



## The psychological impact of Covid-19 on elite athletes

Dr Claire Rossato, Dan Sly, Sam Cumming and Dr Paul Gorczynski discuss the psychological impact of Covid-19 on elite athletes that have experienced cancelled competition.

The current Covid-19 lockdown is an unprecedented event that has had significant psychological impacts amongst various populations and cultures. Fear of infection, boredom, frustration and poor information from public health authorities have all been identified as salient stressors associated with being in lockdown (Brookes *et al.*, 2020). Consequently, within the sport domain, it is important in our field of work to understand how lockdown has psychologically impacted athletes who were planning on attending competitions such as the Olympics and Paralympics in Tokyo, Formula One, Wimbledon and the completion of the English Football League. This article briefly outlines some examples of the impact Covid-19 has had on elite athletes, as well as discussing important aspects we must consider moving forward.

(six times world champion) has stated that “a big void” had been left in his life due to the current cancellation of the start of the Formula 1 season (Mail online, 2020).

Sport has tried to find a way to “carry on” in the current situation, and technology has been a key aspect of this (Bloom, 2020). This has created opportunities for physical challenges on social media and the use of virtual racing via cycling and running competitions. This has also been a way to engage recreational runners, such as those who were regularly taking part in parkrun for example. Many athletes have been creating their own environment to train in. For example, Olympic Pole Vaulter, Holly Bradshaw, has been very creative in replicating her training. She was recently quoted in the telegraph saying, “When you do pole

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As the ISSP statement (2020) entitled *Working with athletes during a pandemic and social distancing* highlights, career disruption is an important aspect of the athletic experience to consider in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic (ISSP, 2020). For late career athletes, Tokyo 2020 could be their last chance to compete. For example, Susannah Townsend (GB women’s hockey player and Olympic gold medallist), has postponed her retirement so that she is able to compete within the postponed Tokyo 2020 Games. She has talked about the potential challenges of delaying her retirement, stating, “For me it’s going to be a little bit more of an uphill battle due to my age and injuries. I’m going to have to manage my body going forward, resting and stretching in particular. I have to find ways to help myself and make the right decisions.” (BBC, 2020b).

Athletes in sports such as Formula 1 have also talked about their struggles dealing with the pandemic and lockdown. Lewis Hamilton

drills and pick up a pole, it’s quite heavy because a lot of the pole is out in front of you,” she told *Telegraph Sport*. “But if you’re at home and replicate it with a broom or a mop, it’s really light. She talks to the Telegraph, suggesting, “So I’ve been taping two cans of baked beans to the end of the mop and that is like a replica pole. I haven’t actually run with the mop and beans because that would be a bit chaotic but it’s good for drills and hurdle walks.”

Other athletes and sports have turned to the use of eSports to carry on with some form of their competition. For example, Formula 1 have launched a virtual Grand Prix series to replace postponed races with current drivers competing such as Lando Norris for McLaren and George Russell for Williams, making an appearance (F1, 2020).

The Madrid Open was also made into a virtual tournament due to Covid-19, with players such as Andy Murray, Rafa Nadal,

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Caroline Wozniacki and Kristina Mladenovic taking part (Metro, 2020). Furthermore, due to the cancellation of the Grand National, a virtual race was shown in the place of this on the BBC (BBC, 2020a).

Some athletes have found positives regarding the lockdown, for example, Bradshaw stated, “When it first started I thought there was no way I could gain anything from it, but actually I feel like I’ve done a really good job of staying fit, getting strong and doing things that I wouldn’t necessarily do.” Moreover, Mo Farah (Olympic gold medallist) has stated that he feels the delay to Tokyo 2020 will actually help his chances of defending his 10,000m title (The Straits Times, 2020). In addition to these comments, lockdown has the potential to provide athletes an opportunity to focus on personal development, learn new skills and reframe long-term goals (BPS, 2020; EIS, 2020). It may also help to focus on the cognitive appraisal of an athlete, and to focus on a challenge rather than a threat approach to the current situation (Rossato *et al.*, 2016).

Moving forward, it is important to continue to understand the athlete experience and ensure we can facilitate appropriate forms of education and support. Whilst the Covid-19 pandemic represents unprecedented challenges for all in society, we are able to apply familiar psychological models to help athletes to manage their adjustment to this unique situation. For example, talking through Kubler-Ross’ (1969) model of adjustment and loss through bereavement may help individuals to understand their own individual response to this unique situation. It is also important for psychologists to be mindful of the physical impact of this time in lockdown and the subsequent potential to affect their motivation and self-esteem. This may include the impact of respiratory health impairment (Hull *et al.*, 2020) and subsequent impaired performance and increased injury risk (Sarto *et al.*, 2020).

Additionally, we must appreciate feelings of fear and apprehension that athletes may be experiencing when faced with the prospect of returning to competition. Premier League footballer and Watford captain, Troy Deeney, has been particularly vocal in voicing his concerns; particularly with the BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) community being shown as being at increased risk of contracting Covid-19. Deeney states, “For black, Asian and mixed ethnicities, they’re four times more likely to get the illness, they’re twice as likely to have long lasting illnesses - is there anything extra, additional screening, heart stuff to see if people have got problems with that? No. OK, well I feel that should be addressed.” (BBC, 2020c).

Once we enter the post-lockdown era, we must be mindful of monitoring the mental health of athletes as it is essential to athlete well-being and performance. Being denied the opportunity to compete can carry serious psychological consequences and should be monitored as it has been associated with depressive and anxiety symptoms (Reardon *et al.*, 2019). Athletes are often in a position where they may be at risk of being denied the opportunity to compete. Previous examples include war (e.g. 1916, 1940, 1944 Olympics), political protest (e.g. 1980 Moscow and 1984 Los Angeles Olympics boycotts), terrorism (e.g. 1972 Munich Olympics assassination of Israeli athletes), labour disruptions (e.g. 1994-1995 Major League Baseball strike and cancellation of 1994 season) and weather (e.g. 2012 NYC Marathon due to Hurricane Sandy). Career ending injuries are also often to blame for athletes being forced to forgo competition and can happen unexpectedly. Therefore, it is important to learn as much as possible from the impact of this pandemic and its effects on athletes, so that we can develop systems that provide the best possible support in the future. ■



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