematic analysis; themes and sub-themes.

### Data analysis

Based on reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019), an inductive analysis was carried out adhering to the following phases: (a) data familiarisation, (b) code generation, (c) initial theme creation, (d) theme and code revision, (e) final definition of themes and (f) report writing. To ensure scientific rigour, critical peer reviews were conducted in order to raise observations on the process of topic generation and representation (Smith & McGannon, 2018).

### Results and Discussion

Considering that the description and interpretation of meanings are closely related, the Results and Discussion sections are combined in an attempt to interweave the experiences of the athletes with the scientific literature. Figure 1 summarises the themes and sub-themes resulting from the inductive reflective thematic analysis. These are structured along a timeline, with the first two themes reflecting the retrospective view at the time of the interview (regarding lockdown) and the last two reflecting the prospective view (of postponement).

#### Retrospective analysis

The following is a retrospective account of athletes' experiences of pre-lockdown and lockdown phases.

#### Pre-lockdown

##### Competing for Olympic qualification

The first four months of 2020 saw major competitions for most athletes who were still competing to qualify for the Olympics. Depending on the sporting discipline, qualification depended on the result of participation in a pre-Olympic competitions (e.g. water sports) or on the sum of points obtained in multiple competitions and overall *ranking* (e.g. athletics). In both cases, and as noted by Henriksen et al. (2020a), the pre-lockdown stage was a phase of intense training in order to achieve peak fitness. Clara explains: "[...] I remember the last days of training, we did so much, so much, so much, that we would get there and we couldn't even study."

##### Final competitions abroad

Days before the establishment of the state of alarm in Spain, some athletes sought to compete in their final competitions abroad. The global situation regarding COVID-19 was becoming more complicated day by day, and travelling abroad implied a fear of not being able to return home and of being stigmatised on the basis of being a Spanish athlete (due to the fact that Spain was gradually becoming one of the countries most affected by the number of contagions). Brooks et al. (2020) highlighted stigmatisation as one of the main post-lockdown stressors; i.e. rejection, fear, and cessation of invitations to social events for fear of contagion.

The results of the present study showed that stigmatisation was a stressor present, even prior to lockdown.

"[...] Before lockdown started, we were travelling to (a country) that had a European Cup which was a qualifier, it was one of the most important competitions of the season. And when we arrived, we had to go home the next day without competing because [country] had declared that Spaniards were not allowed in [country]. To be honest, that was a bit of a difficult time, realising: 'Damn! Competitions are being postponed and I'm not sure when I will compete, where I will compete or how I will qualify'. It was quite a difficult few days."

### **Bubble proposal**

In the days leading up to the imposition of lockdown, there was a sense of tension in the high performance centre. Faced with the exponential growth of cases in Spain, management opted to anticipate the circumstances and offer an alternative plan so that athletes with the possibility of Olympic participation could continue training in a safe space. They gathered all the athletes and coaches together and offered them the possibility of lockdown in the centre in order to continue training. This lockdown meant that for the duration of the state of alarm (initially only 15 days) they could not leave the centre and, in turn, no one could enter. In response to this communication, two positions emerged: those who decided to lockdown in the centre and those who preferred to do so at home with their loved ones. Following the communication, those who had decided to lockdown in the centre returned home to pack their bags, and it was then that the situation changed. With the confirmation of a positive test result at the centre, the possibility of lockdown there became impossible, and the institution had to be closed. Laia comments: "If I had been staying there and had my room and my space, I don't know (.) I might have reacted differently. But I just said 'no'. And I felt really guilty, because in the end I was deciding not to train."

### **Lockdown**

Most athletes identified four phases within lockdown. Within them it can be observed how the two transitions have been interconnected. The first phase, coded as "Only 15 days", captures the initial belief regarding the duration of lockdown. Putting aside the bewilderment and uncertainty of a new and unforeseen situation, given that the Olympic objective was still viable, training sessions were made just as demanding as before this new reality. Motivation remained high. Jordi commented: "Well, this is only going

to last a week, two at the most, and then things will go back to normal. I even trained harder than (...) I train normally, I did some pretty *heavy* sessions on the treadmill."

The second phase coded as "Postponement of The Olympic Games" followed the announcement of the postponement of the Olympic Games. In the days leading up to the Olympics, the sporting calendar was plagued by cancellations and postponements, but the Olympic goal was still alive and well. This situation caused concern as athletes from other countries continued their training without restrictions while athletes from Spain feared that their performance would suffer due to the unequal conditions. Faced with the postponement, on the one hand, they were relieved that conditions would be equal again, and on the other hand, they were sad to see another objective discarded from the competitive calendar. The emotional responses are similar to those found by Oblinger-Peters & Krenn (2020): confusion, disappointment and relief. Joaquín, an athlete who had overcome an injury, commented:

"When they decided that they were not going to be held, my mentality changed. It took me two or three days to get to grips with the fact that it wasn't going to happen and I'd put in all that effort, especially to recover from an injury, eh, it's not in vain, right?"

In this phase the motivation to train decreases due to the lack of goals. Alina explains:

"After they decided they were cancelling them and moving them to the following year, that second week was a bit of a downer because in the end it was a bit like: 'Ugh, what am I training for now if we don't know when there are going to be competitions?'"

The third phase was coded as "Acceptance and Opportunity" and shows the process of adapting to concurrent transitions. In this phase most athletes, with the support of their coaches, managed to set short-term goals and changed their assessment of lockdown and postponement from one of threat into one of opportunity. They prioritised other aspects of their lives (e.g. studies, career development, family) and took advantage of training at home to partake in training activities that habitually, due to lack of time, they are not able to do. Ignasi commented:

"We saw it like this: you can gain strength, you can gain flexibility if you stretch every day, you have a lot of time to work on flexibility, which sometimes we don't have time for on a daily basis."



The present results show that the psychological resources of sport identity (i.e., frustration tolerance, adaptability), resources related to the environment (i.e., coaches, family and centre agents) and the development of extra-sport identities (i.e., studies, professional development) have operated as facilitating factors in coping with and managing these concurrent transitions. In turn, the results add the perception of lifestyle as a resource for adapting to the demands of lockdown. Ignasi commented:

"I think that in situations like this, which are a bit exceptional, sportsmen and women are able to cope well. Even better than other people because we are actually more exposed to situations that are extraordinary. In competitions anything can happen and you have to know how to deal with it. I think, and I'm speaking generally, that we athletes are people who [laughs] often face restrictions, basically."

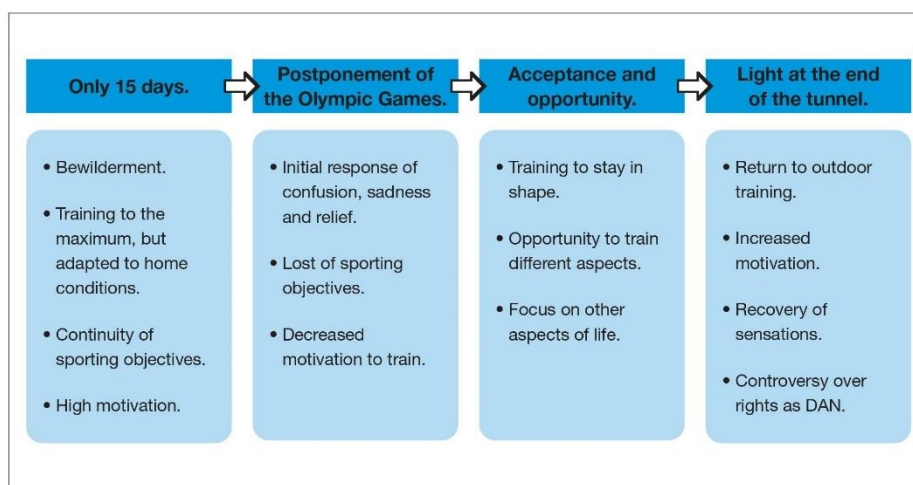
It is also at this stage that some athletes reported to have reflected on the role of sport, not only in their lives, but also in society. They also reflected on their identity. In this respect, the present results mirror those of Schinke et al. (2020) who argue that any unforeseen transition conceals the possibility of personal enrichment. Taking distance from the exacting demands of the sporting world

allowed for the development of personal identity and the exploration of interests outside sport. Joaquín shared:

"I mean, I can describe myself without saying I've been an Olympian, I've been to a World Cup, I've been [a sporting discipline]. You know? It has made me reflect on that. You are not just that! You are more than that!"

The last sub-theme was coded as "Light at the end of the tunnel" and coincides with the relaxation of lockdown, and the possibility of leaving home for outdoor training. The government decreed that DAN athletes were permitted longer training slots than the rest of the population. The possibility of training outdoors increased their motivation and enabled them to regain experiences that could not be replicated through training at home. Those who participated in water sports were particularly interested in regaining these experiences, as they had never before been away from their environment – the water – for such a long time. After returning to the sea Aina commented: "It's incredible, I mean, I don't know, I really wanted to go back and in fact, well, I trained and then it's true that I floated around for a while." Figure 2 summarises the phases described above with their sub-themes and codes.

Ruffault et al. (2020) found that athletes who continued training at home and maintained the dynamics of interaction with the technical team generated the ideal conditions for



**Figure 2**  
Lockdown phases: sub-themes and codes.

return to sport, reducing anxiety levels and remaining intrinsically motivated. The present results coincide, but the differences between sports need to be considered (i.e., aquatic and non-aquatic), on the basis that those who depend on aquatic environments for their sporting activities have never had to spend so many days away from the water. As a result, they highlighted the uncertainty of how long it would take for them to recover their fitness as a concern.

### Prospective analysis

Below are the codes, sub-themes and topics defined on the basis of expectations for the Post-Lockdown phase and concerns regarding the Olympic Games, scheduled to take place in 2021.

#### Post-lockdown:

In asking athletes to tell us what they envisaged the post-lockdown phase to be like, most participants highlighted: (a) concern about the global impact of COVID-19 (e.g. deaths, economic crisis, unemployment), (b) uncertainty about the sporting calendar. Joan commented:

"[...] we don't have the assurances we had last year (2019). Last year, well, you could plan from September until the Spanish Championships, for example. Because you knew that everything was going to be able to go ahead. But this year (.) we don't know."

(c) Concern about the duration of COVID-19 and (d) the expectation to return to training at the centre and adapt to the new health and safety regulations and protocols. In relation to the latter, Isona commented:

"It's going to be weird at first, isn't it? A lot of care, a lot of control, but I think the ability to adapt, especially for athletes, is very high. Once we've done it a few times we'll get used to the fact that this is what we have to do and that these are the measures we have to take and we'll do it."

#### Tokyo 2020 + 1

Most athletes agreed that the Tokyo 2020 + 1 Olympic Games will have an added value, given that in addition to the usual barriers they have to overcome within the Olympic cycle, this time they have also overcome the COVID-19 barrier. Projecting what the road to Tokyo 2020 + 1 might look like, Berta shared:

"The road there will be a bit of a *déjà vu* because, of course, I've already completed the season. You know? Now repeating it is like a second chance, because this time things are clearer to me."

As in the results of Clemente-Suárez et al. (2020), no negative perception of the impact of lockdown on

performance in the run-up to Tokyo 2020 was found in the present study.

Considering the three scenarios proposed by Stambulova et al. (2020b), the present results show that uncertainty and concern about the evolution of COVID-19 and the potential cancellation of the Olympic Games, were even stronger in those who see Tokyo 2020 as the final stages of their sporting careers, and even their last or only chance of Olympic participation. Robert said:

"If the Olympic Games had taken place in 2020, depending on how things turned out there, I would have considered certain areas of my future and my sporting career, but imagine if they were cancelled! I certainly don't know where I could find the energy... Yikes! The way I see it is that I've given it my all, I've come close once and all of a sudden that dream is gone."

The results of the present study are in line with Hakansson et al. (2021) who warn of the need to consider not only the acute impact of concurrent transitions, but also the cumulative and prolonged impact of the pandemic and the postponement of the Olympic Games on the psychological well-being of athletes.

### Conclusions

The results of this qualitative study offer further evidence for understanding the experiences of Olympic hopefuls in relation to the disruption of the Olympic cycle (i.e., lockdown and postponement of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games). The retrospective exploration of lockdown and prospective exploration of postponement have allowed an overview of the different events that make up these transitions. The announcement of the postponement of the Olympic Games was acknowledged as a milestone that changed the experience of lockdown, transforming the perception of lockdown from a threat into an opportunity. A number of resources that facilitated coping and adaptation to these transitions were also identified. These include psychological resources specific to sport identity (e.g. frustration tolerance, adaptability), environmental resources (e.g. coaches and other centre staff, rights as top athletes), lifestyle resources (e.g. habituation to training camps) and the development of extra-sporting identities (e.g. studies, professional development).

Exploring the prospective vision allowed possible focuses of intervention by sport psychology professionals to be detected, contemplating the impact of the prolongation of the pandemic. At the same time, it is understood that the disruption of the Olympic cycle can be seen as another opportunity to train athletes to deal with unexpected situations. By considering the stage of their sporting careers, athletes can be helped to make decisions about



fighting, fleeing or coping with the demands of these transitions.

This study makes the relevant contributions described above and is not without its limitations. Primarily, considering the pragmatic nature of the project and the interpretative nature of this particular study, the commitment to the confidentiality of the participating athletes necessarily resulted in the omission of some information that could be interesting for the people who read the article, this limits the transferability of this information to other similar sporting contexts, as well as the applied use that can be made by sport science professionals.

Finally, future research could focus on: (a) longitudinally exploring the disruption of the Olympic cycle, (b) exploring the experience of the surrounding actors (i.e. coaches, families) and (c) exploring the post-Olympic transition in this particular cycle.

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**Artículo 3 - Choose your own story: creative nonfiction about athletes attempting to qualify for the Olympics.**

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

Rocío Zamora-Solé, Saul Alcaraz, Susana Regüela, Carme Viladrich & Miquel Torregrossa

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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.

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### 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 realign 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!

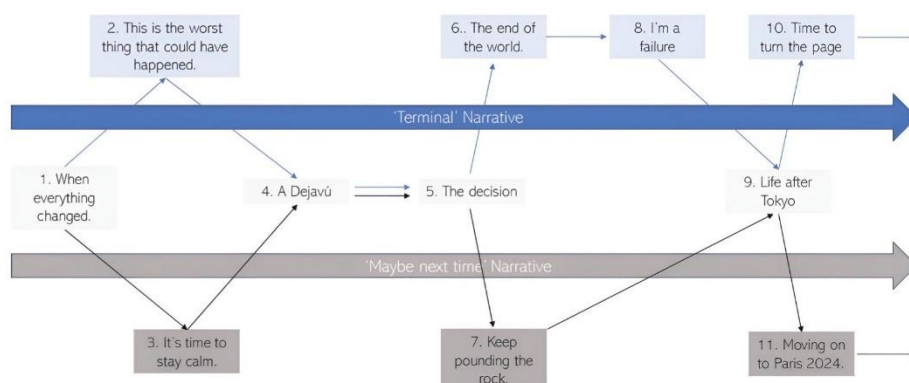


Figure 1. The produced strap joints and the manufacturing setup.



### 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 Devís-Devís 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.



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# DISCUSIÓN



## Discusión

En esta tesis doctoral, hemos presentado relatos del deporte en tiempos de incertidumbre, específicamente hemos mostrado un ejemplo de una intervención basada en la evidencia y coproducida para apoyar a una organización en el afrontamiento de las transiciones impredecibles provocadas por la pandemia de COVID-19 y la disrupción del ciclo Olímpico de Tokio 2020. Asimismo, hemos explorado las experiencias de deportistas olímpicos durante los momentos iniciales de la pandemia, la disrupción del ciclo Olímpico y la construcción de significado por parte de quienes no lograron clasificarse para los Juegos de Tokio. Estas exploraciones han permitido complementar el conocimiento científico sobre prácticas basadas en la evidencia, alinearnos con el llamado al giro participativo de realizar investigación con, para y por las personas usuarias, y aportar conocimiento sobre transiciones en la carrera deportiva que han sido poco representadas en la literatura: las transiciones impredecibles y los no-eventos.

Como se ha observado en los apartados anteriores, cada objetivo específico ha sido abordado mediante un artículo particular. En cada uno de ellos se han detallado los resultados, los principales lineamientos metodológicos, las conclusiones, las limitaciones y las futuras líneas de investigación. Para evitar la repetición de contenido y proporcionar un análisis integral, a continuación, se interpretan y discuten las principales aportaciones de la tesis en su conjunto, exponiendo las implicaciones prácticas generales, las limitaciones y las propuestas para futuras investigaciones.

En el artículo "De Barcelona a Tokio", presentamos el enfoque global que integra todos los productos de esta tesis, basado en la coproducción de una intervención siguiendo el modelo GEPE de práctica basada en la evidencia (Ramis et al., 2019). A partir de nuestra experiencia, mostramos un ejemplo posible para acompañar a una organización en la gestión de una transición impredecible. Tal como sugiere Wagstaff (2018) en su

análisis sobre el avance en el estudio de la psicología deportiva organizacional, esta intervención presenta un cambio de enfoque y en lugar de centrarse exclusivamente en un acompañamiento individual, plantea un acompañamiento longitudinal que involucra a los diversos colectivos que conforman una entidad deportiva pública de alto rendimiento, como deportistas, entrenadoras, personal médico, entre otros.

Aunque el artículo se centra en ofrecer un ejemplo de intervención organizacional, es fundamental subrayar que esta intervención resultó de una estrecha colaboración entre las personas usuarias, o aquellas con experiencia vivida, y el equipo de investigación. A pesar de que el proceso reflejó una coproducción (Smith et al., 2021), en el artículo se menciona este aspecto de manera limitada por dos razones: (a) la revista en la que se publicó solicitaba una adaptación del lenguaje académico para hacerlo accesible al público general, y (b) la duda personal de si el proceso compartido podía considerarse una "verdadera" coproducción, lo cual conecta con el debate iniciado en la Introducción.

Dado que la coproducción y su aplicación en el ámbito del deporte y la actividad física es un tema de creciente interés y relevancia (Monforte et al., 2024), resulta pertinente reflexionar sobre los factores que facilitan o dificultan la adopción de esta orientación. Los avances de Smith et al. (2021) proporcionan una guía valiosa sobre lo que puede considerarse coproducción, sus diferentes tipologías y principios orientadores para fomentar la colaboración entre usuarias e investigadoras. Sin embargo, existe el riesgo de interpretar estos principios como una suerte de lista de comprobación, lo que podría conducir a una búsqueda purista de una "verdadera coproducción". Esto, en lugar de fomentar la colaboración, podría limitar el desarrollo de esta orientación.

Como investigadora cualitativa en las primeras etapas de mi carrera, debo admitir que durante un tiempo utilicé los principios de Smith et al. (2021) como una herramienta de seguridad para "verificar" (nótese el uso del lenguaje positivista) si había logrado una



coproducción genuina. Fue solo después de un período de reflexión, discusión y reevaluación que comprendí que mi enfoque estaba desviado.

Lo anterior sugiere que la coproducción, como proceso colaborativo, no solo presenta desafíos y barreras, sino que también requiere, a nivel personal, de tiempo y una profunda reflexión para evitar caer en una rigidez que contradiga la esencia de la investigación cualitativa. En este contexto, es crucial reconocer la importancia de la investigación pausada (Kuus, 2015; Staniszewska et al., 2018). La investigación cualitativa, y en particular la investigación participativa, demanda tiempo. Para evitar la "McDonalización" de la investigación (Brinkmann, 2015) y, como proponen Mateu et al. (2024) al aplicar la teoría de la aceleración social al estudio de la carrera dual, no caer en la idea de que la presión y la falta de tiempo son parte inherentes de determinadas realidades (e.g., entender que trabajar bajo presión para cumplir plazos es una parte inevitable de la producción académica); es importante crear espacios para reflexionar, debatir, desafiar y proponer nuevas narrativas que complementen esta perspectiva.

En segundo lugar, en los artículos “Experiencias de disrupción” y “Elige tu propia historia” presentamos evidencia sobre dos temas clave: la pandemia de COVID-19 y la interrupción del ciclo Olímpico de Tokio 2020 por un lado, y las experiencias de no-clasificación de deportistas, por el otro. Nuestro principal aporte ha sido conceptualizar estos eventos y no-eventos a partir de la teoría de las transiciones en la carrera deportiva (Torregrossa, 2022). No obstante, aunque los modelos teóricos actuales (e.g., Stambulova, 2003; Torregrossa, 2022) ofrecen una taxonomía clara para ubicar la pandemia y la disrupción de Tokio 2020 como transiciones, no ocurre lo mismo con la conceptualización de la no-clasificación. En las primeras versiones del modelo de Stambulova (2003), los no-eventos, como la no-clasificación, se incluían dentro de las

transiciones no normativas; sin embargo, en el desarrollo posterior del modelo, su inclusión ha sido omitida.

Al considerar modelos de transición fuera del ámbito deportivo, como el de Schlossberg (1981), los no-eventos se reconocen como una categoría diferenciada, ya que implican procesos distintos a los de los eventos impredecibles. Nuestra investigación, que exploró tanto los eventos impredecibles como los no-eventos, refuerza la necesidad de distinguir estas transiciones. Dado que los no-eventos, como la no clasificación, pueden generar diversas narrativas, creemos que es necesario replantear los modelos teóricos actuales y considerar la inclusión de una categoría específica. Por un lado, es fundamental reflejar las particularidades de la no ocurrencia de un evento esperado (e.g., la frustración inicial y el duelo por lo que no sucedió); por el otro, es crucial reconocer y visibilizar que los no-eventos también forman parte de la mayoría de las carreras deportivas (e.g., no ser seleccionado para ir a cierta competición, no fichar por el club deseado o no subir de categoría en el momento esperado)

En el artículo “Elige tu propia historia” ampliamos el conocimiento sobre las experiencias de las deportistas durante el proceso de clasificación olímpica, enfocándonos en cómo integran la no consecución de la clasificación en su historia vital. Los Juegos Olímpicos de Tokio estuvieron además marcados por la pandemia de COVID-19, lo que añadió factores como la incertidumbre respecto a la realización o no de determinados eventos deportivos, la convivencia con estrictos protocolos de seguridad y el distanciamiento social. Reconociendo que, independientemente de lograr o no la clasificación, atravesar este proceso lleno de incertidumbre representó para muchas deportistas un “éxito” en sí mismo, reabrimos el debate sobre cómo se define el éxito y el fracaso en el deporte (e.g., Jordana et al., 2021).

Investigaciones previas (e.g., Mitchell et al., 2021) y los medios de comunicación han tendido a presentar la no-clasificación como un fracaso. Un ejemplo es el titular del diario Página 12 de Argentina sobre la no clasificación de la selección nacional de básquet al Mundial que otorgaría una plaza para los JJ.OO. de Paris 2024: *“Selección de básquet: razones de un fracaso estrepitoso”* (Greco, 2023). Sin embargo, nuestra investigación muestra que no hay una única manera de interpretar la no-clasificación. Otras investigaciones, como por ejemplo Gotwals y Tamminen (2021), conceptualizan las experiencias de no consecución de objetivos como momentos de impulso estancado. Creemos que comprender los procesos de búsqueda de clasificación desde una perspectiva holística, permite relativizar y contextualizar aquellos momentos de no consecución de objetivos, considerando los aprendizajes adquiridos en las diferentes áreas de desarrollo vital (e.g., los procesos de aprendizajes adquiridos durante el COVID-19). Como destacan estudios previos (e.g., Frank, 2013; Tamminen et al., 2022), las narrativas desempeñan un papel clave en la construcción de la identidad, la comprensión del mundo y la creación de relatos personales. Por ello, consideramos fundamental cuestionar y ampliar la narrativa dominante que asocia la no-clasificación con el fracaso. Buscamos ofrecer recursos narrativos alternativos (Monforte et al., 2017) que permitan conceptualizar la no-clasificación como una posibilidad dentro de la carrera deportiva, en lugar de un fracaso absoluto. Aunque es cierto que los no-eventos generan frustración, angustia y enojo, creemos que experimentar estas emociones no significa que el proceso sea un fracaso.

Dado que la no-clasificación es una experiencia común para muchas deportistas, es preciso promover relatos más adaptativos con el fin de facilitar la integración de esta experiencia sin comprometer la salud mental de las deportistas. A nivel personal es importante continuar trabajando en la gestión emocional, pero a nivel social y cultural es

preciso reflexionar sobre el impacto que poseen determinadas narrativas sobre las vidas de las personas.

### **Implicaciones prácticas:**

Los resultados de esta tesis podrían servir a los diferentes colectivos involucrados en la carrera deportiva (e.g., deportistas, entrenadoras, entidades deportivas, familias, psicólogas, investigadoras) para desarrollar estrategias que promuevan el bienestar ante transiciones impredecibles y transiciones de tipo no-evento. A continuación, se presentarán las que considero son las principales contribuciones de la tesis desde una mirada integral y diferenciando en dos colectivos: las organizaciones deportivas y sus integrantes (e.g., deportistas, entrenadoras, equipo directivo, staff médico) y las profesionales de la psicología del deporte.

Focalizando la atención en las organizaciones deportivas y sus integrantes, esta tesis refleja la importancia y los beneficios de incorporar las voces, intereses y necesidades de las diferentes integrantes de una organización. Promover la participación no solo contribuye a ajustar los servicios a las personas usuarias, sino que también fortalece el sentido de pertenencia. Por tanto, creemos que es beneficioso adoptar una predisposición a trabajar no solo para y por las diferentes integrantes de un colectivo, sino que fundamentalmente *con* ellas.

Por otro lado, dado que las transiciones son procesos que ocurren a lo largo del tiempo (Schlossberg, 1981), es recomendable llevar a cabo intervenciones en distintos momentos para ayudar en el afrontamiento de cualquier tipo de transición, especialmente aquellas impredecibles por su alto grado de incertidumbre. Evaluar estos procesos en diferentes fases permite explorar cómo evoluciona la adaptación y detectar necesidades individuales o colectivas de herramientas que favorezcan una mejor gestión de la

situación. En este contexto, nuestros resultados sugieren que brindar apoyo tanto a las cuidadoras como a las personas con altos niveles de responsabilidad (e.g., equipos directivos en una organización) es crucial durante las transiciones impredecibles.

Otra implicación práctica de esta tesis es la importancia de reflexionar sobre el tiempo, en especial los momentos de pausa. La pandemia de COVID-19 obligó a la sociedad y al mundo del deporte a interrumpir sus rutinas de entrenamiento habituales. Nuestros resultados indican que, al transformar la percepción de la pausa, de verla como una amenaza a entenderla como una oportunidad, se abre un abanico de posibilidades para el fortalecimiento que se refleja en el rendimiento. Dado que existen transiciones impredecibles, como las lesiones, que forman parte del día a día, creemos que es esencial promover una mentalidad que desafíe la falacia de control —una distorsión cognitiva que nos limita— y enfocarse en lo que se puede hacer (e.g., aprovechar la pausa para ejercicios de fuerza o flexibilidad, o utilizar el tiempo disponible para reforzar identidades alternativas). También, ya sea desde una vertiente individual o colectiva, creemos que la pausa brinda un momento oportuno para tomar consciencia y repensar en dónde nos situamos respecto al imperativo capitalista de la aceleración que exige una continua productividad (ver Mateu et al., 2024).

Focalizando ahora nuestra atención sobre las profesionales de la psicología del deporte, como sugieren Smith et al. (2021), queremos destacar la importancia de que las investigadoras cualitativas sean vistas como colaboradoras clave en proyectos de coproducción, ya que poseen valiosos recursos para comprender y valorar las experiencias de vida de las personas. Basándonos en nuestra experiencia, invitamos a las investigadoras a considerar la investigación participativa, en la orientación que mejor se ajuste al proyecto, como una vía para superar las barreras de poder e inequidad presentes en el ámbito académico.

En segundo lugar, reforzando lo expuesto en “De Barcelona a Tokio” y en línea con Wagstaff (2017), abogamos por la inclusión y formación de psicólogas del deporte a nivel organizacional. Como profesionales, podemos contribuir en la identificación de necesidades, el desarrollo de protocolos institucionales, y la provisión de herramientas para una mejor gestión emocional, un mejor afrontamiento del estrés y del cambio. Además, desde nuestro rol podemos promover acciones que contribuyan a una mayor alfabetización en salud mental y desde allí promover el cuidado de la salud mental como una responsabilidad compartida (Henriksen et al., 2019).

En tercer lugar, al igual que los trabajos de Borrueco et al. (2020) y Jordana (2022), esta tesis doctoral refuerza la utilidad del Modelo GEPE de Práctica Basada en la Evidencia (Ramis et al., 2019) como una guía para integrar la investigación con la práctica aplicada. El artículo “De Barcelona a Tokio” también destaca la flexibilidad de este modelo, que permite su combinación con enfoques participativos, como la coproducción. Esto resalta la inclusión de figuras clave, como personas con experiencia directa o usuarias, y señala momentos cruciales en la investigación, como el diseño de la recolección de datos y el análisis posterior.

Finalmente, tomando como ejemplo el artículo “Elige tu propia historia”, creemos que uno de los principales aportes prácticos de esta tesis doctoral es la de considerar no solo la inclusión de las personas usuarias en la ejecución de la investigación, sino también a la hora de la difusión de los resultados. En ese sentido, la utilización de la no ficción creativa (CNF, por sus siglas en inglés) a través del formato “Elige tu propia historia” podría ser una herramienta valiosa para compartir y divulgar las diversas narrativas del mundo del deporte. Este enfoque lúdico y evocador busca no solo llegar al público académico, sino también, y de manera fundamental, a las personas con experiencias vividas: las deportistas y sus entornos.

Disponer de materiales como nuestra CNF puede facilitar la creación de espacios para conversaciones significativas, donde se exploren distintas narrativas y recursos disponibles. A través de estas historias, las deportistas pueden descubrir diversas formas de afrontar las situaciones que enfrentan, sentirse identificadas, acceder al conocimiento experiencial de compañeras que han pasado por circunstancias similares, rechazar ciertas narrativas, profundizar en su autoconocimiento y buscar caminos más adaptativos para mejorar su bienestar.

Por último, esta tesis doctoral permite destacar y valorar la relevancia de revistas como la *Journal of Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise, and Health* (QRSEH), que promueven formas creativas y rigurosas de comunicar resultados de investigación. Asimismo, es necesario señalar la importancia de revistas aplicadas como la *Journal of Sport Psychology in Action* (JSPA), que permiten divulgar diferentes maneras de implementar en el campo aplicado aquellos conocimientos construidos desde el ámbito académico y revistas que promueven la divulgación en diversos idiomas, como por ejemplo *Revista APUNTS de Educación Física y Deportes* (APUNTS).

### **Limitaciones y propuestas de futuras líneas de investigación:**

En esta tesis doctoral hemos avanzado en el estudio de las transiciones impredecibles y los no-eventos, y hemos presentado un ejemplo de intervención y coproducción en una organización de alto rendimiento que afrontaba momentos de incertidumbre. No obstante, reconocemos que, como en todo proyecto, nuestro proceso tuvo limitaciones. Una de las principales fue la de no pactar qué integrantes del grupo de coproducción deberían ser incluidas como coautoras en los artículos publicados.

Esta limitación se debe a varios factores. Por un lado, a la falta de experiencia en investigación participativa y al tiempo necesario para aprender y adaptarse. Al inicio del

proyecto, mi conocimiento sobre investigación participativa era limitado, y no había considerado la importancia de reflejar en los productos académicos el trabajo conjunto. Por otro lado, percibí una incompatibilidad entre los tiempos académicos y los no académicos, en este caso, los del ciclo olímpico. Parte del trabajo de esta tesis coincidió con el ciclo de Tokio 2020, y dado el estrés y las demandas que enfrentaban las deportistas, entrenadoras y demás miembros del CAR por la preparación para los Juegos, y más aún por la incertidumbre generada por la pandemia, consideré que no era adecuado añadirles la presión extra que implica la participación en un proceso de publicación académica. Por este motivo, solo integramos a una persona usuaria (que a su vez posee experiencia dentro del ámbito académico), Susana Regüela, en la difusión académica.

Reflexionando sobre otra limitación personal, no solo los tiempos fueron un obstáculo, sino también los acuerdos establecidos dentro del grupo de coproducción. Si tuviera la oportunidad de realizar nuevamente un proyecto participativo similar, consideraría desde el inicio del proyecto la necesidad de mejorar la distribución de tareas y decidir si es relevante para todas las involucradas aparecer como coautoras en los artículos científicos.

Considerando las futuras líneas de investigación, para avanzar en la investigación sobre los temas tratados en esta tesis, proponemos dos líneas principales de estudio. Primero, es crucial profundizar en las experiencias, narrativas y relatos de la no-clasificación en particular y de los no-eventos en general, utilizando el modelo transicional. Creemos que ello permitiría identificar las características específicas de los no-eventos y replantear los modelos transicionales existentes para desarrollar una taxonomía adecuada. Sería útil investigar los procesos de no-clasificación retrospectivamente y en contextos no relacionados con la pandemia, ya que la



incertidumbre relacionada con la pandemia y su evolución y el estrés podrían haber influido en la forma en que se construyó el sentido.

Finalmente, sería oportuno ampliar el conocimiento no solo sobre cómo los deportistas experimentan las transiciones impredecibles, sino también sobre el impacto que éstas tienen en sus entornos familiares, especialmente en sus parejas. Sería relevante estudiar el papel de estos entornos en las transiciones, así como cómo las parejas se ven afectadas por las transiciones impredecibles que enfrentan los deportistas, considerando que éstas son procesos compartidos.



# CONCLUSIONES

## Conclusiones

En esta tesis doctoral, ampliamos el repertorio de relatos del deporte en tiempos de incertidumbre, abordando tanto desde una perspectiva teórica como práctica diversas transiciones impredecibles (como la pandemia de COVID-19 y la disrupción del ciclo de Tokio 2020) y transiciones de no-evento (como la no-clasificación a unos Juegos Olímpicos). En este contexto, complementamos las narrativas existentes, destacando que la disrupción puede ser concebida como una oportunidad y que no alcanzar un objetivo no siempre se interpreta como un fracaso. Los trabajos presentados incluyen un ejemplo de intervención organizacional coproducida, diseñada para acompañar a un centro de alto rendimiento durante la gestión de estas transiciones. Asimismo, los trabajos empíricos aportan conocimiento sobre las experiencias de las deportistas que afrontan tanto transiciones impredecibles como de no-evento, desde una perspectiva transicional y narrativa. Las conclusiones específicas de esta tesis son las siguientes:

1. El enfoque participativo y la teoría narrativa brindan un marco teórico-práctico valioso para acompañar a organizaciones y personas que atraviesan momentos de incertidumbre. El enfoque participativo permite realizar un ajuste a las necesidades, intereses y conocimientos de las personas usuarias, promoviendo de ese modo que las intervenciones sean potencialmente más beneficiosas. La teoría narrativa, por su parte, nos ayuda a comprender la importancia de los relatos en la construcción del sentido, la identidad, la concepción del mundo, las relaciones y nosotras mismas.
2. La coproducción, como enfoque participativo, presenta numerosos beneficios. Entre ellos, se destacan el aumento del sentido de pertenencia a la institución, la mejora de la comunicación y la cohesión entre sus miembros, la reducción de tensiones relacionadas con las relaciones de poder y la oportunidad de expresar

necesidades y deseos, lo que favorece el empoderamiento personal y grupal. Sin embargo, no está exenta de desafíos. Coproducir requiere, entre otros, de tiempo, reflexión continua y financiación.

3. Adoptar una perspectiva de toda la carrera, toda la persona y todo el entorno, comprendiendo las transiciones como procesos en lugar de un evento único, posibilita un acompañamiento integral y longitudinal que se torna especialmente relevante en tiempos de incertidumbre. Desde una vertiente aplicada, ante situaciones disruptivas (e.g., disrupción del ciclo de Tokio, lesiones de larga duración) se podrían capitalizar los momentos de pausa para potenciar otras áreas de desarrollo vital, fortalecer diversas identidades, entre otros.
4. Reconocemos la diferencia entre transiciones impredecibles (como la pandemia) y no-eventos (como la no-clasificación), lo que nos lleva a proponer una reevaluación de los modelos teóricos existentes. Sugerimos incluir a los no-eventos como una categoría diferenciada debido a los procesos particulares que desencadenan (e.g., procesos emocionales, toma de decisiones).
5. La exploración retrospectiva del confinamiento y la disrupción del ciclo Olímpico de Tokio 2020 permitió identificar diversas maneras en que las protagonistas integraron el aplazamiento de los Juegos en sus historias de vida. Para algunas, este aplazamiento marcó un hito que transformó su percepción de la transición impredecible: lo que inicialmente veían como una amenaza, lo reinterpretaron como una oportunidad. Para otras, fue un estímulo que movilizó la toma de decisión de abandonar la carrera deportiva y priorizar otros aspectos del desarrollo vital.

6. La exploración de las experiencias de deportistas en momentos iniciales de la pandemia del COVID-19 y la disrupción del ciclo olímpico nos permitió identificar que cuentan con diferentes recursos para afrontar adaptativamente los desafíos de las transiciones impredecibles. Entre ellos, diversos recursos psicológicos (e.g., tolerancia a la frustración, capacidad de adaptación), recursos del entorno (e.g., entrenadores, derechos de deportistas), recursos del estilo de vida (e.g., habituación a concentraciones) y el desarrollo de identidades extradeportivas (e.g., estudios, desarrollo profesional). Es necesario, por tanto, apoyar el fortalecimiento de estos aspectos protectores de su salud mental.
7. Existen variedad de experiencias posibles a partir de la no-clasificación. Por eso, es importante complementar las narrativas existentes en la literatura científica e incluir relatos holísticos en donde la no consecución del objetivo pueda ser visto como algo diferente a un fracaso para ampliar el repertorio y propiciar la identificación de recursos que permitan la construcción de narrativas adaptativas. En esta tesis doctoral proponemos dos posibles narrativas para deportistas que no logran clasificar a un Juego Olímpico: una "terminal" y otra de "tal vez la próxima vez". Los resultados no solo muestran narrativas alternativas, sino que también muestran cómo estas historias fluctúan entre caminos adaptativos y no adaptativos.
8. Creemos que es fundamental que los diferentes agentes involucrados en el mundo del deporte sigamos reflexionando sobre lo que entendemos por "éxito" y "fracaso". La no consecución de objetivos competitivos es una parte natural del proceso deportivo, que también puede conllevar aprendizajes y crecimiento personal, fundamentalmente si adoptamos una visión holística.

9. Es importante promover relatos más adaptativos sobre la no-clasificación, ya que las narrativas dominantes pueden afectar negativamente la salud mental de las deportistas. En este sentido, abogamos por un cambio cultural y social que reduzca el estigma asociado a la no-clasificación, permitiendo que las deportistas integren estas experiencias de manera más saludable.
10. El formato "Elige tu propia historia" permite presentar resultados científicos de una forma novedosa, interactiva y educativa que involucra a las lectoras, fomentando la reflexión más allá de nuestros propios aprendizajes. Incluir este tipo de herramientas puede facilitar conversaciones sobre distintas maneras de integrar eventos y no-eventos en la historia personal, además de ser un valioso recurso para la alfabetización en salud mental.

## Conclusions

In this doctoral thesis, we expand the repertoire of narratives in sport during times of uncertainty, addressing both from a theoretical and practical perspective various unpredictable transitions (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic and the disruption of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic cycle) and non-event transitions (e.g., non-qualification for the Olympic Games). In this context, we complement existing narratives in the literature, highlighting that disruption can be seen as an opportunity and that not achieving a goal is not always interpreted as failure. The studies presented include an example of co-produced organizational intervention, designed to support a high-performance center during the management of these transitions. Additionally, the empirical work provides insights into the experiences of athletes facing both unpredictable and non-event transitions from a transitional and narrative perspective. The specific conclusions of this thesis are as follows:

1. The participatory approach and narrative theory provide a valuable theoretical and practical framework for supporting organizations and individuals going through moments of uncertainty. The participatory approach allows for adjustments to the needs, interests, and knowledge of the users, thus promoting potentially more beneficial interventions. Narrative theory, in turn, helps us understand the importance of stories in constructing meaning, identity, worldviews, relationships, and self-perception.
2. Co-production, as a participatory approach, offers numerous benefits. Among them are an increased sense of belonging to the institution, improved communication and cohesion among its members, reduced tensions related to power dynamics, and the opportunity to express needs and desires, fostering both



individual and group empowerment. However, it is not without challenges, as co-production requires time, continuous reflection, and funding.

3. Adopting a whole-career, whole-person, and whole-environment perspective, viewing transitions as processes rather than single events, enables comprehensive and longitudinal support, which becomes particularly relevant during times of uncertainty. From an applied perspective, in disruptive situations (e.g., disruption of the Tokyo Olympic cycle, long-term injuries), the moments of pause could be leveraged to strengthen other areas of personal development and reinforce diverse identities.
4. We acknowledge the distinction between unpredictable transitions (such as the pandemic) and non-events (such as non-qualification), which leads us to propose a reevaluation of existing theoretical models. We suggest including non-events as a distinct category due to the specific processes they trigger (e.g., emotional processes, decision-making).
5. The retrospective exploration of the lockdown and the disruption of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic cycle allowed us to identify various ways in which athletes integrated the postponement of the Games into their life stories. For some, this postponement marked a turning point, transforming their perception of the unpredictable transition: what initially seemed like a threat was reinterpreted as an opportunity. For others, it prompted the decision to retire from their sports career and prioritize other areas of personal development.
6. The exploration of athletes' experiences during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic and the disruption of the Olympic cycle revealed that they possess different resources for adaptively coping with the challenges of unpredictable

transitions. These include psychological resources (e.g., frustration tolerance, adaptability), environmental resources (e.g., coaches, athletes' rights), lifestyle resources (e.g., habituation to training camps), and the development of non-sport identities (e.g., education, professional development). Therefore, it is essential to support the strengthening of these protective factors for their mental health.

7. There are a variety of possible experiences related to non-qualification. Thus, it is important to complement existing scientific literature and include holistic narratives where not achieving the goal can be seen as something other than failure, broadening the range of possibilities and identifying resources that foster adaptive narratives. In this doctoral thesis, we propose two possible narratives for athletes who do not qualify for the Olympic Games: a "terminal" narrative and a "maybe next time" narrative. The results show not only alternative narratives but also how these stories fluctuate between adaptive and non-adaptive paths.
8. We believe it is essential for the various stakeholders in the sports world to continue reflecting on how we understand "success" and "failure." Not achieving goals is a natural part of the sporting process, which can also lead to learning and personal growth, especially if we adopt a holistic perspective.
9. It is important to promote more adaptive narratives around non-qualification, as dominant narratives can negatively impact athletes' mental health. In this sense, we advocate for a cultural and social shift to reduce the stigma associated with non-qualification, allowing athletes to integrate these experiences more healthily.
10. The "Choose Your Own Story" format allows for the presentation of scientific results in a novel, interactive, and educational way that engages readers, fostering reflection beyond our own learnings. Including such tools can facilitate

conversations about different ways to integrate events and non-events into personal narratives, in addition to being a valuable resource for mental health literacy.



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# ANEXOS

## Anexos

**Presentación Oral - ‘Recalculating route’: Narratives of elite athletes on the road to Tokyo 2020 and its impact on mental health**

Zamora-Solé, R., Alcaraz, S., Viladrich, C., Ramis, Y., y Torregrossa, M. (2022, agosto 31-2). “*Recalculating route: Narratives of elite athletes on the road to Tokyo 2020 and its impact on mental health*” [Presentación Oral]. European College of Sport Science (ECSS). Sevilla, España.

## **‘Recalculating route’: Narratives of elite athletes on the road to Tokyo 2020 and its impact on mental health**

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**Introduction:** The disruption of the Olympic cycle of Tokyo 2020 caused by the COVID-19 lockdown and the postponement of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games forced Olympic hopefuls to go through a series of uncertain and challenging phases. These, event and non-event, can be understood as two concurrent non-normative transitions that could have the potential to put mental health of elite athletes on risk. The aim of the present study is to explore the narratives of elite athletes during the different phases of the disruption of Tokyo 2020, understand how those evolve during time, and their impact on mental health.

**Methods:** Eight elite athletes from a high-performance center in preparation for Tokyo 2020 (6 female and 2 male) took part in this longitudinal qualitative study. The data collection was done by a series of semi-structured online synchronous interviews that took place in three specific moments: during lockdown, in the beginning of the ‘new normality’ and in the pre-Olympic phase. The philosophical position of Interpretivism was used as a companion and extension of the thematic narrative analysis used for data analysis.

**Results:** Elite athletes define Tokyo 2020s preparation phase as a bumpy road that presented unclear conditions towards the final destination. During their road to Tokyo 2020, three specific time related narratives were identified: (a) lockdown: moving from threat to opportunity; (b) ‘new normality’: embracing uncertainty and (c) pre-Olympic phase: pulling the handbrake. Two more narratives, (d) giving up the control fallacies and (e) the adaptability as a distinction of being an athlete, were present during the whole

preparation process and overlapped with the situational narratives. The overall preparation process showed that the influence of the environment (i.e., coaches, families) and psychological aspects such as resilience are a key protective factor when ensuring elite athletes' mental health.

**Conclusions:** The road to Tokyo 2020 has allowed us to identify that athletes possess a series of resources to recalculate their route in case of unexpected events and adapt to uncertain circumstances. In this sense, psychological protective factors, such as resilience and adaptability, should be included in career assistance programs as well as psychoeducation for the entourage. Future investigations should explore the experiences of the agents of the environment (i.e., coaches, families) in supporting athletes on non-normative transitions and to explore the post-Olympic transition in this disrupted Olympic cycle.

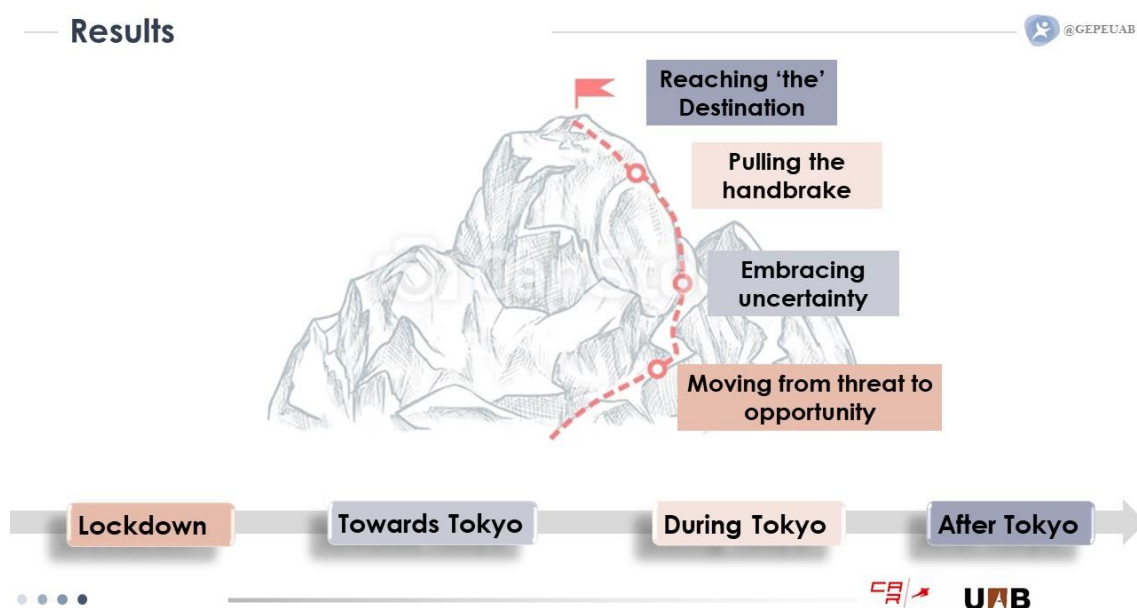
### Portada y síntesis de resultados de la presentación oral:

# 'Recalculating route': Narratives of elite athletes in the road to Tokyo 2020 and its impact on mental health

02/09/2022

Rocío Zamora-Solé, Saül Alcaraz, Carme Viladrich, Yago Ramis & Miquel Torregrossa

## Results



**Póster 1 - ‘Failing’ to qualify for the Olympics: A Creative Nonfiction.**

Zamora-Solé, R., Alcaraz, S., Regüela, S., Viladrich, C., y Torregrossa, M. (2022, Julio 26-28). “*Failing to qualify for the Olympics: A Creative Nonfiction*” [Presentación de póster]. International Society of Qualitative Research in Sport and Exercise (QRSE), Durham, UK.





# 'Failing' to qualify for the Olympics: A Creative Nonfiction

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## Introduction:

During the road to Tokyo 2020 athletes had added barriers to overcome: the COVID-19 pandemic and the disruption of the Olympic cycle (Zamora-Solé et al., 2022). One of the current gaps in research is to explore the experiences of athletes that did not reach the qualification to Tokyo 2020's Games.

## Objective:

To explore the transitional experiences of elite athletes dealing with the non-classification to the Olympic Games of Tokyo 2020.

## Method:

This work is positioned within an interpretivist paradigm. Four elite athletes (two female; *Mean age* = 27.25) participated in two semi-structured interviews conducted pre and post Tokyo 2020 to gain an in-depth understanding of their experiences over time. Data was analyzed using narrative thematic analysis (Riessman, 2008).

## Results and Discussion:

All four narratives were related to different processes of "awakening" (i.e., increasing awareness) depending on athletes' stages of athletic careers, injuries, and interests outside of sport. Conversely with Mitchell et al (2022) although athletes did not reach the Tokyo Games, they do not conceptualize their processes as a failure.

## Conclusions:

The present study contributes to gain comprehension on a topic that has received little attention in the literature (i.e., non-events such as not qualifying or deselection) and provides useful resources for athletes and their entourage to integrate the lessons learned through the Olympic cycle, focusing on the process rather than on the result.

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**Athletes experienced the non-classification as a process of 'awakening'**

Want to see these stories come to life? Check the QR Code!

Monica's Story: Sport can be unfair

Luna's Story: Bounce-back

Scott's Story: Lowering the curtain and moving on

Simon's Story: Trusting the process

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Enlace a video: [https://youtu.be/L\\_K1Gxr1NBk](https://youtu.be/L_K1Gxr1NBk)

**Póster 2 - ‘We are a team’: Partners’ experiences of elite athletes’ unexpected transitions.**

Zamora-Solé, R., Alcaraz, S., Viladrich, C., y Torregrossa, M. (2024, Julio 29-Agosto

1). “*We are a team: Partners’ experiences of elite athletes’ unexpected transitions*”

[Presentación de póster]. International Society of Qualitative Research in Sport and

Exercise (QRSE), Bath, UK.



## 'We are a team': Partners' experiences of elite athletes' unexpected transitions

Zamora-Solé, R.\*, Alcaraz, S.\*\*, Viladrich, C.\*, and Torregrossa, M.\*

\*Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, \*\*Institut Nacional d'Educació Física de Catalunya-Lleida

# Learning how to become a supporter and knowing when to ask for support: partners' dual challenge

### Stories about being at 'front stage'

*"When she competed, everything depended on her, and when I competed, everything depended on me."*

### Stories about becoming a supporter

*"Sports takes time away from us, but we know we're a team, even from a distance. We're just a call away"*

Olivia & Milo (26 years old, heterosexual relationship)  
2 Olympic cycles together

Both performing in aquatic sports and developing a dual career

#### Research Gap:

Athletes' experiences when facing unexpected transitions is documented, but little is known about how partners deal with these events.

#### Objective:

To delve into the experiences of partners of elite athletes when facing unexpected events (i.e., deselection, injuries).

#### Method:

Through a narrative approach, a semi-structured interview was conducted. Data was analyzed through narrative thematic analysis (Riessman, 2008).

#### Future Research:

Further research is required to understand how partners experience both expected and unexpected transitions and how these can impact their own lives. Sport migrations and retirement are pointed out from our participants as the main transitions that require attention.

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