Sport Psychology, 91-120 ECTS

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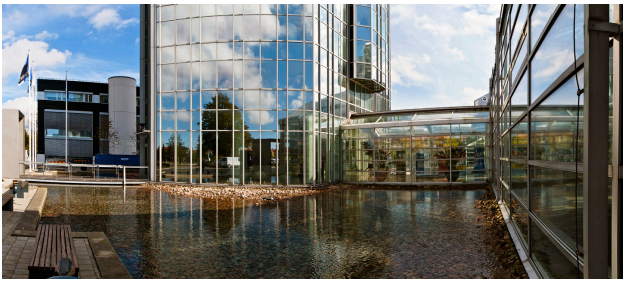

Icelandic Athletes' Experiences of the Olympic Games as a Career Transition

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Sport psychology
15 ECTS

Halmstad, 2013-06-28

Icelandic Athletes' Experiences of the Olympic Games as a Career Transition

Halmstad University
School of Social and Health Sciences:
Sport Psychology, 91-120 ECTS, Spring 2013
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Rósa Björk Sigurgeirsdóttir (2013). *Icelandic Athletes' Experiences of the Olympic Games as a Career Transition*. Halmstad University, School of Social and Health Sciences: Sport Psychology (91-120 ECTS).

Abstract

The aim of this study was to examine Icelandic elite athletes' experiences in regard to the Olympic Games (OG)-2012. More specifically the focus was on the OG as a career transition process covering several phases in the Olympic cycle, having the Games as its culmination and followed by a career change. The athletic career transition model, the holistic lifespan perspective and temporal structure of the Olympic cycle guided retrospective interviews with six Icelandic athletes who (some years ago) were candidates to take part in the OG-2012. Among the six participants three were successful in the OG-2012, one was less successful and two participants prepared but were not qualified for the OG. Holistic-content and categorical-content analyses resulted in: (a) six core narratives describing and interpreting each athlete's individual pathway through preliminary/basic preparation, selection process, Olympic season, the Games, and post-Games periods, and (b) sixteen themes following athletes' major foci in each transition phase (e.g., "gaining international experience" and "getting financial support" in the preliminary/basic preparation, etc.) and also the transition resources perceived by athletes as necessary during the whole Olympic cycle ("prioritizing sports while balancing sport with work/school", "organizational support" and "family support"). Results are discussed in relation to the theoretical frameworks, previous research, and Icelandic context.

Key words: athletic career, career transition, holistic perspective, Icelandic athletes, Olympic cycle, Olympic Games.

Rósa Björk Sigurgeirsdóttir (2013). *Icelandic Athletes' Experiences of the Olympic Games as a Career Transition*. Högskolan I Halmstad, Sektion för Hälsa och Samhälle: Psykologi inriktning idrott (91-120 ECTS).

Abstrakt

Syftet med studien var att undersöka isländska elitidrottare erfarenheter från de olympiska spelen (OS) -2012. Mer specifikt fokuserar studien på OS som en karriärövergångprocess vilket omfattar flera faser i den olympiska cykeln, samt att ha OS som kulmen för sin karriär förändring. Den idrottsliga karriärövergångsmodellen, det holistiska livslängdsperspektivet och tidslängd för den olympiska cykeln har använts som grund för retrospektiva intervjuer vilka genomfördes med sex isländska idrottare och tillika kandidater att delta i OS-2012. Bland de sex deltagarna var tre framgångsrika i OS-2012, en erhöll moderat framgång och två av deltagarna lyckades inte kvalificerade sig. Holistisk-innehåll och kategorisk innehållsanalys resulterade i: (a) sex centrala och beskrivande berättelser samt tolkningar av varje idrottares individuella väg genom förberedande/ grundläggande förberedelser, urvalsprocessen, OS-säsongen, spelen och perioder efter spelen, och (b) sexton teman vilka följer idrottarnas stora fokus i varje övergångsfas (t.ex. "att få internationell erfarenhet" och "att få finansiellt stöd" vid de preliminära/ grundläggande förberedelserna, etc.). Detta inkluderar även de resurser som krävdes vid övergången vilka uppfattas som nödvändiga under hela OS-cykeln av idrottarna (t.ex. "prioritera sporter och samtidigt balansera sport med arbete/ skola", "organisatoriskt stöd" och "familjens stöd"). Resultaten diskuteras i relation till uppsatsens teoretiska ramverk, tidigare forskning och isländsk kontext.

Nyckelord: idrottslig karriär, karriär-övergång, holistiskt perspektiv, Isländska idrottare, Olympisk tidslängd, Olympiska spelen.

Icelandic Athletes' Experiences of the Olympic Games as a Career Transition

The Olympic Games (OG) are one of the biggest events in many athletes' careers. Every two years (alternating between summer and winter Games), the world sits down and watches the world's greatest athletes performing their hopefully best. The Games themselves take about two weeks, but the athletes' preparation starts way before.

In the past decades, there has been a shift in sport psychology research from the performance-enhancement perspective to a more holistic lifespan perspective where athletes are seen as individuals doing sport alongside other things in their lives (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007; Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler, & Coté, 2009; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004).

In this research the main focus is on the Olympic Games as a career transition. Interviews are conducted with Icelandic athletes to explore with a holistic perspective the experiences in their preparation and participation at the Olympic Games 2012 in London as well as their lives after the Games or after not qualifying. How can the Olympic Games be seen as a career transition? Furthermore, what themes go through the process of the transition?

Below in the introduction key concepts will be defined, followed by theoretical frameworks used in this study and analysis of previous research in the area of Olympic preparation, performance, and career transitions. Then methodological issues will be explained and, finally, a summary and objectives of the study will be presented.

Key terms

An *athletic career* has been defined by Wylleman, Theeboom, and Lavallee (2004) as "a succession of stages and transitions that includes an athlete's initiation into and continued participation in organized competitive sport and that is terminated with the athlete's (in)voluntary but definitive discontinuation of participation in organized competitive sport". Alfermann and Stambulova (2007) defined *athletic career* as "a multi-year sport activity voluntarily chosen by the person and aimed at achieving his/her individual peak in athletic performance in one or several sport events". An athletic career can also be seen as "an athletic-pyramid" illustrating that only a minority of athletes from those who participate in sports achieve athletic excellence and develop elite careers whereas a majority drops out at the earlier stages or stays on the lower levels in sport. One explanation for this pyramid image is that many athletes cannot cope successfully with career transitions (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007).

A widely used definition of the term *transition* is Schlossberg's (1981) definition: "an event or non-event that results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world and, thus, requires a corresponding change in one's behavior and relationships". This definition has however met some challenges in transition research in sport, especially the part of the definition that identifies transitions as events/non-events (Stambulova et al., 2009). A transition has gained a new understanding as a coping process with potentially positive or negative outcomes. Stambulova & Wylleman (2013) defined *career transitions* as turning phases or shifts in athlete's development associated with a set of specific demands that athletes have to cope with in order to continue successfully in sport and/or other spheres of their life. In the athletic career transition model by Stambulova (2003) the transition process is explained in more detail and will be addressed further.

Career development is defined as proceeding through career stages and transitions (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2013). The developmental model of transitions faced by athletes (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004) is a descriptive career model that provides a sequence of career

stages, describes characteristic features of each stage and predicts normative transitions between adjacent stages. This model will be addressed further.

Theoretical frameworks

Two models will be used as theoretical framework in this study, the *Athletic career transition model* (Stambulova, 2003) and the *Developmental model of transitions faced by athletes* (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004).

The Athletic career transition model, see figure 1, is designed to explain not only the final normative athletic transition but also other types of occurring transitions during the athletic career. In this model a transition is considered as a process of coping with a set of *transition demands*. In the coping process athletes use various *coping strategies* (e.g., planning, practicing more than opponents, searching for professional support, etc.) to deal with the transition demands. Effectiveness of coping is seen as dependent on a dynamic balance between the coping resources and barriers. *Resources* refer to the various internal and external factors that facilitate the transition (e.g., previous athletic and personal experiences, social and professional support available, etc.), and *barriers*, to the various internal and external factors that interfere with the coping process (e.g., low self-efficacy, lack of financial support).

The model entails two primary transition outcomes: a successful transition and a crisis transition. A *successful transition* is the result of effective coping or a good fit between transition demands, on the one hand, and the athletes' coping resources and strategies, on the other hand. *Crisis transition* is a result of ineffective coping because of the athlete being low in resources, and/or high in barriers, and/or using inappropriate coping strategies. Crisis is also conceptualized as a transition the athlete has to make but is not able to cope with independently, and for which he/she perceives a need for transition intervention. Stambulova (2000) described three kinds of coping strategies chosen by athletes facing a crisis situation; a rejection strategy, which involves avoiding the situation, withdrawing from the activity or breaking a relationship; an acceptance strategy, which involves staying in the situation and accepting a compromise to adapt to it; and a fighting strategy, which involves changing both the athlete's attitude towards the situation and the situation per se.

Further, according to the model, the crisis transition can have two possible secondary outcomes: "*delayed"* successful transition (in the case of effective intervention) or unsuccessful transition (in the case of no or ineffective intervention) associated with *negative consequences* (e.g., premature dropout, neuroses, overtraining, eating disorders, substance abuse, etc.).

The developmental model of transitions faced by athletes (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004; Wylleman, Alfermann, & Lavallee, 2004), can be seen as an embodiment of the holistic lifespan perspective because it combines stages in athletes' athletic, psychological, psychosocial, and academic-vocational development, outlines athletes' normative athletic and non-athletic transitions, and "roughly" aligns the stages and transitions with chronological age markers (Figure 2).

The developmental model consists of four layers. The top layer represents four stages in *athletic development* and four normative athletic transitions such as, into organized competitive sports (at 6-7 years of age), into an intensive level of training and competitions (at age 12-13), into the senior level of competitions (at 18-19 years of age), and to the post-sport career (at 28-30 years of age). The second layer presents athletes' *psychological development* with childhood (up until 12 years of age), adolescence (13-18 years of age), and adulthood (from 19 years of age onward) as developmental stages and relevant transitions

(i.e., from childhood to adolescence, and from adolescence to adulthood). The third layer is representative of the changes which can occur in the athlete's *psychosocial development* and sport related network including their parents, siblings, peers, coaches, and spouse/partner. The final layer contains the specific stages at *academic-vocational level* with transitions into primary education/elementary school (at 6-7 years of age), into secondary education/high school (from ages 12-13), into higher education/college or university (at 18-19 years of age), and to a work place (at about 25 years of age).

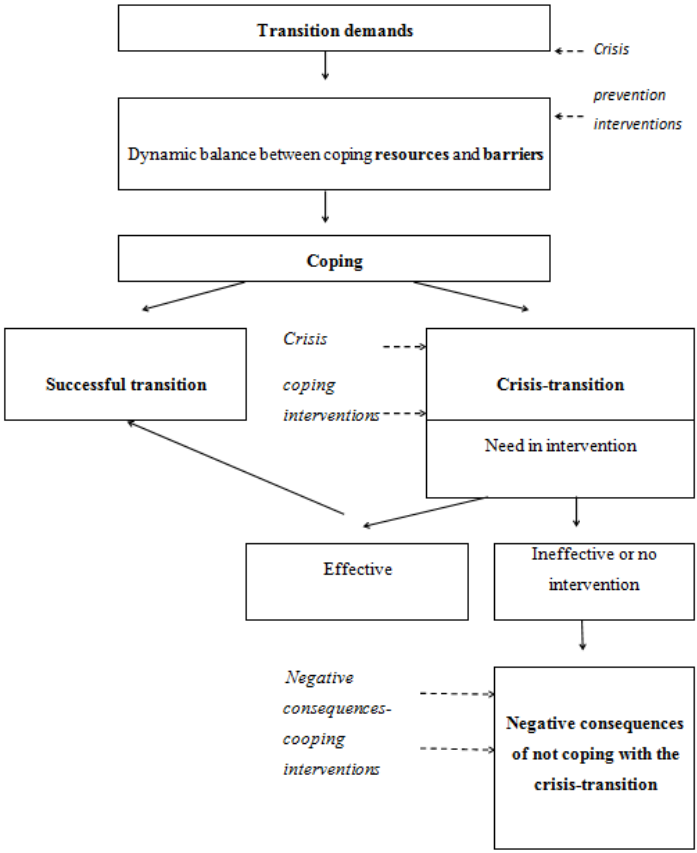
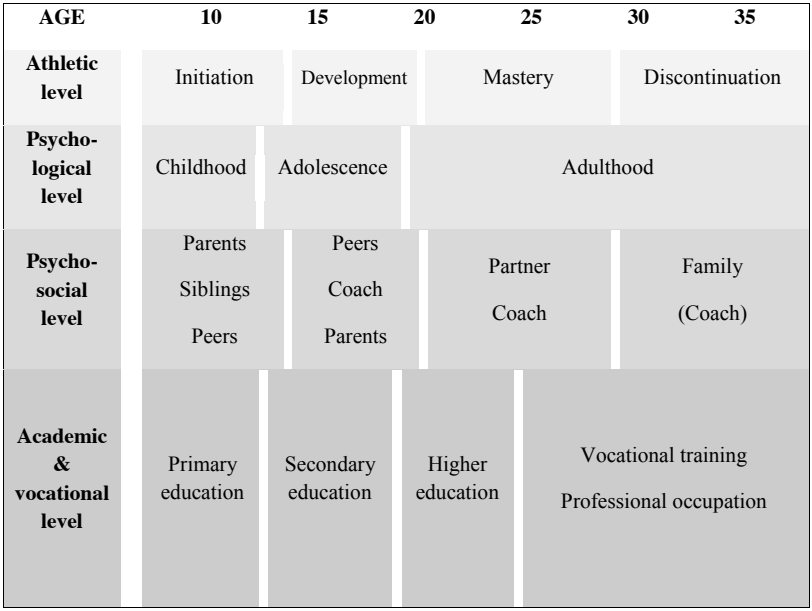


Figure 1. Athletic career transition model (Stambulova, 2003).



Note. A dotted line indicates that the age at which the transition occurs is an approximation.

Figure 2. Developmental model of transitions faced by athletes (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004).

Olympic Games and athletes' careers

Context of Olympic Games. The Olympic Games is a unique competition, unlike for example the World Championship. The World Championship is usually held separated for each sport at a different time and different locations. The Olympic Games are however an event where athletes from various sports, both individual sports and team sports, male and female athletes, come together at the same location at the same time. Due to this special arrangement the atmosphere among the athletes, the public and everybody involved, before and during the Olympic Games is phenomenal. Participation at the Olympic Games is often a highlight in an athlete's career.

The importance of the Olympic Games is magnified because the opportunity to compete only arises every four years. The Olympic preparation, or an Olympic cycle (Stambulova, Stambulov & Johnson, 2012) can be explained as a four year period between two consecutive Olympic Games. This cycle can be divided into five stages, a) preliminary/basic preparation (typically first 1-2 years), b) selection for the Olympic team (usually in the third year), c) Olympic season (year before the Games), d) the Games and e) post Games.

Olympic Games and Icelandic athletes. The first Olympic Games Iceland participated in was 1908. Since then Icelandic athletes have won four Olympic medals. First was Vilhjálmur Einarsson, he won a silver medal for triple jump in 1956. The year 1984 Bjarni Friðriksson

won a bronze medal in judo. Vala Flosadóttir claimed the bronze medal in pole vault the year 2000 and finally the men's national handball team won the silver medal in 2008 (Íþrótta- og Ólympíusamband Íslands, n.d.). Twelve Icelandic athletes competed at the OG 2012 in individual sports as well as the men's national handball team.

Previous research

Two lines of research relevant to this study will be considered below. They are factors influencing Olympic performance and athletes' transitions.

Factors influencing Olympic Performance. The opportunity to compete at the Olympic Games only arises every four years, for that reason some athletes only have a chance to compete once or twice during their athletic career. Previous studies have focused on athletic performance at the Olympic Games and what factors facilitate good performance (Gould & Maynard, 2009). To answer the question of why some athletes perform well under the unique conditions of the Olympic Games and others do not, the United States Olympic Committee (USOC) commissioned a large-scale project to examine positive and negative factors that influenced Olympic performances of American athletes and coaches in Atlanta and Nagano. The project adopted a holistic perspective on factors that influence performance of Olympians, including psychological, physical, social and situational factors (Gould, Guinan, Greenleaf, Medbery, & Peterson, 1999; Gould et al., 2001a; Gould et al., 2001b; Gould, Greenleaf, Chung, & Guinan, 2002).

Gould et al. (2001a) explored what lessons were identified regarding performance excellence by U.S. Olympians and coaches who took part in 1996 Summer and 1998 Winter Olympic Games. Their results revealed multiple performance-related lessons reported by the athletes. These lessons were organized into general categories and included mental preparation/training; achieving optimal physical conditioning while not overtraining; distraction preparation and awareness (e.g. being ready to balance the Olympic "hoopla" with performance mission and focus); and coaching. Successful Olympic performances were found to be complex, multifaceted, delicate, and long-term processes that required extensive planning and painstaking implementation of plans. Furthermore, success was seldom due to chance and was easily disrupted by numerous distractions. Lesson reported by coaches of Olympians who competed at OG-1996 in Atlanta and Nagano included the importance of team cohesion/harmony; mental preparation/training (importance of having a sport psychology consultant); dealing with the media (set rules about media interviews and coordinate through one person) and international competition (putting athletes in "pressure" international settings).

Gould et al. (2001b) did a qualitative study on American Olympians who competed in Atlanta and Nagano to explore perceived factors that have had positive and/or negative influences on Olympic athlete performance and examine differences in performance factors cited by athletes who met or exceeded performance expectations and athletes who failed to meet expectations. Their findings revealed that factors perceived to have positive influences on performance included mental skills and preparation (e.g., working with a sport psychology consultant), attitude towards the Olympics (e.g., treating Games like other competitions), support services and support facilitation, multifaceted preparation (e.g., knowing what to expect/expect the unexpected, talking to previous Olympians and training at/visiting venue prior to Games) physical preparation and coaching. Factors perceived to have negative influences on performance included departing from normal routine, media distractions, coach issues (e.g, experiencing coach conflict and coach-athlete conflict over training), overtraining and injury. The two groups investigated by Gould et al. (2001b) differed on a few positive performance

factors, including attitude towards the Games. All athletes that met expectations mentioned factors related to the attitude category while only one athlete who failed to meet expectations did so. The two groups also differed on Olympic housing and team unity when it came to positive performance factors. The athletes that met expectations more often mentioned team unity and factors related to Olympic housing having a positive influence on their performance than those that did not meet expectations. The groups differed on team selection, coaching, lack of support and team issues when it came to negative performance factors. The biggest difference emerged in themes regarding team selection where only athletes that did not meet expectations talked about this category. Within the team selection category, factors mentioned where qualification stress, unclear selection criteria and process and trials too close to the Games.

Athletes' transitions. As mentioned in career transitions review papers (e.g., Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007; Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler, & Coté, 2009; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004) recent studies have taken a shift from the performance-enhancement perspective to a more holistic lifespan perspective and exploring various transitions faced by the athletes during their career. Transitions can be normative (expected) or non-normative (unexpected) (Stambulova, 2000). A step to a higher competitive level is an example of a normative transition and is usually determined by age or organizational characteristics of the sport (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). Non-normative transitions are less predictable and may include de-selection from a team, injury or the loss of a personal coach to name a few. The predictability of normative transitions gives the athletes a chance to prepare themselves to cope with them in advance; alternatively the low predictability of non-normative transitions might result in athletes finding them difficult to cope with (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2013).

Retirement, or career termination, is an example of a normative transition and even an inevitable transition (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007). Earlier studies focused mostly on athletes' difficulties in this transition, but international data has shown that only about 20 per cent of athletes experience athletic retirement as a crisis and 80 per cent as a successful transition (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2013). Athletic retirement is relevant to this study because many athletes retire after the Olympic Games.

What plays an important role for the career retirement is the athlete's perception of controllability of the transition (Taylor & Ogilvie, 2001). Retirement planning in advanced (i.e., when the athlete is still active in sport), voluntary termination, multiple personal identity and positive experiences in roles other than the athlete role and effective social support from family, coach, peers and sport-organizations are all factors that have been found to be resources assisting the athletes in their transition to the post-sport career. Lack of support from coaches, sport peers, and sport organizations might lead to difficulties with retirement planning and further adaptation (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2013).

The European Perspectives in Athletic Retirement project involved a series of cross-cultural studies on athletes' adaptation to the post-career. Common and culture-specific patterns were found in retirement of German, Lithuanian, and Russian (Alfermann, Stambulova, & Zemaityte, 2004) as well as in French and Swedish (Stambulova, Stephan, & Jäphag, 2007) athletes. Common patterns consisted of pro-active retirement planning associated with voluntary athletic career termination, more positive and less negative emotional reactions to retirement and using more active (i.e., problem solving) and less defensive (i.e., emotion-focused) coping strategies. Retired athletes agreed upon the importance of social support from family and friends, but also upon lack of support from sport organizations. Cultural specific patterns consisted, for example, of prevalence of job-related reasons for retirement (e.g., a job

offer) and active coping strategies in the German sample, high athletic identity and more negative than positive reaction to retirement in the Lithuanian sample, the lowest of retirement planning and much defensive coping in the Russian sample (Alfermann et al., 2004), searching for a new career mainly within the sport system in the French sample, and the highest level of retirement planning and searching jobs outside sports in the Swedish sample (Stambulov et al., 2007).

Within-career transitions are those transitions that take place during an athlete's career. An example of a within-career transition is the transition from junior to senior level. This is an important transition for athletes who want to achieve an elite or professional level in sports (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2013). This is also a transition in which a number of athletes do not manage successfully. Vanden Auweele, De Martelaer, Rzewnicki, De Knop, and Wylleman (2004) found that only 17 per cent of elite junior athletes made a successful transition to senior elite sports within a five year period after the transition. Research (Stambulova, 1994; Pummell, Harwood & Lavallee, 2008; Finn & McKenna, 2010; Bruner, Munroe-Chandler & Spink, 2008; Stambulova, Franck, & Weibull, 2012) has shown that in the transition from junior to senior athlete issues outside sports are important, with studies and social aspects proving the most demanding. High stress and increased sensitivity to social influences can be the results from the athletes' ambitions to success in this transition and to meet the expectations of significant others together with uncertainty about success in coping. Successful coping with this transition is associated with athletes' identity development and personal maturation. Support from coaches is important for the success of this transition but the family also plays an important role (Robertson-Wilson and Cote, 2002; Rea, 2003).

Poczwardowski, Diehl, O'Neil & Cote (in press) conducted a study on six athletes where internal and external resources that contributed to a successful transition to the Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs were explored. The results revealed three metathemes: optimism, sport-life balance and transition- and performance-enhancing resourcefulness.

Extended knowledge on within-career transitions (transitions athletes face during their career) is needed because by understanding specific demands of particular transitions, necessary resources can be made available to athletes to assist them in making successful transitions (Wylleman, Alfermann, & Lavallee, 2004). When exploring different transitions, it can be important to take an individual approach to the process. Even though two different athletes might have the same outcome of a particular transition, their perceived journey might vary a lot (Carless, & Douglas, 2009).

Research (Debois, Ledon, Argiolas & Rosnet, 2012) has shown that the interactive nature of all domains of life should be taken into account when preparing athletes for the OG. Debois et al. (2012) did a case study on a French Olympian fencer and the narrative of her path throughout her sports appeared to be strongly linked to other domains of life.

To gain more insight into the changes perceived by athletes in view of their participation in the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games Wylleman, Reints and Van Aken (2012) did a study on four Belgian Olympians. Their use of the *Developmental model of transitions faced by athletes*, allowed them to identify a) 14 changes at all four levels during the phase prior to the Olympic Games (e.g. increased training load and frequency, increased feelings of pride, decreased contact with parents/family and decreased focus on studies), b) eight changes at three levels during the Olympic Games (e.g. physical tiredness, pre-competition pressure/tension and difficulty meeting parents/family), and c) 11 changes at all four levels during the phase after returning from the Olympic Games (e.g. longer break from training, increased self-confidence, increased contact with parents/family and increased focus on studies).

Wylleman, Reinst & Van Aken (2011) explored the Olympic Games as a career transition using Wylleman & Lavallee's (2004) developmental model for a holistic approach. They interviewed six athletes that either competed at the OG 2008 or did not qualify. Participation/non-participation influenced the quality and quantity of the athletes' relationships with parents, partner, siblings, and coach, including a decrease in frequency of contact with family and partner, and an increase in frequency with the coach before and during the OGs, and vice versa after (not making) the OGs. For athletes who participated in the OGs, the OGs were perceived as an important within career transition, while for those who did not qualify, it was perceived an antecedent to their athletic career end. Furthermore, the OGs had a strong influence on the quantity and quality of interpersonal relationships (Wylleman et al., 2011).

Methodological issues

The most common designs in research regarding athletes' career transitions are retrospective and cross-sectional analyses, there is however a lack of longitudinal studies in this area. Both qualitative and quantitative methods are popular in this research area (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007). Quantitative methods (questionnaires and standardized scales) are often done with large samples. When using qualitative methods, although on the expense of larger samples, the individual experiences and inner feelings may be assessed in greater detail.

A systematic review was conducted by Park, Lavallee and Tod (2013) on career transitions out of sport from 1968-2010 and a total of 126 studies. According to their findings research designs include qualitative (44%), quantitative (44%) and mixed-method (12%) designs. Furthermore, only 13 of the 126 studies were longitudinal studies.

Narrative inquiry, a form of qualitative research, has gotten more attention over the past few years (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). Narratives present human experiences as socially positioned and culturally grounded (Hiles & Čermák, 2008) and can be seen as a scheme for linking human action and events into contextualized and integrated whole.

In this study interviews with a narrative perspective will be conducted and participants will be asked to recall their experience relevant to their preparation for, and participation at the Olympic Games in London 2012 as well as their lives after the Olympic Games or after de-selection for the Olympic team.

Summary and objectives

Career transition is a relatively new topic of interest in the field of sport psychology; furthermore, the field of sport psychology is a relatively new field of interest in Iceland. Considering that the field of sport psychology is at an early stage in Iceland, there is a lack of research in that area. By investigating Icelandic athletes and gaining better understanding on their athletic careers with regard to cultural and contextual influences, hopefully better services can be provided along with athletes being better equipped for taking on various transitions in their athletic career.

There are no studies on the Olympic Games as a career transition on Icelandic athletes, to the author's furthest knowledge. Previous research (e.g. Gould, Greenleaf, Guinan, Dieffenbach & McCann, 2001a; Gould, Greenleaf & Dieffenbach, 2001b; Stambulova, 2003; Wylleman, Reints & Van Aken, 2008) in this field have focused on countries much larger than Iceland, e.g. USA and Russia. It is important to gain better understanding of cultural and contextual

influences on career transitions faced by Icelandic athletes because of the small population and few elite athletes.

The aim of this research is to explore Icelandic athletes' experiences relevant to their preparation for, participation at the Olympic Games 2012 in London and their lives after the OG/not making the OG. The Olympic Games will be explored as a career transition process covering several phases in the Olympic cycle, having the Games as its culmination and followed by a career change. Three groups will be compared; athletes that did not make it to the Games; athletes that made it and were successful; and athletes who made it to the Games and were less successful. Themes going through the athletes' journeys will be explored for each phase of the Olympic cycle.

Method

Design

To better understand the process of the OG as a career transition, individual interviews with a narrative perspective were conducted with six elite Icelandic athletes. All interviews were retrospective and took place within the year following the OG in London 2012. Using interviews allowed the interviewer to request additional information and clarify athlete responses in order to better understand the unique experience of each athlete. Through the whole process of data collection and analyses the Narrative Oriented Inquiry (NOI) model (Hiles & Čermák, 2008) was used. The NOI model is a dynamic framework for good practice in narrative research in psychology. It covers data collection, transcription, analyses, and reflection upon.

Participants

The National Olympic and Sports Association of Iceland selected nine elite athletes in cooperation with the author for this study but due to lack of responses only six athletes were interviewed. All of them were a part of an Olympic group put together by the National Olympic and Sports Association of Iceland as potential participants of the OG in London 2012. At the time of the interviews, the participants were between 27 and 32 years of age (mean age = 29,5 years, S.D. = 1,87). Four of the six athletes were female and two were male.

Participants were divided into three groups, the first group consists of those athletes who made it to the OG and were successful (n=3, mean age=28,3 years, 2 females, one male), the second group were athletes that made it to the OG but were less successful (n=1, age=31 year, male) and the third and final group were athletes that planned to go to the OG but did not qualify (n=2, mean age=30,5 years, 2 females).

In the group of those who were successful at the OG, two athletes had competed at the OG once before and for one athlete, these were the first OG. In the group of those who were less successful the athlete had competed at three OG prior to 2012. In the group that did not qualify for the OG, one athlete had competed twice at previous OG and one has never competed at the OG. The division between those who were successful at the OG and those who were less successful was made based on several criteria; 1) the division was done with expert evaluation; 2) a comparison was done on performance at the OG and personal best; 3) the athletes real placement at the OG.

Ethical issues

The research proposal was sent to the National Bioethics Committee of Iceland and received approval to be conducted. A notification of the research was also sent to the Data Protection Authority in Iceland.

Prior to the interviews each participant was asked permission to use their real names. All participants except one gave permission to their real names being used. A pseudonym will be used for the athlete that wanted to keep anonymous. Athletes were however made clear that because of the small sample size in the research complete anonymity could not be guaranteed.

Interviews

Two interview guides (see appendix 1) were developed with a narrative perspective. One was intended for those athletes that participated in the OG in London 2012. The other guide was intended for those athletes that aimed for the OG but did not qualify. There was one main question concerning their journey through the Olympic cycle but more detailed questions were used in the interviews to guide the participants through the process in a chronological order. The interview guides were developed to allow the interviewer to explore the journey of the Olympic cycle as recalled by the participants. The structure of the interview guide for those athletes that participated in the OG was based on the division of the Olympic preparation into five stages (Stambulova et al., 2012). The interview guide for the athletes that did not qualify included the first two phases of the Olympic cycle i.e. preliminary/basic preparation and selection process and then additionally the interview guide included questions about consequences and career situation after not qualifying. Structuring the guides into stages that come in chronological order reflects the athletic career transition model (Stambulova, 2003). Questions pertaining to psycho-social and academic influences were included, thereby drawing upon the developmental model (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). The guide was pilot tested with a three time Icelandic Olympian. The final guides were used in the six main interviews.

Procedure

The National Olympic and Sports Association of Iceland contacted nine prospective participants via e-mail, who forwarded a participant information letter (see appendix 2). Participants were asked to contact the researcher and schedule an interview or inform if they did not want to participate. Three follow up e-mails were sent to the participants who had not replied. Six out of those nine athletes replied and agreed to participate.

Interviews were conducted. The interviews were conducted by the author through Skype due to the interviewer being in another country than the participants. Each interview lasted between 20 and 60 minutes and was tape-recorded to provide an accurate record. All interviews were conducted in Icelandic, which is the native language of both the author and all the participants.

Data analysis

Data analysis was done with the help of the NOI model (Hiles & Čermák, 2008) in the following steps:

1. All interviews were transcribed verbatim. The author noted non-verbal cues for the working transcripts.

2. A participation check was done where the participants were given the option of changing, adding or deleting information in the transcripts. Minor changes in the transcripts resulted from this procedure.

3. A holistic-content analysis was conducted as suggested in the NOI model (Hiles & Čermák, 2008). The author read the verbatim transcripts several times to identify meaningful information about the athletes. Narratives resulted from this analysis describing and interpreting each athlete's individual pathway through preliminary/basic preparation, selection process, Olympic season, the Games, and post-Games periods.

4. A second participation check was done where the participants got a chance to review the narratives resulting from the holistic-content analysis of the interviews. All participants approved of the narratives and no changes resulted from this procedure.

5. A categorical-content analysis was conducted. The author read through the narratives several times until themes came apparent for each stage of the Olympic cycle as well as for the Olympic cycle as a whole. Overall, sixteen themes were identified. The author consulted her supervisor in regards of formulating the themes. Certain advice or quotations that related to the themes were taken from the interviews and included in the presentation of the results.

Results

Narratives describing and interpreting each athlete's individual pathway through preliminary/basic preparation, selection process, Olympic season, the Games, and post-Games periods resulted from the holistic content analysis of the transcripts are presented for each athlete. Then the focus in describing results is shifted to themes for each stage of the Olympic cycle derived from the categorical-content analysis of the narratives.

Narratives of athletes successful at the Olympic Games

Ásdís Hjálmsdóttir – Javelin throw

Preliminary or basic preparation

Ásdís started thinking about the Olympic preparation for the OG in London 2012 as soon as the 2008 Games were over. She took it one year at a time, pre season during the fall and then she had big tournaments during the summer. Her strategy for her preparation was to "…train well number 1, 2 and 3. Stay whole, not get injured, and train wisely…"[1]

Ásdís had some sponsors and claimed "The year before the OG it's very easy to get sponsors because everybody wants a piece of the pie." As well as financial support she had good support from her family, friends and her coach. Ásdís was resourceful when it came to professional help; she was working with a nutritionist, a masseur, a chiropractor and a sport psychologist.

During her preparation she was in school almost the entire time. She finished her bachelor's degree in the spring of 2009 and went straight on to take her master's degree. Her goal was to finish her master's degree in December 2011 and take time off to focus on the OG. After finishing school she worked a little bit but made sure that her preparation and training always

[1] This quote and all following quotes are translated from Icelandic by the author.

came first. "…I was always making sure that sports were a complete priority." She had good time management and was able to coordinate her sport with school very well and had time for her friends and family. Getting enough rest and not overtraining was important to her and she was very aware of those things.

Selection process

Qualifying for the OG in javelin throw is according to Ásdís a very convenient arrangement. She has to throw a certain distance in a certain timeframe. She made the minimum length in August 2011 and therefore had about a year to put all her focus on the OG. Many countries have stricter rules, but Iceland doesn't have that many world class athletes and don't put any further rules. Ásdís injured her foot around the time she qualified but that didn't seem to affect her training and ambition much. Qualifying for the OG seemed to be the results of very hard work. "This is sort of the payoff after everything I've been through."

Olympic season

Because Ásdís qualified for the OG almost a year before the actual Games she was able to put all her focus on peaking at the Games.

> "We were able to do things a little differently because I had already thrown the minimum length so everything was aimed at peaking at the OG, I didn't have to think about peaking before the OG to throw the minimum length."

After qualifying for the Games, Ásdís stuck to her normal routine. She used the tournaments before the OG to work on her technique and get into the right mood for the OG. Ásdís had the same coach for many years and according to her their relationship was very good.

The Games

Ásdís went to the OG with high expectations and was hungry for achievement.

> "I came there with high expectations; I was going to the finals. I came in 13th place at the World championship the summer before, I came in 13th place at the European championship earlier that summer….I was very hungry to make it to the finals and I was going to do it".

Both in the World championship and the European championship the top 12 go on to the finals so she was very close both times and came into the OG with the goal to make the finals.

Ásdís came to the Olympic village for a quick stop some time before she was competing just to get a feel of the atmosphere. She returned 3 days before she competed in the qualification round. Describing how she did in the qualification she said "I think I can claim this to be the best moment in my life, seriously…setting an Icelandic record on the first throw at the Olympics, secure yourself to the finals." After the qualifications she immediately started preparing for the finals "I wasn't full…I started preparing right away and couldn't wait to compete in the finals". She felt she could have done better in the finals but today Ásdís is very happy with her performance at the Games.

> "I was very disappointed after the finals because, even though it was one of my best throws in a big tournament….and was in fact technically a better throw than in the qualifications, I did a tiny technical error and that kind of thing can take 5-10 meters off your throw….disappointing ending like that because I knew I could do so much more".

During the Games Ásdís had very good expert support including physical therapists and a sport psychologist. She was well taken care of and felt she got all the help and support she needed.

Reflecting on her performance at the Games Ásdís said:

> "It is very good, I am extremely satisfied…I am so grateful to have experienced this feeling, being on the Olympic stadium, set a record on the first throw…I'm in this because it's what I enjoy the most doing, I really love it and there is no place you enjoy it more than on the Olympic stadium."

Working with a sport psychologist helped Ásdís very much in her preparation and during this whole process. Having this experience will help her in the future, "This gives me such self-confidence, to have experienced this and feel and see that I can do this, for the next Games".

Post Games

A lot has changed for Ásdís after the Games. "My life has changed very much, it has sort of overturned". She is more recognized in Iceland and aware that there is responsibility that comes with it. She has been working as a pharmacist and teaching at the University. Her training is however still a priority and she doesn't work more than 2 days a week. After the Games Ásdís got a new coach that lives in Switzerland and she has been traveling back and forth but plans to move to Switzerland in the fall of 2013. She also plans to apply for a PhD position there so she will continue being an athlete as well as a student.

When asked about advice for future Icelandic competitors at the Olympic Games, Ásdís said "Don't lose focus of the fact that you are there to compete" meaning that everything is so big at the OG and it is easy to get distracted. She also mentioned that everybody that is participating for the first time should go and watch an event before actually competing, just to get a taste of what it's like at the stadium.

Kári Steinn Karlsson - marathon

Preliminary or basic preparation

Kári has been a runner for years but has mainly focused on shorter distances, such as 10km or 21km. In 2011 he decided to run a marathon and his goal was to not only finish but to qualify for the marathon at the OG in London 2012.

Selection process

He ran his first marathon ever in September 2011 in Belgium and with that run he qualified for the OG. There are simple rules in qualifying for the OG in a marathon run, you have to beat a certain time during a certain period. It gets a little more complicated if there had been more than one marathon runner trying to qualify from Iceland but there is no other runner from Iceland that has been close to qualifying for the OG marathon so Kári knew he had to run under the time frame and he would be guaranteed a spot at the OG. He qualified almost a year before the OG and was happy to have reached it in his first marathon run ever. Talking about qualifying this long before the Games Kári said: "…you sort of get full [after running a marathon] and such an anticlimax reaching the goal of qualifying, if you reach it too shortly before the Games it's hard to get back that hunger".

Kári talks a lot about mental preparation and how believing in himself helped him so much in reaching his goal of qualifying for the OG. He gave out his goals to the media and in a way that put pressure on him to do what it takes to reach that goal. He was glad he made his goals official. "…I didn't think about anything else than that I would make it, and I did everything I possibly could…there was never any doubt in my mind". For him putting some pressure on himself works well, he works well under pressure and isn't afraid to set challenging goals.

Olympic season

As soon as Kári qualified he started thinking about physical and mental preparation. He emphasized the importance of rest because running a marathon takes a lot out of the runner and getting enough rest is important. In his preparation he focused on speed, which he thought is sometimes forgotten when training for a marathon. He went to South-Africa for a little while to train and was able to focus on just training and not having to work. In March 2012 Kári ran his second marathon, mostly just to get in another marathon before the OG and the main focus in that run was just to run without any pressure and learn to make the distance of a marathon. "I just wanted another race under the belt, have fun…I put a lot of pressure on myself reaching the goal of qualifying and I knew I would put a lot of pressure on me at the OG". When getting closer to the OG, Kári stayed in Iceland to train and get a rest from all the traveling he had been doing.

His relationship with his coach was good and their relationship got stronger during the whole Olympic preparation process. Kári also had a physical therapist he went to every week even when he was not injured, just for preventive purposes. His physical therapist was then chosen to go to the OG, which helped Kári very much because he knew Kári's body and what would help him get ready for the competition. Kári had an agent that helped him with sponsors and the agent was also his strengthening coach. Kári didn't have many sponsors before he qualified for the OG but when he qualified "everybody wanted to sponsor me and have me in their commercials and stuff."

His family gave him good support as well as his girlfriend, which he claimed was very understanding to all the late night practices. He was well aware of the importance of mental preparation and sought information about that topic and tried to be aware of them all the time.

Kári worked 75% along with his Olympic preparation and felt comfortable with that routine. He was unfortunate a few months before the OG when he was on a project in his job and had to show up for work 100% for six weeks. This was at the same time he had very tough training. "There was a point where it was just too much, working full time, deal with all the media stuff and train twice a day. For three weeks I was completely broken and close to overtraining."

Coordinating his training with other activities didn't seem to work too well, especially when he had to work full time. He said this experience taught him to be aware of knowing how to balance different activities in a good way for the next OG, but these were his first OG. He did however get good rest the last 4 weeks before the Games and took a vacation from his job to focus on his training.

> "I wanted to get to London early even though I was competing on the last day of the Games. I wanted to get away from everything and be able to sleep as much as I wanted and focus on my training".

The Games

Kári went to England about two weeks before his race but didn't enter the Olympic village until 4-5 days before the race. He wanted to go to England and use the time to train and relax.

When first asked what his goal for the OG was he said he wanted to be in the top 30. He hadn't thought about it and didn't know how much it was realistic. He then found out he was ranked around number 90 out of 105 runners that competed, "I realized that this wasn't really a realistic goal". He changed his goal from the top 30 to just beating as many runners as possible and leave it all out there on the track. He came in 42nd place, "I am extremely happy with that after having been ranked around ninety". He talked about that the track was difficult and the weather was very hot and that he has yet to prove that he can do a lot more. "I didn't manage to beat my personal best, which was also my goal. But that can totally be written on the weather".

His experience in the race itself was unbelievable "I got such goose bumps being there, I was in shock the first few kilometers, there was such noise and such a scene…being a part of all this…". He talks about the support he got during the race itself, there are three drinking stations on the way and he ran past each of them three times. On each station he had somebody, his coach on one, his physical therapist on the second and the Icelandic guide on the third.

Even though he feels he could have done better in the marathon he is satisfied with his performance "I know I could have done a lot worse and at least I put 110% in it and thinking back I am very happy with that place considering where I was ranked before." He still hasn't given up on the top 30 and feels that could be a realistic goal for the next OG, or placing even higher. "I still have this top 30 in my head since I gave that out publically. And I believe I can reach that, or even top 20, at the next Games."

Post Games

Talking about what Kári has learned during this whole process is that goal setting is very important. He also talks about that for the next Games he will control his strains much better "My biggest mistake was not giving it more time, it was ridiculous to work 100% during the period when the training loads were so heavy".

Not a lot has changed in Kári's life, except maybe he is a little more recognized in Iceland. He keeps is routine, working 75% and training. He is happy to be working a little bit and knows that when he ends his athletic career he will have another career to turn to. "It doesn't go together putting a lot of ambition in your occupational career and sports".

Final advice from Kári:

> "Enjoy every moment of it and give it all you've got. It's not every day you get this kind of opportunity and there aren't many OG, they are only every 4 years. Don't have any regrets and don't let the little things or stress ruin it."

Ragna Ingólfsdóttir – Badminton

Preliminary or basic preparation

„I always planned on participating in two OG, ever since I was little. The preparation just started as soon as the other Games ended". Ragna participated in the OG in 2008 and her goal was to make the OG in 2012 as well. The first year after the Games 2008 went into

rehabilitation because she tore her ACL. Then three years before the OG 2012 she started competing again and working on qualifying for the Games.

When asked about her main focus Ragna replied "Make the top 50 on the world ranking list. And of course the OG was number 1, 2 and 3." Ragna seemed to have good goal setting skills and sets both long-term goals and then short-term goals.

Ragna got good support from her club and had a personal trainer whom she worked closely with and went with her when competing abroad. Financially Ragna claimed it was difficult:

> "I felt better financially before the 2008 Games, then of course everything was in an upswing and easy to get sponsors. It was really difficult before these Games, you had to think much more about that part. Of course the National Olympic and Sports Association of Iceland help but that is just a drop in the bucket of what you need."

Ragna has played badminton for 21 years and always had good support and understanding from her family.

Ragna graduated from the University of Iceland in 2009, "I sort of had to study….because I needed the student loans…but I also enjoyed having something other than my sport to think about". After graduating from the University she was forced to work in the occupational market more than she had before for financial reasons.

Coordinating different parts in Ragna's life she said "the preparation was of course always number one. If there was time and I wanted to do something else I did find time for it but my life just revolved around this."

Selection process

To qualify for the OG in badminton the athletes have to work their way up the world-ranking list by competing in at least 10 tournaments a year. Ragna planned to compete at 15-20 tournaments per year from 2009-2012. Qualifying for the OG 2012 was more difficult than for 2008, "there were younger girls from other countries that have gotten good, so I experienced before these Games more insecurity. I knew I was good enough to qualify, but I had to do well in the tournaments". The final list of participants at the OG comes out May 1st before the Games but Ragna was fairly sure that she would qualify in February/March.

"Endless training over the years. I never would have made it if I hadn't always thought about badminton and sports as my main goal in life" is what Ragna said about what helped her qualify for the OG. "It really comes down to you. There are certain things like support from others that play a part, but at the end of the day it comes down to how hard you work".

Olympic season

Ragna was close to being secure with a spot at the Olympics about 4-5 months before the Games and the main focus for her was to not get injured. She did participate in some big tournaments the months before the OG like the European championship but made sure she didn't compete in too many tournaments. "You of course keep on training but make sure you're not overtraining."

Ragna had the same coach since she was very young and their relationship seemed very good. "He is sort of like my dad. He has traveled around the whole world with me." The National Olympic and Sports Association of Iceland offers some time with a sport psychologist and

Ragna had been going to the same one for years. Then she had a physical therapist she went to once a week.

The Games

At the OG in London Ragna's goal was to win at least one game. There are three athletes in each heat and with Ragna there was one athlete ranked number 14 in the world and the other one was ranked below Ragna.

> "I saw I had a chance to win at least one game…I had never competed against the girl that was ranked number 14 so I didn't know how she was. But I set out to win her, but then I lost against her. But I did win one game, reached that goal to win a game at the Olympics".

Ragna's experience at the OG was good "This is the top of your life as an athlete, being at the OG". She felt well taken care of at the Games and claimed that if there was anything she needed it was taken care of. Talking about her performance Ragna said:

> "I'm really happy. I couldn't imagine it any better. Of course you think about how it would have been fun to win the heat and stuff like that, but I feel I did very well against that girl that was ranked so high on the world-ranking list. Incredibly happy with the way I played at the Games and everything just worked out, so I left very happy with it."

Post Games

Ragna retired from badminton after the Games like she had planned and feels everything she put into her sport was worth it. She got pregnant shortly after the Games. "I would very much like to be a normal individual in the society [laughs]."

About her retirement she said "I've experienced this in a very positive way and feel this is a fun change. I'm looking forward being a mom, having a family and having a normal job and stuff like that…." Advise for future Olympians from Iceland Ragna said:

> "Be aware of and have the people around you be aware of that this is what matters the most to you…put everything you've got into it because it's so worth it. Even if you end up without any rights [e.g. parental leave and retirement pension] here in Iceland it's all worth it."

Narrative of athlete less successful at the Olympic Games

Jakob Jóhann Sveinsson – Swimming

Preliminary or basic preparation

Jakob first qualified for the OG in 2000 at the age of 17 and has qualified every OG since, making the OG 2012 his forth. He started thinking about the preparation for the OG 2012 as soon as the Games 2008 were over. His goal was to improve and do better than in 2008, but in 2008 he did not make the semi-finals. Jakob tried various new things to improve his swimming; he tried different weightlifting from what he had done before, he traveled to train with and compete against swimmers from other countries.

When talking about support he said there was very good support from his family but it seemed that organizational support was lacking. "I don't know about…uhm…the NOC and the swimming committee were kind of inflexible if I was trying to do something…I just did it

on my own terms…went by myself and did everything". It seems that Jakob felt alone in his preparation except for a masseur he went to once a week and then his coach.

Jakob tried to study along sides his training but because big tournaments in swimming are at the same time as finals at the University, it was difficult and he took some classes at a slower pace. When coordinating different parts of his life Jakob said "It maybe wasn't that complicated really. You just put the sport number one and other things number two and three."

Selection process

Before the OG 2012 the rules for how to qualify in swimming were changed. Because of these new rules there was uncertainty about whether he would qualify until three weeks before the Games. "I felt it was more uncomfortable from how it was before." Jakob felt it was helpful for him to have traveled and compete abroad rather than staying in Iceland. Jakob talks about how he learned from the process that you have to work hard for things and have discipline. Since Jakob had competed at three OG before the Games 2012 he probably already had good discipline and was a hard worker. When asked the question of what he learned from the process it seemed he didn't really have an answer and maybe something he hadn't thought about.

Olympic season

Jakob secured a spot at the OG three weeks before the Games. Those weeks he focused on "fine tuning" his technique and get rest. When asked about his relationship with his coach Jakob answers "It was okay I guess, but uhm...maybe…it was a little like…I maybe wanted to do other things than he and we were always trying to discuss that, what we would do there and there." In an interview right after Jakob's competition at the OG he blamed his coach for his poor performance but did however publicly apologize for that later. Jakob seemed to be on the lookout not going too deeply into his relationship with his coach during the interview.

The Games

Going to the OG Jakob had his mind set on making it to the semi-finals which he didn't and was far from his personal best. When asked about how he evaluates his performance his response was "…nooot good enough….I was very tired at the Games…something…I don't know why that was….just some exhaustion and...I just didn't do well then". Jakob said he learned from this process of the Olympic preparation to think about other things as well as the sport and be aware of not training too much.

Post Games

After the Games Jakob has put more focus on his studies and isn't training much and doesn't know what the future will bring in regards of swimming. "I haven't made up my mind…I'm thinking whether I will go back to swimming or not, I'm keeping fit and seeing if I have a chance making it to the next Games or not." He plans on finishing his studies at the University and find a job after that.

For future Icelandic Olympians, Jakob's advises them to focus on the competition. "Don't get distracted or stressed out by how big everything is and don't spend all your time on seeing everything and doing everything."

Narratives of athletes that did not qualify for the Olympic Games

Anna Jónsdóttir – Undisclosed

Preliminary or basic preparation

Anna started thinking about the OG after the World Championship in 2009 but according to her the actual preparation didn't start until 2011. She traveled to Africa to train with world top athletes. Her plan was to stay in Africa for a while but she was forced to go back home because of lack of money and she had to change her plans for the preparation. Another setback in her preparation was getting pneumonia in the beginning of 2012 and she claimed "it was all downhill from there."

Selection process

The rules for qualifying for the OG in [Anna´s sport] were changed before the OG 2012 with little appreciation by Anna; „they changed the requirements. The B-minimum was no longer valid, if they had been I would have gone, and without having to wait almost until the day before the OG were set...". Anna has competed in two OG (2004 & 2008) and knew how the process was and didn't like these new rules.

Financial issues seem to be a big burden on many Icelandic elite athletes. "I was in fact just [doing the sport], and needed to raise money. I was taking on as many projects as I could…. Make some money to be able to do this."

> "It's very dreadful, you wish you could just practice and focus on that, but I had to focus on making money to be able to go abroad to compete and go to training camps. And also just to buy food and gasoline [for her car] really to do this…then I definitely would have been able to do much better."

In the start of 2012 she got very sick and it was "all downhill" from there. Trying to train and work and then get sick seemed too much to handle. She did however have a chance of making the OG but that dream was cut short the day before she was supposed to leave for London, a week before the OG opening ceremony when she fell below on the world-ranking list.

> "I could have taken better care of myself and not get pneumonia. I actually did take really good care of myself but I tend to get pneumonia, I have gotten it three times the past 5-6 years…..There was nothing I could have done differently. I did everything I could."

Consequences and career situation

As consequences of not making the OG Anna said:

> "It's of course disappointing for everybody that had sponsored me. Disappointing because of not being able to deliver when you've gotten sponsors and grants and stuff…uhm and of course disappointing setting out to do this and then not doing it…..but you never reach the top without taking a few dives…"

Support for athletes that do not make the OG is limited when it comes to organizational support. She got good support from her family and they helped her "think about other things".

Despite getting sick Anna did come very close to going to the OG and is "…very happy that I gave it my all…and learn to take the fall. And hopefully learned something so you can do better the next time…"

After the OG Anna decided to turn to other things and spend more time with her family. She has however not ruled out the possibility of competing again.

> "The plan was always to finish the OG and then retire, have kids and maybe study, move abroad and stuff. But since I didn't finish the OG I kind of want to continue, do a little bit better, maybe compete in one more tournament, or even more, I haven't decided anything yet."

Anna advises future Olympians to enjoy the preparation, "I don't understand people who compete just to compete; you have to want it and have fun during the preparations as well. The tournaments aren't the only fun part."

Finally Anna talks about good support from the National Olympic and Sports Association of Iceland for the athletes during their preparation for the OG, while there is little money, they provide as much support as they can.

Þorbjörg Ágústsdóttir – Fencing

Preliminary or basic preparation

As an athlete Þorbjörg has always had that dream of competing at the OG but right away she strikes the interviewer as not having very high confidence that she can. Perhaps it is not a lack of confidence in her but a lack of confidence in the belief that an Icelandic fencer could qualify for the OG. "It's of course something you are always thinking about [going to the OG]…you didn't know if you could do it because fencing isn't that big in Iceland, but we have done pretty good despite of that."

She aimed at competing at the OG in 2008 but when that didn't work out she immediately started thinking about the OG 2012. Because fencing is a rather small sport in Iceland, the fencers are always competing against the same individuals. Þorbjörg's plan was to travel a lot and compete against more athletes from other countries. The biggest barrier in her preparation was financial struggles. Even though she got sponsors and various grants it didn't cover the cost for all the traveling and everyday needs. "You just don't have money to buy food when you train this much and work this little and you have to live somewhere, you need to pay for that." Þorbjörg worked as much as she could along with her training but when training twice a day and traveling a lot there isn't much time left to work.

Selection process

To qualify for the OG, Þorbjörg has to climb the world-ranking list which means that she has to travel abroad to participate in tournaments.

In 2010 she got a grant from the IOC and Þorbjörg was able to prepare the way she wanted and attend all the tournaments she needed. "I had a real shot at this even though I didn't make it." Þorbjörg talked about the importance of both physical and mental training.

> "I wish I could have gone to a sport psychologist when I was just a teenager, to help keep you calm really, and keep your focus because you need to be so concentrated and believe in yourself when you are fencing."

Before the OG in 2012 Þorbjörg had been seeing the same sport psychologist for 5-6 years. “It helped me so much…..I’ve had a hard time dealing with how high the stress level in the sport is.”

Þorbjörg said that even though support from the family is the most important, other kinds of support are necessary. This might be especially true for Icelandic athletes where very few of them are getting paid as professional athletes. “You are not getting paid when you are training.” She had some sponsors but needed more and talks about how difficult it is for athletes to get sponsors. “It’s a little bit like applying for a job but nobody replies…people might understand how difficult that would be” and mentions that Icelandic athletes should maybe be marketed better so it would be easier for them to get sponsors. When asked how she coordinated different parts of her life Þorbjörg said:

> “The Olympic preparation was, you know, the main thing in my life. My life revolved around that….it maybe didn’t go to well coordinating everything….it’s of course always difficult for your family, you’re of course never home, and for my boyfriend.”

Qualifying for the OG is according to Þorbjörg very difficult and there are only 32 spots in her category and the top 10 in the world are secured a spot while the other athletes have to compete for the remaining 22 spots. “An Icelandic athlete with the support available in Iceland doesn’t really have a chance being in the top 10 in the world.” Þorbjörg is disappointed in how her journey ended.

> “The hardest thing about this Olympic preparation is that I went to the tournament where I could have secured a spot at the OG, being so well prepared and being such a good athlete but wasn´t able to perform my best. That was the biggest mistake.”

She talks about if she had performed her best she could have made it but then mentions her “fear of making mistakes…instead of being full of self-confidence”. She talked about her fear of making mistakes and at this particular tournament there was pressure of not affording to make mistakes, this might have been too much for her to handle.

Consequences and career situation

> “I am so happy I decided to give it all I’ve got even though I didn’t pull it off. It was very giving and an amazing experience. Even though all my friends were at home working and making money and now I stand up as an athlete with nothing but dept, you wouldn’t want to trade because you get to travel the world, even though it’s mostly just the sport venues, you have been doing what you love most in the world.”

Þorbjörg feels she might have needed some help in controlling the training load, “You and your coach are so focused on getting better, and you practice and practice. But sometimes you maybe need more rest.” She also feels she should have worked more on the mental part.

When the dream of making it to the OG was over Þorbjörg said she got very good support from her family but no support other than that. She lost a lot of her sponsors and said “if you don’t qualify there is no support”. Þorbjörg had already bought a ticket to the OG, to secure that somebody could come and watch her. She used the ticket herself and said it helped a lot to go and watch.

Þorbjörg is now working full time and had to cut her training by 50% because of the dept she got while shooting for the OG. She doesn’t have a long-term goal at this point when it comes to fencing and is taking it one year at a time. “I’m not aiming for Rio because it’s so difficult financially and I’m not ready to increase my dept by 100%, they are so high.” She is heading abroad this fall to take her PhD and “change scenarios” and seems happy not having the

pressure of Olympic preparation hanging over her head. “I put high demands on myself. I maybe put unnecessary pressure on myself. But it’s good to get rid of all that [laughs].”

Athletes’ shared themes

A categorical-content analysis was conducted as suggested by the Narrative Oriented Inquiry (NOI) model (Hiles & Čermák, 2008). Themes derived for each transition phase of the Olympic cycle and the Olympic cycle as a whole. The data analysis yielded overall 16 themes. Themes going through the narratives at each stage of the Olympic cycle are presented in table 1. Advice and quotations from athletes for each stage are also presented as well as advice and quotations regarding the Olympic cycle as a whole.

Table 1
Themes of each stage of the Olympic cycle and advices from the athletes

Phases of the Olympic cycle	Themes	Advice from the participants
Preliminary/basic preparation	Gain international experience through competition and camps Getting financial support	“There is a big tournament every single year and preparation for the Olympics really isn't that much different...the only difference is that the Olympic Games are of course the biggest tournament.” (SG) “What holds us back in individual sports is that you're always competing against the same individuals...so it helps a lot to go abroad and train.” (NQG) “I trained here at home and then I went abroad to compete once or twice every month for three years.” (SG) “The sport money [grants from the NOC and IOC] is of course just to cover tournament costs…it’ really important to get other kinds of [financial] support.” (NQG)

Selection process	Benefits of early qualification/selection Clear criteria for qualification/selection	"There was this uncertainty...you trained and trained and trained and you didn´t know whether you were going until about three weeks before the Games...that was very uncomfortable." (LSG) "If you qualify to shortly before the Games it can be difficult to get back that hunger." (SG) "I am very lucky...it's not like for example in Judo or Badminton where you have to compete in all these tournaments and climb the world-ranking list or something, because it can so easily be measured. There is some minimum that I have to throw and I'm in." (SG)
Olympic season	Good relationship with/support from coach Energy management and prevention of overtraining Visiting Olympic venue prior to the Games	"I had a lot of support from my coach both on and off the field." (SG) "It was okay I guess [relationship with coach], but uhm...maybe…it was a little like…I maybe wanted to do other things than he and we were always trying to discuss that, what we would do there and there." (LSG) "I maybe though about swimming a little too much last year…maybe trained too much…that's what I learned the most, to relax more in between." (LSG) "You keep training but make sure you are not overtraining." (SG) "I came to the village and got a feel of the atmosphere, then I left and came back just before I competed, because you know, you don't want to adjust and that it is something comfortable and normal. You want to be on your toes." (SG)

The Games	Hunger for achievement Distraction awareness and preparation Expert support	"...I was very hungry to make it to the finals and I was going to do it". (SG) "Just relax, don't stress about the OG...it's so big...don't do everything and see everything all at once...just focus on the competition and just relax in your room." (LSG) "There was a very good team of experts there. There were two physical therapists…and I had a sport psychologist there that I worked a lot with…she helped me so much…everything is done to help us perform our best." (SG) "…be prepared for that [the size of everything] and work systematically on that, how big everything is, not letting that distract you." (SG)
Post Games	Analysis and evaluation of Olympic experience Career changes/retirement More public/media attention and higher responsibility	"I'm really happy. I couldn't imagine it any better." (SG) "…nooot good enough….I was very tired at the Games…something…I don't know why that was….just some exhaustion and...I just didn't do well then." (LSG) "Training is different now because I don't have any long-term goals. I'm just taking it one year at a time and I'm not aiming for Rio…" (NQG) "My life changed very much when I got a new coach. I quit training with my coach that I have had since I started, since I was a kid." (SG) "...now I notice that when I come to a crowded place people turn their heads....there is responsibility that comes with that, it means you are more of a role model and need to watch out what you do." (SG)

		"You just put the sport number one and other things number two and three." (LSG)
	Prioritizing sports while balancing sports with work/school	"In general I took the evenings off, that's when I met up with my friends or family..." (SG)
Olympic cycle as a whole	Organizational support	"The NOC offers a few sessions with a sport psychologist...I've been going to the same one for years and gotten good help from him." (SG)
	Importance of family support	"Incredibly good support from my family and friends….I was in this for 21 years so my whole life as revolved around this and everybody around me knows it." (SG)

Note: Successful Group (SG); Less Successful Group (LSG); Non-qualified group (NQG)

Discussion

Summary of results

This study shows the results from interviews with six elite Icelandic athletes. Even though it is difficult to generalize from six individuals, it allows for a deeper understanding of the complexity of each athlete and their journey through the Olympic cycle. Six core narratives resulted from the holistic-content analysis. The narratives describe and interpret each athlete's individual pathway through the different phases of the Olympic cycle. Conducting narratives showed different types of journeys for each individual to the final outcomes of the transition.

Despite the uniqueness of each narrative the categorical-content analysis revealed certain themes that go through each phase of the transition with an emphasize on important resources and coping strategies as well as outcomes of the OG as a transition. Resources perceived and different coping strategies used by the athletes as necessary during the whole Olympic cycle were also revealed.

In the *preliminary/basic preparation* the main transition demand is to prepare for the selection/qualification for the OG. Coping strategies helping the athletes to get more resources were gaining *international experience through competition and camps*; and *getting financial support*. Going abroad and gaining international experience can be very important for elite athletes since there are few athletes that reach that level of excellences in Iceland. Being able to go abroad and train with and compete against world class athletes could provide priceless experiences for Icelandic athletes. Some kind of financial support is required for the athletes to be able to travel and gain international experience. Both athletes that did not qualify struggled with getting the necessary financial support. One of them needed to travel a lot to qualify for the Olympic Games; she needed to attend many international tournaments. After

not making the OG she cut down her training load to work and pay some of the dept she got during her Olympic preparation. The other athlete planned to train for some time abroad but had to cut her stay short due to financial strains.

Two of the athletes that were successful talked about how easy it was to get sponsors, especially after they qualified for the Games, but they both qualified about a year before the Games. It should be noted that both of these athletes were not obligated to compete abroad for their qualification but nonetheless they did travel to gain international experience. The third successful athlete had to compete at international tournaments to qualify for the OG. She had difficulties in getting financial support but did not end up in any dept. The athlete that was less successful did not talk at all about financial support. Considering these results it seems that getting financial support gets easier when an athlete qualifies early for the Games. The largest economic collapse in relative terms in modern history happened in Iceland in 2008 (The Economist, 2008) and might have made it more difficult for the athletes to get sponsors and especially before qualifying for the Games. One athlete especially mentioned it being more difficult to get sponsors before the OG in 2012 than it was before the OG 2008.

In the *selection process* phase, the main transition demand is to be selected/qualified for the OG. Important resources perceived by the athletes at this stage were *benefits of early qualification/selection* and *clear criteria for qualification/selection*. The benefits of early qualification were clear when the athletes that were successful were compared to the athlete that was less successful. All three athletes that were successful qualified 4-11 months before the Games while the athlete that was less successful qualified only three weeks before the Games. Qualifying shortly before the Games could have caused more insecurity and stress while the athletes that qualified early could organize their preparation to peak at the Olympic Games and not worrying about having to perform their best at tournaments leading up to the Games. It should also be mentioned that because it seems that getting financial support gets easier when an athlete has already qualified, there are clear benefits of early qualification when it comes to financial support. Qualifying for the OG varies from sport to sport. Two of the successful athletes talked about the convenience of the qualification criteria for their sport. The rules changed from previous years for the qualification for the athlete that was less successful and one of the athletes that did not qualify and they both thought the new rules were less convenient and made them feel insecure.

In the *Olympic season*, the main transition demand is to prepare for peaking at the OG. Important resources perceived by the athletes at this stage were *good relationships with and support from coach*. Coping strategies important for this stage were *energy management and prevention of overtraining*; and *visiting the Olympic venue prior to the Games*. All three athletes that were successful claimed they had a good relationship with their coaches and one even talked about their relationship getting stronger during the whole process. The athlete that was less successful claimed he and his coach had some disagreements. In the interview he did not want to talk much about his relationship with his coach. It can be understood that their relationship was problematic and that might have affected the athletes training and preparation, and consequently his performance at the OG. Two of the successful athletes talked about their focus on avoiding overtraining prior to the Games. The third athlete was attending his first OG and mentioned coming close to overtraining at one point. His inexperience in Olympic preparation might play a role in poor energy management. Three of the four athletes that competed at the OG talked about either visiting the Olympic village or training there prior to the Games and how having gotten the feel of the atmosphere prior to their competition was helpful.

The main transition demand for *the Games* is to perform the athlete's best. Resources during the OG were *hunger for achievement* and *expert support*. Coping strategy during the OG was

distraction awareness and preparation. The athletes talked about being prepared for how big everything is when coming to the Olympic village/venue and not forgetting that you are there to compete. All four athletes that competed at the OG were happy with the expert support they got during the Games and felt well taken care of. The National Olympic and Sports Association of Iceland offer time with a sport psychologist for the athletes and four of the six athletes mentioned using that service. One of the athletes that did not mention using the service of a sport psychologist was in the group of successful athletes. He did however talk about his awareness of mental preparation and being self educated in that area. The other athlete that did not mention using the service of a sport psychologist was in the group that did not qualify.

The main transition demand for *post Games* is making proper changes in career. A coping strategy for this stage was *analysis and evaluation of Olympic experience*. Outcomes of the OG as a transition were *career changes/retirement*; and *more public/media attention and higher responsibility*. The athletes were asked to reflect on their experiences and performance at the OG. All four Olympians talked about good experiences in regards of their stay in the Olympic village. When analyzing their performance the successful athletes were all very satisfied with their performance as expected and the less successful athlete was in contrast very dissatisfied with his performance. One athlete retired after the Games, these were her second Games and she talked about her goal always being to compete twice at the OG. Her perception of retirement was positive. She was in the group of the successful athletes and reaching her goals could play a key role in how she perceived retirement. One athlete that did not qualify talked about the possibility of retiring within the next few years and her perception of retiring thoughts was not as positive. Five of the six athletes changed career scenarios and plans after either the OG or not qualifying. The athletes that did not qualify and was less successful all took a break, and at the moment of the interviews were still uncertain about what the future holds in terms of their athletic career. In the successful group, one currently retired, one keeps the same routine and the third one is moving abroad because of her sport and plans to continue her athletic career. Athletes preparing for the OG always get a lot of media attention and those athletes that compete at the OG get even more media attention. Two of the successful athletes talked about how much more public and media attention they have gotten after the Games and the higher responsibility of becoming a role model for many young Icelandic athletes.

Resources perceived by the athletes as important during *the Olympic cycle as a whole* were *organizational support* and *family support*. An important coping strategy for the whole Olympic cycle was *prioritizing sports while balancing sport with work/school*. Variations in organizational support were evident when the three groups were compared. All three athletes that were successful mentioned good organizational support while the athlete that was less successful felt a lack of organizational support and the feeling of being alone in the process. The athletes that did not qualify seemed to have needed more organizational support and surprisingly they got no organizational support when failing to qualify. All athletes talked about the importance of family support and that they had met good understanding through the whole process. For the athletes that did not qualify, family support was extra important whereas that was the only support they received after not qualifying.

All six athletes were balancing their sports while either working or studying. Even though their sport was a priority, most of them needed an income from a job or student loans to cover their expenses. Two of the successful athletes were satisfied with their balance between work/school and training, except for a few weeks for one of them when he had to work full time. The third one was studying and claimed it was good to have something else to think about but also talked about the need for staying in school to get student loans. The athlete that

was less successful at the Games didn't manage to be in school except for a little bit because finals and big tournaments overlapped too much, he however did not talk about the need to go to school or have a job for financial reasons. The two athletes that did not qualify were both working primarily for financial reasons and were trying to work as much as they could.

Results in relation to theoretical frameworks and previous research

The two theoretical frameworks used to guide the study appeared useful and complemented each other. The results revealed that the Olympic Games as a transition can be seen as a process with various transition demands at each stage of the Olympic cycle. To cope with the demands athletes used various resources and coping strategies. This reflects the process suggested by the Athletic career transition model (Stambulova, 2003). The results imply that athletes who were successful at the OG and thus made a successful transition were high in resources while they were overall low in barriers (e.g. early qualification, less financial worries). In contrast, the athletes that did not qualify for the OG were both higher in barriers (e.g. financial struggles and late qualification process) and lower in resources. The athlete that was less successful was high in barriers (e.g. lack of organizational support, lack of confidence in his coach and late qualification). The athletes that had an unsuccessful transition, the less successful athlete and those who did not qualify all put their athletic career on standby after the Games or when not qualifying, and were uncertain about the future in regards to their athletic career. This might be what Stambulova (2000) described as a rejection strategy, where the athletes are either avoiding the situation by not deciding what will come next or possibly withdrawing from the situation which might lead to the athletes retirement.

In relation to the Developmental model of transitions faced by athletes (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004) the narratives reflect athletes' Olympic preparation in the holistic perspective. This model stimulated interview questions regarding various aspects of the athletes' lives. None of the six athletes were full time professional athletes; they were also either students or employees. The athletes were also asked to talk about what was next for them as individuals, meaning what they will be doing in their lives both in sports and outside of sports. The athletes were all facing other transitions during their Olympic cycle. Most transitions mentioned by the athletes during the Olympic cycle were on the academic level where they were either starting a higher education or finishing higher education. After the Games or not qualifying most athletes faced other transitions. One athlete faced transitions on both the athletic and psychosocial level right after the Games when she retired from her athletic career and got pregnant. Another athlete from the successful group faced a transition in the psychosocial level when she got a new coach after the Games and will be facing a transition in the academic & vocational level when she will move abroad to take her PhD in the upcoming year. These findings underline the importance of taking a holistic perspective in understanding athletes' development because transitions at one area in an athletes' life might affect transitions in another area.

When results of this study were compared to the findings of Gould et al. (2001a) some similarities came apparent. Themes in this study concerning distraction awareness and prevention; and energy management and prevention of overtraining are compatible with the findings of Gould et al. (2001a) where Olympians stated these categories lessons learned regarding performance excellence. Coach-athlete conflict over training seemed to have a negative influence on the performance of the athlete that was less successful which is consistent with the findings of Gould et al. (2001b). Benefits of early selection/qualification and clear criteria for selection/qualification were evident in this study which is also consistent with Gould et al. (2001b) findings. One athlete in the successful group talked about treating the Olympic Games as any other tournament which was found by Gould et al. (2001b) to have

a positive influence on performance. Gould et al. (2001b) also found support services to have a positive influence on performance, the three groups in this study varied in support services where the successful group seemed to have a better support system than the athletes that did not qualify or was less successful. Other factors perceived to have a positive influence on performance in Gould et al. (2001b) study did not link to specific groups in this study e.g. factors regarding working with a sport psychologist and training at/visiting venue prior to Games.

The results of this study were compared to studies regarding retirement whereas one athlete in the group of the successful athletes retired after the Games. It was a voluntary termination and in her interview she saw her retirement positively and was excited about taking on roles other than the athletic role. These findings are consistent with literature regarding athletic retirement (Taylor & Ogilvie, 2001). One of the athletes that did not qualify for the Games talked about her future retirement and did not have the same positive perspective as the athlete that had a successful transition just before her retirement. Icelandic athletes have for example not earned rights to a parental leave when retiring. This might be problematic for elite athletes in Iceland and push them to focus more on their occupational career rather than their athletic career. Culture specific patterns for retired athletes in Iceland might be similar to those found with Swedish athletes (Stambulova et al., 2007), for example in regards of finding jobs that are not related to sports.

The two athletes that did not qualify for the OG talked about the importance of family support while feeling a lack of organizational support after not qualifying. These findings are similar to those found for retiring athletes in cross-cultural studies (Alfermann, et al., 2004; Stambulova, et al., 2007). Both athletes that did not qualify were uncertain about their athletic future and mentioned possible retirement. This might underline the connection between athletic retirement after the Olympic Games.

Exploring the Olympic Games as a career transition is very new and the author only came across one additional research on this particular topic (Wylleman et al., 2011). Wylleman et al. (2011) found that participation/non-participation influenced the quality and quantity of the athletes' relationships with parents, partner, siblings, and coach, including a decrease in frequency of contact with family and partner, and an increase in frequency with the coach before and during the OGs, and vice versa after (not making) the OG. For athletes who participated in the OGs, the OGs were perceived as an important within career transition, while for those who did not qualify, it was perceived an antecedent to their athletic career end. Furthermore, the OGs had a strong influence on the quantity and quality of interpersonal relationships (Wylleman et al., 2011). The results from this study also showed influences on the quality and quantity of the athletes' relationships with parents, partner and coach. There was a decrease in frequency of contact with family and partner before the OG and vice versa after the Games or when not qualifying. The results from this study are partially consistent with Wylleman et al. (2011) study in regards to a career transition/antecedent to athletic career end. Two of the successful athletes will continue their athletic career and talked about their Olympic experience to be helpful for their future in sports. The three athletes that either did not qualify or was less successful all might be facing the end of their athletic career although uncertain about the future.

Methodological reflections

Using a qualitative methodology was appropriate for this study. Using a narrative approach in the interviews allowed for a deeper understanding on each athletes experience and gave the athletes the opportunity of describing their experience in their own words and elaborating on

things that were important to them. In addition, there are no instruments available for a quantitative method that can be used to explore the process of the OG as a transition.

The five stages of the Olympic cycle (Stambulova et al., 2012) were helpful in guiding the athletes through their journey in a chronological order and conduct narratives based on the interviews. The NOI model (Hiles & Čermák, 2008) turned out to be a useful tool in the data collection and data analysis. The two forms of analysis chosen for this study, the holistic-content analysis and categorical-content analysis, gave the author an opportunity to present core narratives focusing on each athlete as an individual as well identify themes that go through all six narratives.

Limitations of the study. This study represents an exploration of only a small sample of Icelandic athletes in individual sports. Furthermore the athletes were chosen for this study and not randomly picked out of all Icelandic Olympians and athletes that were in the Olympic group as possible participants at the OG 2012 but did not qualify. It is important to recognize that the group may not be representative of Icelandic athletes, given the possibility of response-bias in the sampling method, and that transition experiences may vary in individual and team sports. Using Skype for the interviews could also create limitations in regards to connection between the interviewer and the athletes resulting in less information shared by the athletes. Additionally, results may have been subject to retrospective bias.

Implications

Using an individual approach allows for deeper understanding on each athlete's journey in their transition. It is important to take into account that athletes' stories are different even for athletes that have the same outcome of the transition, e.g. a successful outcome. Even though the stories differ in many ways, certain themes arise that can be helpful in understanding the transition demands, resources, barriers and coping strategies of Icelandic athletes during the Olympic cycle.

If an athlete career is seen as a pyramid (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007) where only a few athletes from those who participate in sport achieve athletic excellence and elite careers, Iceland does not get many elite athletes because of the small population. In light of that, every athlete that reaches that level of excellence in Iceland should be extra well taken care of and in that, organizational support can play a big role.

This study demonstrates the importance of taking a holistic perspective on athletes. All the athletes in this study were also focusing on other things in their lives, for example work or studying. This might be very common for Icelandic athletes and being aware of this might lead to better support for athletes in balancing different parts of their lives. There might be a need to facilitate organizational support with the athletes' lives outside of sports, for example make it easier for elite athletes to intertwine their studies with their training. Furthermore it might take a load of some of the athletes' worries to make it easier for them to retire by having them earn some of the rights an individual would earn in other occupational careers, e.g. pay in a union and earn rights for parental leaves.

Hopefully this study will give both athletes and everyone working with athletes in Iceland an idea of what transition demands Icelandic athletes face in the Olympic cycle. That knowledge might shed light on barriers the athletes have to face in this transition and organizations can help the athletes adopt efficient coping strategies to overcome those barriers. Furthermore, the resources can be underlined and more focus put into helping athletes use those resources and adopt good coping strategies. One of the successful athletes had an agent that helped him get

financial support. Having an agent might be a valuable resource whereas financial strains are evident barriers for Icelandic athletes.

If a career assistance program for athletes will be established in Iceland this study might be used as a guideline for assisting the athletes both in sports and outside of sports. This study underlines the importance of the need for assistance and/or support throughout the entire process of the Olympic cycle and is something that should be taken into account in a career assistance program.

Sport psychology is a new field in Iceland and not many studies have been conducted in the area. This study is the second one the author has conducted on Icelandic athletes in the field of sport psychology and as reflected in poor response rates it seems as if the athletes are not aware of the benefits of research in sport psychology. The author hopes that this study will inspire others to conduct more studies on Icelandic athletes.

Conclusion and future research

This study is to the author's knowledge the first one of its type done in Iceland and with Icelandic athletes. Future research within the area of career transitions should examine the experience in regards to the OG for athletes in individual sports as well as in team sports. Iceland is known for the success of the men's national team in handball and it would be interesting to explore the process of the Olympic cycle for team athletes.

It would also be interesting to examine the process of transition for Icelandic athletes from the Special Olympics. Iceland had a gold medalist at the Special Olympics in 2012, furthermore Icelandic athletes have won a total of 37 gold medals at the Special Olympics since 1980 (Íþróttasamband fatlaðra, n.d.). It would be interesting to see what transition demands Icelandic athletes aiming for the Special Olympics face and what kind of support and resources are available for them.

Retirement of Icelandic athletes should be studied further. When retiring from an athletic career in Iceland the athletes have not earned any right as they would have in the labor market, for example parental leave. This might play a role in why many Icelandic athletes work parallel to their sport and possibly prevents them from giving their sport the attention it might require during the Olympic cycle.

It would be ideal to conduct longitudinal studies on Icelandic athletes. Longitudinal studies which track athletes throughout a transition would eliminate the retrospective bias and provide a deeper understanding of the transition process as it unfolds over time.

To get a better understanding of culture specific patterns in the transition of Olympians during the Olympic cycle, cross-cultural research should be done. Doing cross-cultural research in terms of the Olympic Games as a career transition might shed light on transition demands, resources, barriers and coping strategies that are common for most athletes as well as the culture-specific transition resources and barriers.

In conclusion, the present study has provided an insight into what transition experiences Icelandic elite athletes face in the Olympic Games transition. There were themes that followed the athletes' major foci in each transition phase concerning resources, coping strategies and outcomes of the OG as a career transition. Themes were revealed for the Olympic cycle as a whole concerning coping strategies and resources. Getting financial support and gaining international experiences through competition and camps were important coping strategies for the Icelandic elite athletes. In light of how few Icelandic elite athletes are each one of them should be given the opportunity to take advantage of resources available and

adopt effective coping strategies. This study emphasizes the importance of adopting a cultural specific approach in research, to better understand the multidimensional nature of transitions.

Acknowledgements

I offer my sincere thanks to all the athletes for sharing their stories from their athletic career. I would also like to thank the staff members of the National Olympic and Sports Association of Iceland for their cooperation. I would like to thank my supervisor, professor Natalia Stambulova, for excellent guidance and constructive criticism in my writings. Finally, I would like to thank my partner for all the help and support during my studies.

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Appendix 1

Interview guide
The Olympic Games as a Career Transition

All questions are aimed at the period when you were preparing for (and participating at) the Olympic Games in London 2012.

Structure and examples of questions stimulating participants to share their stories about different stages of the Olympic cycle.

Questions for those who participated in the Olympic Games in London 2012

- **Preliminary or basic preparation**
  - Had you competed at the Olympic Games, prior to 2012?
  - When did you first start thinking about your preparation for the Olympic Games in London 2012?
  - What were your plans for the Olympic preparation?
  - What was your main focus in the preparation?
  - What kind of support did you have?
  - How was your life outside of sports? School? Work?
  - How did you coordinate different parts of your life with your Olympic preparation?
- **Selection for the Olympic team**
  - How was the selection process organized in your sport?
  - How did you experience the process of the for competing in the Olympics? Any likes and dislikes about the process?
  - How long before the Olympic Games did you know you would be competing?
  - What helped you the most in making the Olympic team? Internal? External?
  - What lessons did you learn from the selection process?
- **Olympic Season**
  - Please tell me about the Olympic season, training and competition.
  - What was your main focus?
  - How was your relationship with coach?
  - Did you have any expert support during your preparation? (e.g. psychological, nutritional etc.)
- **The Games**
  - What were your expectations for the Games?
  - How were your real experiences of the Olympic Games? (positive and negative)
  - What kinds of support did you receive during the Games (staff, family, teammates)?
  - How do you evaluate your (your team) performance at the Games?
- **Post Games**
  - What lessons did you learn from your participation in the Games?

- What has changed in your life after the Olympic Games?
- What are you doing now? In sports? Outside sports?
- What is next for you as a person?
- Do you have any advice for future Icelandic Olympic competitors?

Structure and examples of questions stimulating participants to share their stories about preparation for the Olympic Games and consequences of not qualifying.

Questions for those who prepared for, but did not participate in the Olympic Games in London 2012

- **Preliminary or basic preparation**
  - Had you competed at the Olympic Games, prior to 2012?
  - When did you first start thinking about your preparation for the Olympic Games in London 2012?
  - What were your plans for the Olympic preparation?
  - What was your main focus in the preparation?
  - What kinds of support did you have?
  - How was your life outside of sports? School? Work?
  - How did you coordinate different parts of your life with your Olympic preparation?
- **Selection process**
  - How was the selection process organized in your sport?
  - How did you experience the process of the qualification for competing at the Olympics? Any likes, dislikes?
  - When and how did you receive the information about not being selected?
  - Do you think now that you could have done anything different in your preparation before the selection and during the selection process? What?
- **Consequences and career situation**
  - What can you see as consequences of not qualifying and what kind of support did you receive?
  - Do you see any positive aspects relevant to not taking part in the Olympic Games 2012?
  - What are you doing now? In sports? Outside sports?
  - What is next for you as a person?
  - Do you have any advice for future Icelandic Olympic competitors?

Appendix 2

Participant information letter in Icelandic as it was sent to participants

Upplýsingar til þátttakenda rannsóknarinnar

Kæri viðtakandi,

Fyrirhugað er að hefja ofangreinda rannsókn sem lokaverkefni í framhaldsnámi íþróttasálfræði við Háskólann í Halmstad.

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Tilgangur rannsóknarinnar er að kanna upplifun íslenskra íþróttamanna í tengslum við undirbúning og ef við á þátttöku á Ólympíuleikunum í London 2012. Þátttakendur eru þeir íþróttamenn sem voru í Ólympíuhópi ÍSÍ fyrir Ólympíuleikana 2012.

Samþykir þú þátttöku verður þú beðin um að svara spurningum í 30-50 mínútna viðtali sem mun fara fram í gegnum skype/síma. Þú munt hafa tækifæri á að lesa yfir afrit af viðtalinu og getur eytt eða breytt svörunum þínum ef þú óskar þess. Viðtalið mun vera tekið upp, og því verður eytt um leið og búið er að færa viðtalið yfir í tölvutækt form.

Upplýsingum sem verður aflað og niðurstöður verða notaðar í masters verkefni meðrannsakanda. Óskir þú eftir nafnleynd verður dulnenfi notað í staðin og reynt verður eftir fremsta megni að halda öllum þínum kennimerkjum leyndum. Taka verður þó fram vegna þess hve þátttakendur eru fáir, 9, verður erfitt að tryggja að ekki verði hægt að rekja upplýsingar til einstaka íþróttamanna. Rannsóknargögn verða varðveitt í læstri tölvu rannsakanda á meðan rannsókn stendur og öllum gögnum verður eytt að rannsókn lokinni, í júní 2013.

Þér er frjálst að hafna þátttöku eða hætta í rannsókninni á hvaða stigi sem er, án útskýringa. Ef þú hefur spurningar um rétt þinn sem þátttakandi í vísindarannsókn eða vilt hætta þátttöku í rannsókninni getur þú snúið þér til Vísindasiðanefndar, Hafnarhúsinr, Tryggvagötu 17, 101 Reykjavík. Sími: 551-7100, fax: 551-1444, tölvupóstfang: visindasidanefnd@csn.stj.is.

Rannsóknin er unnin með samþykki Vísindasiðanefndar og tilkynning hefur verið send til Persónuverndar.

Kær kveðja,
með von um góðar undirtektir,

Natalia Stambulova
Ábyrgðarmaður

Rósa Björk Sigurgeirsdóttir
Meðrannsakandi

Rósa Björk Sigurgeirsdóttir
Student at Halmstad University