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# “Someday it will be better again”: upper-secondary student athletes’ experiences of schoolwork and sport 7 and 14 months after the COVID-19 outbreak

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## ABSTRACT

Globally, educational systems were thoroughly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Upper-secondary students were faced with school closures and distance education. For student-athletes, the COVID-19 pandemic, besides academic stress, also contributed to sports-related stress. In this paper, we explore upper-secondary school student athletes’ experiences of schoolwork and sport during two phases of the pandemic. A qualitative research design was used, and 53 student-athletes participated in focus group interviews. Three themes appeared: Struggling to cope with the new life situation, Reevaluating and longing for social life, and Speeding up the transition to adulthood. The themes were elucidated from temporal perspectives. The students experienced challenges in handling school, sports, and social life, but they also experienced opportunities for personal development. Student-athletes are a common responsibility between schools and sports, and, based on the results, schools and sports in collaboration need to increase readiness for action when major societal challenges, such as pandemics, occur.

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## KEYWORDS

Coping; COVID-19; distance education; dual-career development; student-athletes; sports

## Introduction

In the current study, Swedish upper-secondary student-athletes in certified sports-oriented secondary schools (CSUSS) are in focus. This group of students was doubly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to the academic stress caused by restrictions such as distance education in school, they also had to cope with restrictions in their sports (Bullard, 2022).

Globally, educational systems have been thoroughly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Upper-secondary students faced school closures and distance education, leading to increased feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, and stress during times of closures (Camacho-Zuniga et al., 2021; McCluskey et al., 2021; Mollborn et al., 2021). A Dutch study showed that students experienced support from their parents as especially important during distance education, and it was generally important to have social support from peers and others to cope with schoolwork during the COVID-19 pandemic (Klootwijk et al., 2021). From the teacher’s perspective, changed conditions for teaching brought about major challenges and experiences of increased inequity in education, especially concerning the coping of vulnerable students (Folkman et al., 2023; Howley, 2022; Kim & Asbury, 2020). A study with physical education teachers concluded that “the prioritization

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of social and emotional learning came to be viewed as essential components of teaching and learning when physical and face-to-face interaction was not an option” (Howley, 2022, p. 15).

In the general population, several studies noted decreases in physical activity and sports participation for children and youth during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ng et al., 2021; Andriyani et al., 2021). The specific focus of the current study is, however, the population of student-athletes at upper-secondary schools in Sweden.

Being a student-athlete in the Swedish upper-secondary school system is defined in the study as being a student enrolled in the Swedish CSUSS system. The CSUSS system is a collaboration between the Swedish National Agency for Education, which offers Special sports, the Swedish Sports Confederation, and its member organizations (e.g., Ferry & Andersson, 2021). In the Special sports subject, the student-athletes are offered courses in, among other things, physiology, and leadership, but above all, specialized training in their sport in addition to what is practiced in their sports clubs. The CSUSS system has its roots in the beginning of the 1970s and aims to balance efforts in sports and academic achievement (Svensson, 2021). In 2020, the system offered approximately 15,200 positions for student-athletes at CSUSS (Ferry & Andersson, 2021).

Being a student-athlete at the upper-secondary school level also means being in transition from junior to senior sports (JST) (Franck, 2018). The outcomes of a JST depend on internal and external factors and the student’s ability to cope with them. According to Franck et al. (2016), external factors within sports include, for instance, increasing demands on practice and performance, along with factors outside sports such as academic demands. They highlight personal characteristics, such as control over anxiety, ability to focus, optimism, and goal-achieving, as important for the student-athletes ability to cope in the JST. Transitioning into the CSUSS system, with its higher sports and academic achievement demands, is stressful for students (Nikander et al., 2022; Stambulova et al., 2015). Stambulova et al. (2015) emphasize a holistic perspective for student-athletes to find “optimal dual career balance as a combination of sport and studies that helps student-athletes achieve their educational and athletic goals, live satisfying private lives, and maintain their health and well-being” (p. 14). In addition, a Finnish study by Nikander et al. (2022), focusing on upper-secondary student-athletes’ self-esteem, showed that males, in general, scored higher in both self-esteem and career adaptability than female students. To summarize, student-athletes at CSUSS need certain support in their JST and dual-career development.

Therefore, for student-athletes, the COVID-19 pandemic, besides adding academic stress, also added stress due to restrictions in sports (Izzicupo et al., 2021; More et al., 2021; Bullard, 2022). Changes in daily routines are contributing risk factors for mental health problems for student-athletes, and research by Graupensperger et al. (2020) and Shepherd et al. (2021) shows that student-athletes stressed the importance of social support and social connectedness to promote mental health during the COVID-19 lockdown, while Patel et al. (2022) reported concerns about injuries and not being able to perform at the same level as before lockdown among athletes being an extensive health problem. McGuine et al. (2021) studied student-athletes’ mental health and well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic and found that changes in sporting routines and school routines were experienced as stressful for student-athletes. A Swedish study on 7 025 upper-secondary student-athletes during COVID-19 (February 2021) conveyed that 66% reported mental distress due to the situation and 45% were worried about their futures in sports (Håkansson et al., 2022). Indeed, changes in teaching and training have meant significant challenges for student-athletes; however, they have also exhibited favorable adaptation to the situation, such as increased self-awareness and increased personal responsibility (Johnson et al., 2022a).

The results above are in line with previous findings highlighting that during extensive stressors and global crises, people and institutions can react very differently (Bryan et al., 2019).

Therefore, this study aimed to explore student-athletes in certified sports-oriented upper-secondary schools (CSUSS) experiences of rapidly changing everyday life in the form of distance teaching and learning, physical training, and social interaction during two phases of the 2020–2021 COVID-19 pandemic.

## Temporality and transition into adulthood

As elucidated in the introduction, student-athletes are in transition from junior to senior sports (Franck, 2018), as well as from youth to adulthood (Batra, 2013), and in the current study, temporality is an important factor. According to Schutz and Luckmann (1973), experiences are temporally arranged as “arising from present, retentive, and protentive phases, as well as from memories and expectations” (p. 103). Temporality is multifaced and characterized by intersections between the subjective inner duration and time perspectives connected to objective (clock) time, biology (aging), and societal changes (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973). Accordingly, Neale (2021) elucidates the perspectives of fixed objective time connected to the clock and dates and fluid time of experiences connected to who we are and how we perceive the world. However, as Neale (2021) stresses, temporal complexities exist in pointing at relationships of multifaceted time experiences. Concerning upper-secondary students’ temporality, being and becoming (Uprichard, 2008) are connected to the state of being a youth and, at the same time, becoming an adult. This implies different time perspectives related to time as epistemological (being) and ontological (becoming), which, using the terminology of Uprichard (2008), could be considered as intertwined processes of being a youth and becoming an adult. In other words, this study focuses on upper-secondary student athletes’ fluid experiences of time concerning fixed time markers connected to school closure and restrictions in sports during the COVID-19 pandemic and how this affected them in transitioning from being youth to becoming adults.

## Methodology

At the beginning of the pandemic, the Swedish government decided to allow upper-secondary schools to conduct distance education when needed, which was done from March to June 2020 and from November 2020 to April 2021. During the same period, youth sports were subject to restrictions, such as canceled competitions and games, restricted group sizes, and restrictions on indoor training.

To capture the upper-secondary student athletes’ experiences, a design inspired by longitudinal qualitative research (LQR) was used to better understand how experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic unfold over time. According to Tuthill et al. (2020), there is no gold standard for LQR; it could be prospective or retrospective and include two or more qualitative data collections. The current study is retrospective, based on two specific timings: October 2020 (T1) and May 2021 (T2). Epistemologically, LQR can historically be traced back to the Chicago School of Sociology, especially inspired by GH Mead’s symbolic interactionism (Hermanowisz, 2013). However, as Tuthill et al. (2021) stress, the philosophical assumptions of LQR are multifaceted. First, time and change are contextual, where individual experiences give chronological time meaning. Second, LQR considers capturing human experience as a construction between the participants’ and researchers’ understandings. Tuthill et al. (2021), therefore, point out that “Researchers may ... ask the participants about the same experience again at a later time point to evaluate how their experience or their feelings about it may have changed” (p. 12), a strategy conducted in the current study. Finally, LQR is not a fixed methodology but rather contains a variety of different qualitative research strategies, such as autobiographical studies, retrospective studies, and longitudinal studies (Thomson & McLeod, 2015; Tuthill et al., 2021). The core feature is how time is designed into the research process, making change a key focus for analysis (Thomson et al., 2003).

Consequently, LQR answers qualitative questions about experiences of change and stability over time and typically focuses on individual narratives and trajectories, which can capture critical moments and processes involved in change. We have ensured rigor by aligning our data collection method, LQR (Thomson & McLeod, 2015; Tuthill et al., 2020), and data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) with the underlying ontological and epistemological assumptions of student-athletes as being

and becoming (Uprichard, 2008) and where temporality is key (Neale, 2021). All authors of this study are experienced in qualitative research methods and have a solid knowledge of the Swedish sports and CSUSS systems. In addition, the two authors have extensive knowledge of the Swedish school system in general.

### ***Focus group interviews***

In the current study, the participants were allowed to respond in an open-ended fashion in focus group interviews (FGI) to enable data depth and richness. The data collection was conducted 7 (T1) and 14 (T2) months after the COVID-19 outbreak (March 2020). FGI was employed to capture the social interaction when individuals create meaning and understanding within a context concerning a specific phenomenon, such as the experience of COVID-19 (Krippendorff, 2013; Thorne et al., 2004).

Following ethical approval by the Swedish Ethical Review (Dnr. 2020-03716), the student-athletes were provided with oral and written informed consent and informed that participation was voluntary, withdrawal at any time was allowed, and the information provided would be treated confidentially. The interview guide for T1 focused on experiences with COVID-19, including themes such as challenges, lessons learned, and handling schoolwork and sports. The interview guide for T2 contained the same themes, with an additional focus on the time between T1 and T2. Initially, we explained that all statements would remain within the group, there were no right or wrong answers, and all thoughts and opinions were important. To ensure everyone's active participation, one of the researchers acted as a moderator and the other as an observer. This means that one of the researchers led the conversation with the students, and the other filled in with follow-up questions and ensured that all students took an active part in the conversation.

### ***Participants and procedure***

Two local CSUSS with individual and team sports were contacted. The research group informed the management and teachers about the purpose and nature of the study, and they agreed to collaborate. One of the CSUSS was a specialized private school for student-athletes, and the other was a municipal upper-secondary school with a mixed student population. With assistance from the schools, purposeful sampling was utilized to identify male and female student-athletes participating in individual and team sports (Palinkas et al., 2015). The participants were in their second or third academic year and had experienced the outbreak and subsequent period of COVID-19. All student-athletes were enrolled in theoretical upper-secondary school programs (social studies, business economics, and science studies). Overall, it was a relatively homogeneous group. They were students in theoretical programs, all of whom shared the experience of being student-athletes at CSUSS. Several students already knew each other, a strategy that enhanced group dynamics and interactions and added richness to the data (McLafferty, 2004).

The design aimed to follow the development of the situation and how students were affected by pandemic consequences by interviewing student-athletes on two occasions (T1 and T2). However, the current study also had to deal with the effects of the pandemic. Two FGI occasions were conducted in CSUSS I, but just before starting the first FGI in CSUSS II, there was another lockdown. This meant that we only interviewed student-athletes in CSUSS II once in May 2021, retrospectively focusing on T1, T2, and temporal changes during the period. The two FGIs in CSUSS I were conducted in the school, and the FGI in CSUSS II was conducted via Zoom. Fifty-three student-athletes participated in the focus group interviews (28 females and 25 males). In CSUSS I, there was a dropout of five student-athletes from T1 to T2 (Table 1). On each occasion, four to seven student-athletes and two researchers participated. The FGIs lasted between 25 and 55 min and were transcribed verbatim, yielding 170 pages of single-spaced text. All researchers participated in the data collection,

**Table 1.** The total number of student-athletes at two CSUSSs was seven and 14 months after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, respectively.

School	Sports	October 2020 (7 months after the outbreak)		May 2021 (14 months after the outbreak)	
		Gender		Gender	
		Women	Men	Women	Men
<b>CSUSS I (private)</b>	Golf	4	7	2	5
	Handball	5	7	5	6
<b>CSUSS II (municipality)</b>	Badminton	–	–	2	1
	Swimming	–	–	4	0
	Handball	–	–	4	2
	Football	–	–	9	8

but the first and last authors conducted the main part of the FGIs. These were audio-recorded, transcribed, and checked for accuracy by the authors. To ensure confidentiality, student-athletes have been given pseudonyms.

### Data analysis

The data analysis began by exploring how young student-athletes at the two CSUSS experienced schoolwork and sports during COVID-19, reflecting an inductive thematic analytic procedure (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The analysis was conducted on transcripts of each focus group using a six-phase procedure suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006): *Familiarizing yourself with your data*, *Generating initial codes*, *Searching for themes*, *Reviewing themes*, *Defining and naming themes*, and finally *Producing the report*. Initially, the transcripts from the FGIs were read several times to familiarize us with the data and obtain an overall impression. The transcripts were then reread to systematically identify and generate initial codes that were features of data that responded to the aim, which in total yielded 269 initial codes. In the next step, searching for themes, the codes were discussed, compared, and organized by the authors based on similarities and differences. This step of analysis resulted in 16 tentative or potential sub-themes. In the following step, reviewing themes, the tentative themes were reviewed by all the authors, and each coded extract was compared with the tentative themes to check for eligibility. The tentative themes were reviewed and discussed several times and revised to reflect the experience of change or stability over time. Four potential themes collapsed into other themes, and one theme did not have enough data support. This ended up with 11 sub-themes. Finally, in the step of defining and naming themes, three main themes were formulated. This step focused on creditability and trustworthiness (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004), where the authors repeatedly read through the transcripts of FGIs and compared them to sub-themes to validate them. This step of the analysis was ongoing until the authors agreed that the generated three themes were distinct and robust compared to the aim and interview transcripts. Even though the description of the analytical process can be seen as linear, we experienced the analysis process as non-linear, with a pending relationship between the whole and parts. All quotations were translated from Swedish into English and adjusted for readability. The student-athletes are identified with a pseudonym and by their group and time for FGI (e.g., CSUSS I, T1/T2).

### Findings

Three themes, including sub-themes, appeared when the students described their experiences of getting through the pandemic: *Struggling to cope with the new life situation*; *Reevaluating and long-ing for social life*; and *Speeding up the transition to adulthood*. Finally, the themes will be elucidated from a temporal perspective.

## ***Struggling to cope with the new life situation***

### ***Feeling ambiguity and increased school pressure***

Students expressed feelings of ambiguity in school, which led to an increased feeling of pressure. During the first period of distance teaching, critical voices were raised about the teachers' handling of the situation. Students felt that the teachers were unprepared and had difficulty developing teaching strategies. This led to unclear tasks, a higher workload, and the feeling that the teachers were more focused on occupying the students than learning. Over time, students experienced that the situation improved and that the teachers developed their teaching during the second period of distance.

*Leo: I notice a big difference from the beginning of the distance teaching; teachers sort of improve during the lessons, and so on. Truly progress. (CSUSS I, T2)*

### ***Feeling uncertainty and blurred boundaries***

The full period was characterized by being in an uncertain existence, which was challenging for the student's life situation. Feelings of uncertainty and unclear and late information about the lockdown and opening of schools and sports were wearisome.

*Oliver: I think it sounds a bit depressing to say, but I think everyone is so damn optimistic. Yes, but not only at school but also at the Public Health Agency. "Yes, we close until May 17," and then they postpone everything for two months. Why not set a date far ahead instead of taking small steps? (CSUSS I, T2)*

The students expressed the challenges of blurred boundaries between home, school, and sports. Feelings of too much responsibility were present during the school closure, while others pointed to the experience of never feeling free at home. At the beginning of the period, students experienced it comfortably with flexibility. However, in the long run, it became stressful to feel so attached to the home.

### ***Having lower motivation and dropping out of sports***

The students described challenges in finding motivation during times of restrictions in sports and distance education. Difficulties in concentrating and finding long-term coping strategies, the risk of losing school focus, and experiences of increased negative emotions were highlighted. The challenges also led to students losing motivation. It was challenging, especially during the second period of closure from November 2020, when the students were again limited to distance education and new restrictions in sports were introduced. During the first period, it was possible to maintain discipline and concentration, but the second period, during the winter months, was challenging.

*Henry: It was probably right at the second wave. It hit hard. They closed everything down. From my perspective, it looked like a dark wall, and we weren't allowed to do anything. So, I thought the second wave was the hardest. And the future is unclear, so you don't want to plan anything and raise hopes. (CSUSS I, T2)*

Games and competitions were not allowed; only training individually or in small groups was permitted, negatively affecting motivation. Some students dropped out or changed their focus on sports during the period due to their motivation disappearing.

*Stina: I quit playing handball during the time of distance schooling. But it was probably also because I live in another town, so it becomes quite tough to go to school all the time for training.*

*Interviewer: Do you think you would have continued with handball if it hadn't been for COVID?*

*Stina: Yes, I think so. It's mostly because no games were played, so we did the same things in training because we weren't allowed to touch each other. (CSUSS I, T2)*



### **Trying to keep motivation over time**

Despite challenging times, it was possible for students to stay motivated. Initially, students felt that they had regained motivation for sports. The increased time for individual training was perceived as positive for motivation. In general, motivation for sports is easier to maintain than motivation for schoolwork. Some students underlined that training played an important role in motivating themselves in everyday life since it became a way to focus, reduce stress, and maintain structures. However, students stressed that it was challenging to maintain motivation over time. Traits such as determination and stubbornness were highlighted as important. Students wanted to prove to themselves and others that it was possible to get through this period and move on.

Ellen: *So, I guess it's just to keep fighting and persevering until it gets better and better, and we can have ... yes, continue until everything gets normal again.* (CSUSS II, T2)

Students also experienced changed perspectives on their sports, which helped motivate them, for instance, by developing the ability to think long-term and going back to the basics of why they started playing sports.

Carol: *Yes, partly to find the fun, but above all, for me, to think, "Someday it will be better again; you will be allowed to compete again." And then you don't want to fall behind, and you must aim for what is to come.* (CSUSS II, T2)

### **Reevaluate and long for a social life**

#### **Wearisome loneliness**

During this period, loneliness became present in students' everyday lives. Some students experienced it gradually becoming more stressful to stay at home, and distance education created distance from friends and social life. Much time was spent at home without direct social contact, especially in homes where parents were away during the daytime. For a group of students relocating from other places to invest in their sports, the feeling of loneliness and a lack of social life became extra stressful.

Noel: *I thought it was quite hard because I live here myself. I have moved here, so I don't have my family close. But because the [golf] training continues during the evenings and I still focus on sport, that was why I moved here anyway. So I couldn't go home either. So, I became almost stupid in the head, quite frankly, to sit in my little room. I rarely left the apartment.* (CSUSS I, T1)

#### **Appreciating social meetings in school and sports**

After periods of distance teaching, students appreciated social encounters. Being in a situation of restrictions led to new perspectives on life, and students generally felt an increased appreciation for being able to meet in school and sports. Especially after the second period, students highlighted the social significance of sports. For those who played team sports, the importance of the team was especially noticeable. The feeling of being able to train with teammates after the second period was appreciated. Likewise, cohesion increased with friends.

Robert: *It did get into my head. I thought because you didn't have team cohesion, you trained by yourself all the time. You don't get as much energy; I've found that it's easier to go to the gym when you're on a team.* (CSUSS I, T2)

#### **Appreciating family**

Another insight was that appreciation of the family increased. Feelings of security and social support from home and being able to talk to the parents about well-being support durability in school and sports. More time was spent at home on evenings and weekends compared to normal circumstances. This meant more time was spent with the closest family, and the family became an important safety net for students living at home throughout the period.



Eric: *A positive thing about COVID is that my family and I have time to spend together in the evenings. So, we had a lot of quality time at home, which everyone appreciated.* (CSUSS II, T2)

### **The meaning of caring teachers and coaches**

In schoolwork and sports was underlined, especially during periods of distance teaching. Students felt that the school had more understanding of their situation during the lockdown.

Mio: *In handball, we have Kim, our coach ... He has spent a lot of time asking how we feel, and he has given us tasks to write how we feel, how our body feels, and so on. He has cared about how we feel, both mentally and physically.* (CSUSS I, May 2021)

Students also highlighted that the school needs to focus more on the student's health in general in a future crisis, such as with extra support from counselors, psychologists, or similar. They experienced contact with the school as challenging during the distance periods and underlined the importance of increased support from teachers.

### **Speeding up the transition to adulthood**

#### **To develop responsibility**

Distance teaching and changed conditions for sports forced the students to relate to life differently. The students stressed that the rapid change faced them with challenges in adapting to new conditions quickly and rapidly becoming aware of increased demands on individual responsibility. In the first period, it was a challenge, but gradually they developed the ability to increase their responsibility for schoolwork and sports.

Rita: *I think I have become better at taking personal responsibility and planning everyday life, and I can focus on school simultaneously with the training and stuff.* (CSUSS II, May 2021)

Having to take greater individual responsibility was considered a useful ability for the future in sports and university studies.

Harry: *A lot of personal responsibility, because you had to learn what it's like to study at university more and because we were at home and studying all the time.* (CSUSS I, T1)

#### **Sports as support to structure life**

The sport was considered to support the ability to structure life during the period. Students compared their organized sports experiences, where the requirement for structure is a prerequisite, with those of students outside organized sports, and the student-athletes considered themselves to have better abilities to take accountability for planning and structuring their lives.

Sarah: *I have heard from classmates who don't do sports that they feel like school and home are the same thing; there's no difference. When you train, it still gets a little different.* (CSUSS II, T2)

Students in individual sports particularly experienced having developed habits of self-structuring early on in their careers. Generally, the students thought that the pandemic made them more liable as persons.

Helena: *As I mentioned before, you take responsibility for your training and become your own coach. And it was even more so when we didn't have training with the club. Both the school and the training were coached by you.* (CSUSS II, T2)

#### **To gain self-insights and see opportunities**

Students talked about deeper self-awareness and increased self-insights, such as understanding one's abilities and well-being and what is needed to improve schoolwork and sports. Some students also stressed that they had learned to accept situations better. Some emphasized being more comfortable

with themselves. Others discovered that they were resilient when facing challenging situations. Through self-insights, the students also learned more about their bodies and priorities in training.

Roger: *With the physical part, I have at least learned how much it helps me in sports. So, at least I have changed thanks to the physical training and these programs we had, and it has been meaningful.* (CSUSS II, May 2021)

The students discovered new sides of themselves through the rapid changes in everyday life. One discovery was that many things had been taken for granted, becoming apparent when everyday life changed rapidly.

Klara: *I have learned a lot about myself and what I like and don't like about myself. I have always thought I was a loner. Now I realize that I feel better about being with people than I thought.* (CSUSS I, T2)

### **The temporal appearance of the themes and sub-themes**

The study is based on an LQR design, meaning time is key. From a fixed-time perspective (Neale, 2021), schooling was mainly based on distance education from March to June 2020 and from November 2020 to April 2021. At the same time, there were restrictions related to sports. However, as Neale (2021) stresses, temporal complexities exist in pointing at relationships of multifaceted time experiences. With these issues being raised, the next level of analysis was to connect the sub-themes of fluid experiences to a fixed timeline.

*Struggling to cope with the new life situation.* The feeling of ambiguity and increased feelings of pressure were mainly connected to distance teaching and restrictions in sports, and when the school opened for a few months, the pressure was partly released. However, the whole period was characterized by uncertainty. Even though there was a period without restrictions, there were constant feelings of uncertainty and blurred boundaries between the different elements of existence. The challenge to find and maintain motivation was connected to the whole period, where students had different coping strategies for maintaining motivation. In the latter period, however, motivation dropped for some students. During this period, family and social connectedness in school were more appreciated.

*Reevaluate and long for a social life.* The fluid experiences of wearisome loneliness were mainly connected to times of restrictions, and during these times, support from teachers and coaches was of certain importance. Especially during the second period of restrictions, students started to reevaluate their social lives, appreciating family and being in school with peers and teachers more.

*Speeding up the transition to adulthood.* In upper-secondary schooling, students are in transition toward adulthood. When elucidating this from a temporal perspective, students rapidly had to develop a greater sense of responsibility, gain self-awareness, and see opportunities (for instance, restrictions to prepare for higher education), all of which were present during the whole period. Additionally, sports helped the students structure their lives, and the transition process, in other words, was speeded up compared to normal circumstances [Table 2](#).















## **Discussion**

This study explored upper-secondary school student-athletes' experiences of rapidly changing everyday life in school and sports during two phases of the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020–2021. In line with Izzicupo et al. (2021) and Bullard (2022), the results indicate that student-athletes were significantly exposed to changes, as schools and sports were strongly affected by restrictions during the COVID-19 period.

### **Staying motivated over time**

Loneliness increased and was stressful for students during the periods of school lockdown and restrictions. In line with Graupensperger et al. (2020) and Shepherd et al. (2021), student-athletes

**Table 2.** The temporal appearance of themes and sub-themes during March 2020 - May 2021.

Themes and sub-themes	Mar 2020	Nov 2020	May 2021
<b>Struggling to cope with the new life situation</b>			
<i>Feeling ambiguity and increased school pressure</i>			
<i>Feeling uncertainty and blurred boundaries</i>			
<i>Having lower motivation and dropping out of sports</i>			
<i>Trying to keep motivation over time</i>			
<b>Reevaluate and long for a social life</b>			
<i>Wearisome loneliness</i>			
<i>Appreciating social meetings in school and sports</i>			
<i>Appreciating family</i>			
<i>The meaning of teachers and coaches who care</i>			
<b>Speeding up the transition to adulthood</b>			
<i>To develop responsibility</i>			
<i>Sports as support to structure life</i>			
<i>To gain self-insights and see opportunities</i>			

stressed the importance of social support and social connectedness for their mental health during the restrictions. Furthermore, students learned to appreciate the social life in sports and school more due to limited access to social life during distance education and restrictions in sports. Hence, during the school lockdown, student-athletes spent more time at home, which meant more time spent with their closest family. Other studies have also shown that family support was considered important and buffered adolescents' academic motivation and well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ellis et al., 2020; Klootwijk et al., 2021).

Finding and maintaining motivation during the COVID-19 pandemic was challenging for the student-athletes, which is in line with findings from McGuine et al. (2021). The student-athletes described blurred boundaries between school, home, and sports and constantly changing guidelines for school and sports as stressful. Some students described that motivation decreased, especially from November 2020 onwards, and that the second school lockdown during the winter was especially challenging. As in the study by Håkansson et al. (2022), some students reported increased levels of mental distress due to the current situation and worries about the future in sports. Consequently, some students lowered their athletic ambitions and even dropped out of sports. Despite the challenges, maintaining motivation and resilient behavior were present among student-athletes (Agnafors et al., 2017; Johnson et al., 2022a; Sarkar & Hilton, 2020). Although some creativity was required to train during times of restrictions, the general level of physical activity does not appear to have been adversely affected, contrary to previous studies (Ng et al., 2021; Andriyani et al., 2021), which may be a consequence of the fact that a sports population with potentially higher motivation for physical activity was studied.

### ***Sports offered meaning and structure***

The students were on a dual-career pathway through upper-secondary school, combining school-work and sports. These are, indeed, activities of different natures. The schoolwork is mandatory, while their athletic ambitions, although supported by the school and sports clubs, are still based

on the student-athletes' own choices and interests. The whole period was characterized by a struggle between getting through the pandemic and being unable to cope with COVID-19. In line with previous studies (Klootwijk et al., 2021), students' experiences of schooling based on distance teaching were considered the most challenging. However, not directly mentioned in previous studies, including those of student-athletes, are the oscillating coping strategies that point to developed responsibility and an experience of well-being, as well as feelings of ambiguity and increased pressure. For several student-athletes, their dual careers and the experience of trying to be successful in both despite limited opportunities further enhanced the experience of everyday life as a roller coaster ride. Sports played double roles for the students. On the one hand, sports were connected to challenging and negative experiences due to restrictions; on the other hand, sports were perceived as supportive of structuring life in general, despite restrictions. Participating in sports became a significant part of general coping strategies, including schoolwork and private life. Despite the changing conditions of sports, physical training became an important activity for structuring life, making it manageable, and thus taking responsibility for it.

### ***Transitions and the importance of supportive structures***

The COVID-19 situation was extraordinary, and some students expressed mental ill-being during the period. The rapid changes in school and sports were difficult for student-athletes to different extents. As mentioned, Bryan et al. (2019) describe how people react differently to extensive stressors. However, the rapid changes in everyday life compelled student-athletes to quickly learn to take greater personal responsibility and increase self-discipline. In general, the students became more aware of their needs regarding schoolwork and sports. The whole period led to increased self-awareness and an increased ability to see opportunities in life. Under normal circumstances, the transition into becoming a student-athlete in upper-secondary school implies higher demands on sports and academic achievement (Franck et al., 2016; Nikander et al., 2022; Stambulova et al., 2015). In addition, being in late adolescence means being in the natural development of transition toward adulthood (e.g., Batra, 2013; Uprichard, 2008), or, in other words, being a student-athlete in its youth and becoming an adult athlete and human being. For student-athletes, it is also, according to Wylleman and Reints (2010), a time for transition from a development phase to a phase of mastery in sports, with increasing demands and changed conditions, which is what Franck (2018) refers to as the JST for student-athletes. Based on the experiences of the student-athletes, one interpretation is that the transformation process was speeded up, especially for those students that were able to cope with the situation.

However, it is unfair to assume that all students will cope and handle all the personal responsibility required in a difficult situation, such as COVID-19. The student-athletes expressed an extended need for teachers and coaches to care about and support them, which aligns with Kim and Asbury (2020), Folkman et al. (2023), and Howley (2022). In addition to previous results, based on the LQR strategy, we could identify temporal variations in the appearances of themes and sub-themes from March 2020 to May 2021. In other words, some stressors were temporally connected to school closure (such as loneliness), and some were constant (such as uncertainty) in a similar situation with support, coping strategies, and learning processes. Giving the themes a temporal dimension adds another layer of complexity to the situation, increasing prospects for support in future difficult situations.

Facilitating student-athletes' health and well-being is a shared responsibility between upper-secondary schooling and sports clubs and organizations. Strategies based on multidimensional action plans are necessary to support and continue to strengthen student-athletes' health and well-being in future crises. This could include developing (digital) self-help techniques, creating networks for peer support, developing support structures in school and sports, and coordinating support between CUSSs and sports clubs (Johnson et al., 2022b).

## Study limitations and future research

The current study has limitations. The longitudinal approach was not fully conducted in CSUSS II due to the COVID-19 situation. Though, during the FGIs, it was possible to use the timeline of school closures as a starting point for temporal discussions as a methodological flexibility in line with LQR (Tuthill et al., 2020). The consistency with the statements from CSUSS I was immense, which strengthened the longitudinal approach.

The full consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on academic achievement and sports are still to be discovered. The current study followed the short-term consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic during a period in upper-secondary schools. We are still unable to grasp the long-term consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, educational systems and sporting organizations risk being strongly affected by its consequences. Students with impaired future academic chances, children and youth dropping out of sports, and decreased psychosocial health among young people are future risk scenarios in the footsteps of COVID-19. Therefore, future research needs to focus on the individual, organizational, and societal levels.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, despite restrictions challenging motivation and the risks of dropout, participation in sports also offered structures in daily life for student-athletes. Enhanced demands on self-responsibility seem to have been a mediator for speeding up the transition to adulthood. Student-athletes are a common responsibility between schools and sports, and, based on the results of the study, schools and sports in collaboration need to increase readiness for action when major societal challenges, such as pandemics, occur.

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