



IMPACT AND MEANING OF THE POSTPONEMENT OF TOKYO 2020 FROM AN ATHLETE PERSPECTIVE

Abstract – Rescheduling the Olympic Games was an unprecedented decision, justified by the rapid contagion of a novel coronavirus (COVID-19) and the need to prioritize the health, safety, and well-being of all people expected to attend the Games. The group arguably most affected by this decision is the group that is at the heart of the Olympic Games and the Olympic Movement: the athletes. The postponement of Tokyo 2020 generated uncertainty for athletes, as well as their support networks, something even more intensely experienced by athletes who are still in the qualification process. In all, this unprecedented disruption to athlete's routines and daily expectations leads to feelings of loss of control and stress. The manner in which athletes cope effectively with change-events plays a significant role in their performance and even the longevity of their athletic careers. This paper explores the complexities of some of the expectation's athletes have had to redefine, as well as the impact of this process in itself, from an athlete's perspective

Keywords: Tokyo 2020; postponement; COVID-19; mental health; athletes.

IMPACTO E SIGNIFICADO DO ADIAMENTO DE TÓQUIO 2020 NA PERSPECTIVA DO ATLETA

Resumo - O reagendamento dos Jogos Olímpicos foi uma decisão sem precedentes, justificada pelo rápido contágio de um novo coronavírus (COVID-19) e pela necessidade de priorizar a saúde, a segurança e o bem-estar de todas as pessoas que se espera que participem dos Jogos. O grupo mais afetado por essa decisão é o grupo que está no coração dos Jogos Olímpicos e do Movimento Olímpico: os atletas. O adiamento do Tóquio 2020 gerou incerteza para os atletas, bem como suas redes de apoio, algo ainda mais intensamente vivenciado pelos atletas que ainda estão em processo de qualificação. No total, essa interrupção sem precedentes nas rotinas e expectativas diárias do atleta leva a sentimentos de perda de controle e estresse. A maneira pela qual os atletas lidam efetivamente com os eventos de mudança tem um papel significativo em seu desempenho e até na longevidade de suas carreiras atléticas. Este artigo explora as complexidades de algumas das expectativas que atletas tiveram que redefinir, bem como o impacto desse processo em si, da perspectiva do atleta.

Palavras-chave: Tóquio 2020; adiamento; COVID-19; saúde mental; atletas.

IMPACTO Y SIGNIFICADO DE APLAZAMIENTO DE TOKIO 2020 SOBRE LA PERSPECTIVA DEL ATLETA

Resumen - La nueva cita de los Juegos Olímpicos fue una decisión sin precedentes, justificada por la rápida propagación de un nuevo coronavirus (COVID-19) y la necesidad de priorizar la salud, la seguridad y el bienestar de todas las personas que se espera participen en los Juegos. El grupo más afectado por esta decisión es el que está en el corazón de los Juegos Olímpicos y el Movimiento Olímpico: los atletas. El aplazamiento de Tokio 2020 creó incertidumbre para los atletas, así como sus redes de apoyo, algo que los atletas que están en proceso de calificación experimentan aún más intensamente. En total, esta interrupción sin precedentes en las rutinas y expectativas diarias del atleta conduce a una sensación de pérdida de control y estrés. La forma en que los atletas manejan eficazmente el cambio juega un papel importante en su rendimiento e incluso en la longevidad de sus carreras deportivas. Este artículo explora las complejidades y expectativas que algunos atletas tuvieron que redefinir, así como el impacto de este proceso, desde la perspectiva del atleta.

Palabras-clave: Tokio 2020; aplazamiento; COVID-19; salud mental; atletas.

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Introduction

Rescheduling the Olympic Games was an unprecedented decision, justified by unprecedented circumstances presented by a rapid contagion of a novel coronavirus (COVID-19) and the need to prioritize the health, safety, and well-being of all citizens. In a rapid sequence of events, Thomas Bach, President of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), in early March 2020 tried to take control of speculations about the future of the Olympic Games by urging athletes to continue their training as planned, while the IOC and the local organizing committee (OCOG) worked with National Olympic Committees (NOC) to assess the situation. Two weeks later, Bach announced the decision to delay the Games until July 2021, amid pressure from outspoken NOCs and other concerned stakeholders. The effects of this decision are widespread and varied, impacting a range of interconnected parties involved in the planning, execution, and participation in the Olympic Games. The group arguably most affected by this decision is the group that is at the heart of the Olympic Games and the Olympic Movement: the athletes.

While the world is potentially in only the beginning stages of coping with the COVID-19 pandemic, the effects are already massive. Entire countries are ordering its citizens to practice social distancing measures, suspending normal commercial and leisure activities, in order to try to contain the transmission of the virus. Several countries are already facing incredibly high numbers of mortalities and the strain on their health systems. Daily life is permeated with tension, fear, and worry, for oneself and for loved ones. Daily routines are taking on new forms, as well, as schools close and many workers are now working from home; many others have lost their jobs, and so too their financial stability and, in some countries, their health insurance.

Athletes are not immune to the COVID-19 pandemic, nor to the same tensions, fears, and worries of society at large. Training has been disrupted, as athletes must also respect and adhere to social distancing guidelines and cannot frequent their training facilities. Although the IOC has determined that athletes and teams that had already secured qualification for 2020 would retain their status for the new date of the Games, at the time that the postponement was announced, 57% of athletes who would participate in

the Games had already qualified* , leaving a variety of athletes in even more uncertainty concerning the qualification process and, subsequently, their timelines for training and competing¹. As athletes are trying to adapt as best as we can, this also means that many of us have been physically distanced from our coaches, trainers, physiotherapists, psychologists, and other support staff.

Currently, life as we know it has been disrupted. Sport has been disrupted. In the midst of all this, the world continues to look to athletes for daily inspiration, to be examples of positivity and resilience in moments that test our collective patience, our nerves, our hope. On top of these existing pressures to fulfill this expected outward persona during this unprecedented time, during this time and by the time July 2021 arrives, we will be expected to amaze the world through our extraordinary physical feats and skills. Indeed, the imagery of the athlete as hero is ever more contrasted with the fact that athletes are human. The true extent of the individual and collective effects of this global pandemic will only be fully known in future years, with historical perspective and interdisciplinary study, but a conscious light must be shone now on the challenges and struggles athletes are facing, if we have any hope of carrying out an edition of the Olympic Games true to its values and its commitment to the athletes' well-being.

A dream deferred: an exploration of the variety of impacts of changing an Olympic cycle

In the moments following the release of the IOC's decision to postpone the Games, indeed even in the statements made by Thomas Bach and other officials, the image of Tokyo 2020 began to be framed as a symbol of hope for the world to grasp and promote. The decision-making process was arguably less than transparent, but Bach affirmed to the press that athletes' voices were heard and represented, and that there was unanimous support for the decision to postpone. Indeed, the issue is not with the ultimate decision made by the IOC. Rather, it is paramount to understand the burden and challenges of moving forward with this decision. We must maintain a comprehensive view that encompasses these statements and processes, and the reality that each athlete experiences. The institutional weight of these messages of hope and optimism by the IOC

*It is worth mentioning, however, that qualifying for the Olympic Games does not necessarily mean athletes will actually participate. In team sports, qualifying means securing a spot for the NOC to send a team, but the athletes selected for the team are usually only confirmed a couple of weeks before the Games

must be tempered with an understanding that, in the moments following the decision, athletes embarked on their individual paths to process how this decision would impact their lives and the plans that had been made based on the original date of the Olympic Games in mind^{2,3}. The fact that this was the right decision is wholly independent from the challenges athletes face in its aftermath.

The quadrennial Olympic cycle dictates the international sports calendar. It is this cyclical time frame that informs other international sporting events (World Championships, continental tournaments, etc) and the calendars for athletes, fans, organizers, international federations. This predictable and traditional cycle provides athletes with a structure that allows for planning and periodization; it is within this structure, upon this historically reliable basis, that athletes generate various types of expectations[†]. As the COVID-19 pandemic began to generate concerns about the feasibility and safety of Tokyo 2020, athletes began to face many uncertainties. Although the final decision to postpone, as well as a new projected date for the Olympic Games, addressed some of these uncertainties, many remain and are compounded with a sense of loss concerning various expectations. To follow, this paper explores the complexities of some of the expectations athletes have had to redefine, as well as the impact of this process in itself.

As previous studies have shown, participation in the Olympic Games represent the highest professional ambition of athletes who consider the Olympic dream to be the highest point of their athletic involvement⁴⁻⁶. In this way, when athletes describe their personal experiences, the Olympic Games carry more significance as compared to other pinnacle sports events and carry different value in an athlete's career. With this differential value inferred by athletes on the Games, the simple fact of a one-year postponement becomes more nuanced and complex. Many athletes consider participation in the Olympic Games as the most important mark in their career, and so career transitions are usually concomitant with participation in the Olympic Games, as well as perceived satisfaction and fulfillment with one's athletic career and experiences. Suddenly, many

[†]The term expectation in this context is to be understood as its definition, the belief that something will happen in the future, legitimized by the athlete's record of preparation (physical, tactical, technical, psychological), performance and world ranking, and sport organization and structure which provides context for an athlete's activities

athletes have had to consider whether their plans can be adapted, and how, to the new Tokyo 2020 time frame.

For athletes who have already secured qualification and were considering career transitions, this planning can be recalculated, in a sense. However, it is necessary to acknowledge that such a recalculation involves taking into consideration the aspects of an athlete's life that are affected, outside of and beyond one's training regimen, and the emotional and psychological toll of a new time frame. After all, an athlete's life is often intertwined with the lives of non-athletes, those who make sacrifices and deliberate choices to support the priorities of the athlete; an example of that is the fact that it is not uncommon to hear of partners who give up jobs in order to support their partner's Olympic dream. For instance, Alyson Felix (USA) shares that her family relocated to California for her training, and that her husband gave up his job to support her Olympic dream[‡] (7).

The experiences of female athletes, specifically, shows how the Olympic cycle often impacts directly on their (our) decision of whether and/or when to have children. For example, former Brazilian volleyball player and Olympic champion Hélia Rogério de Souza, known as Fofão, has shared how she and her husband prioritized her sport career, to the point that when they did try to have a child, they were unable to. Rosana dos Santos Augusto, former Brazilian football player, also delayed her decision to have a child because of her sport career[§]. More recently, Brazilian volleyball player Fabiana Claudino manifested her desire to have a child after this edition of the Games, plans that have been directly impacted by the postponement. The reality is that depending on the moment of an athlete's career, one year can make a world of difference between making it to the Olympic Games and missing out on fulfilling this dream, or others.

There is compounded uncertainty for athletes whose qualification process was disrupted. With 5,000 athlete quota places still to be assigned, thousands of athletes who were training to peak their performance in time for qualifying tournaments still do not have rescheduled tournaments. The IOC has released revised qualification principles, extending the deadline for qualification and entrusting International Federations (IF) with the authority and discretion to modify age restrictions for eligibility and define new

[‡] Available at: <https://time.com/5809362/allyson-felix-tokyo-olympics-delay/> [cited 24 Apr 2020].

[§] Available at: <https://dibradoras.blogosfera.uol.com.br/2020/04/01/estou-vivendo-um-luto-o-impacto-do-adiamento-de-toquio-2021-nas-atletas/> [cited 24 Apr 2020].

ranking deadlines and pathways, emphasizing the expectation that IFs work with member federations and athlete commissions to accomplish fair and transparent decision-making. In the end, qualification protocols will only be able to be confirmed once the COVID-19 pandemic effects can be assessed, and so, athletes in this situation must face this uncertainty every day for an unknown period of time**.

An athlete's worst fear come true

Independent of qualification status, the current situation athletes are facing is a complete disruption of training schedules, interruption of access to regular training structures, drastically different interaction and care from coaches, trainers, and other support staff. While athlete commissions were involved at some point of the postponement decision process, the vast majority of athletes worldwide were on the receiving end of decisions and had to react quickly to changing local circumstances and comply with social distancing best practices. The impact of this cannot be overlooked: at a key moment in their careers, athletes experienced a loss of control. In countless cases, athletes were suddenly removed from the human and material factors that are involved in their preparation to be at their best, ready to perform.

Elite athletes spend their athletic careers discerning which factors are within their control and training extensively to hone their physicality and skills in the best way to excel in their sport. In this way, athletes have legitimate expectations that guide their routines that will lead them to success and personal fulfillment. For example, they depend on certain training conditions and structures that allow for a specialized training program to be carried out. A stable routine allows for consistency, a key ingredient in performance periodization. In a situation that has evolved rapidly and affected every aspect of society, athletes have been forced into a position in which they have lost control of things that were previously controllable. Without the adequate support to regain control and stability, to cope with these stressors, athletes will be unable to train properly, or may be unable to completely recover from this disruption in their athletic careers⁷.

** Available at: <https://www.olympic.org/news/ioc-releases-revised-olympic-games-tokyo-2020-qualification-principles> [cited 24 Apr 2020].

Coping with grief and moving forward

These uncertainties and changes have placed an unprecedented psychological and emotional load on athletes. Above all, athletes are faced with grief, not only concerning their expectations about the Olympic Games, but also regarding their expectations concerning training and factors that were previously controllable. The grief process is fluid, non-linear, and distinct for each individual. For athletes, this is compounded with the idea that their athlete identity increases their perception of the significance of a change-event on their athletic career. Studies show that a strong and exclusive athlete identity, a characteristic predominant in Olympic athletes, is a factor that causes athletes to view events that disturb their athletic status quo as more significant, and, as a result, generate more concern about solving them⁸.

Compounded with athlete identity, perceived sense of control is another factor that is directly related to effective coping with change-events. Lack of control, or perceived low control, over a situation generates stress and can influence the possibility of favorable outcomes^{7,8}. Indeed, being able to distinguish what is within one's control is a skill that must be honed, and the present situation truly tests the limits of this ability. Now more than ever, athletes may be struggling to regain their sense of control, which may impact the continuation of their athletic career and even their sense of success and fulfillment within their athletic endeavors. Through the Athlete365 Platform, the IOC recognizes these challenges that athletes are facing and reiterates the recommendation for athletes to lean even more on their support networks and ask for help, should they need it^{††}. However, the paradox between the need to seek sport psychological services and undertaking actions to implement this strategy has also been illustrated in exploratory studies: athlete perspectives acknowledge that seeking psychological services improve the feeling of control, but the perceived importance and use of sport psychological services only increases with previous use and Olympic experience¹².

Additional limitations in addressing athlete mental health must be recognized and addressed. The IOC Consensus Statement on mental health in elite athletes, through the expert panel that deliberated this broad topic, recognizes stigma as a barrier that athletes face to seeking mental healthcare¹³. However, the IOC's statement falls short of providing

^{††} Available at: <https://www.olympic.org/athlete365/well-being/stay-mentallyfit/> [cited 24 Apr 2020]. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2MLTT11> [cited 24 Apr 2020].

comprehensive recommendations on how to effectively address these challenges. The Consensus Statement also fails to consider the impact and stress caused by change-events during the athletic career, only addressing the moment of career transition or termination. The situation created by the COVID-19 pandemic has caused an unprecedented change-event in the careers of all current Olympic athletes, and the IOC must undertake future studies to understand the full impact athletes are facing. The Athlete365 resource also seems to follow the basic assumption that all Olympic athletes have access to mental healthcare resources. The IOC, IFs, and NOCs must prioritize athlete mental health by investing in up-to-date research, comprehensive policies, and accessible resources.

The IOC has given the world a light at the end of the tunnel, a beautiful metaphor for the Olympic Games and the power of sport during this unprecedented time. But in order to get to this end, we must recognize that we are still in the tunnel. We must face this reality in all its complexity and diversity: each athlete will have a unique experience, different emotional and psychological reactions and responses, as well as differing access to and availability of resources. The health and well-being of the athletes, and the future of the Olympic Games depends on discarding romanticized notions of overcoming adversities and adopting a holistic view and practical approach to athletes' experiences.

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