

## Meanings of the postponement of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games for Brazilian Olympic athletes Sentidos del aplazamiento de los Juegos Olímpicos de Tokio 2020 para los atletas olímpicos brasileños

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**Abstract.** The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the postponement of the 2020 Olympic Games (OG) in Tokyo, producing numerous effects on participating athletes, especially those from developing countries. The objective of this study was to investigate and understand the impact of the postponement of the Tokyo 2020 OG, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, on the Brazilian Olympic athletes. The epistemology followed social constructionism. The methodology included semi-directed interviews with 11 Brazilian athletes who had qualified for the OG in seven different sports. Following the application of discourse analysis, three thematic categories were identified: a) inequalities and their social impact, b) the importance of supportive relationships, and c) athletes' work challenges. Our findings initially indicate differences regarding social conditions faced by athletes from countries of the global north compared to those from the south, as is the case of Brazil. Secondly, we could verify the importance of multidisciplinary teams, training colleagues and family members for the preparation and development of the athlete. Thirdly, it was possible to identify an intensification of athletes' training routines under inappropriate work environment. In conclusion, the study proposes a dialogue with the community involved in world Olympic sports, to problematize inequities that affect athletes from developing countries.

**Keywords:** Olympic Games, COVID-19, social psychology, sport psychology.

**Resumen.** La pandemia del covid-19 provocó el aplazamiento de los Juegos Olímpicos de Tokio (JO) en 2020, generando innumerables impactos, especialmente para los deportistas participantes. A este fenómeno se suman los problemas particulares que afectan a los países periféricos, como Brasil. Por esta razón, el objetivo de esta investigación fue investigar y comprender cómo los atletas olímpicos brasileños se vieron afectados por el aplazamiento de los Juegos Olímpicos de Tokio 2020, como consecuencia de la pandemia del covid-19. La epistemología adoptada siguió al construccionismo social. Metodológicamente, se realizaron entrevistas semidirigidas a 11 deportistas brasileños clasificados para los JO en siete modalidades diferentes. Luego de la transcripción completa y el análisis discursivo de los enunciados, fue posible identificar tres categorías temáticas: a) sobre desigualdades y sus impactos; b) sobre la importancia de las relaciones afectivas e; c) sobre el trabajo de los deportistas. Los resultados obtenidos indican inicialmente desigualdades en cuanto al apoyo que obtienen los deportistas de países del norte del mundo frente a los del sur, como es el caso de Brasil. En segundo lugar, se verificó la importancia de los equipos multidisciplinarios, compañeros de entrenamiento y familiares para la preparación y desarrollo del atleta. En tercer lugar, se identificó la intensificación de las rutinas de entrenamiento de los deportistas, en condiciones de trabajo inadecuadas. En conclusión, el estudio propone un diálogo con la comunidad involucrada en el deporte olímpico mundial, con el fin de problematizar las desigualdades que afectan a los atletas de países en desarrollo.

**Palabras clave:** Juegos Olímpicos, COVID-19, Psicología Social, Psicología del deporte.

### Introduction

The outbreak of an acute respiratory illness was declared by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) on January 30, 2020, with just over five months remaining before the 2020 Summer Olympic Games (OG) in Tokyo. On February 11, the disease was named COVID-19, caused by the SARS-CoV-2, a coronavirus closely related to the SARS virus. Due to the uncontrolled presence of the virus in several countries, the WHO declared a pandemic on March 11 (Pan American Health Organization [PAHO], 2020).

Considering the WHO's position, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) announced the postponement

of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games to 2021 on March 24, 2020. Before this postponement, the OG of the modern era had only been interrupted during the First and Second World Wars, fought between 1914 and 1918, and 1939 and 1945, respectively. Given its progressive social (Ferrando, 1990) and economic importance, the OG grew progressively over the decades to become the biggest event of humankind, gathering delegations from greater than 200 countries, since the 2004 Athens Games (Colli, 2004).

Scheduled to take place from July 24 to August 9, 2020, with the first competitions scheduled for July 22, the Olympics had a direct impact on all the participating countries and athletes adrift in intense preparation. Moreover, the Tokyo Organizing Committee reported a significant negative impact with an additional cost of USD 2.4 billion;

accordingly, the original budget was increased by 22%, jumping to USD 16 billion (Forber, 2020).

It is in this context that performance athletes, as workers of sports organizations, almost in their majority dependent on various sponsorships, receive the pandemic. Allied to this scenario, it is important to say that the performance sport found itself even more unprotected and involved by important paradoxes. On the one hand, there are the public's expectation of offering sporting events to «reduce the anguish» of social isolation, as well as the idea that athletes are «stronger» and outside the «risk» group of the disease. On the other hand, we find the narratives of international and national health recommendations, which emphasized the need to isolate these workers, given that «no one would be immune».

Even so, amid political games, controversies and complex power relations, preventive measures were adopted in Brazil, among them the prohibition of leisure, cultural and sporting events that directly affected the sports sector, due the cancellation of championships (Camilo et al., 2020).

Given athletes' difficulties with regard to continuing their work and preparations for the Olympics, Brazil approved an emergency fund for the athletes and other sports professionals on July 16, 2020 (Bill n.º 2824), which provided emergency financial aid to athletes, coaches, physical trainers, physical therapists, nutritionists, psychologists, massage therapists, referees, and assistant referees of any professional or non-professional sport, including workers involved in organizing competitions.

Although the pandemic has recently presented itself to the world, science in the field of sport has managed to print its contributions from different perspectives, inspiring practices, and reflections. Of these, we highlight: a) the tensions involving the labor market and sports consumption (Camilo et al., 2020), as well as the budget gap between teams (Almozar-Gomar & César, 2022); b) the reactions and emotions of elite athletes (Paoli & Musumeci, 2020; Ortiz Marholz et al., 2022) and university athletes (Alarcón Meza & Hall-López, 2021), as well as their coaches (Taku & Arai, 2020); c) the psychology services offered during the period to athletes (Schinke et al., 2020) and, d) sports practice in the midst of Covid-19 in some specific sports (Urbaneja et al., 2021).

In the Brazilian context, extreme precarious training, innumerable appeals for financial support, and several cases of pathologies (such as states of depression and burnout syndrome) among the athletes who qualified for the OG, were publicized by the media. Therefore, the objective of this study was to investigate and understand the impact of the postponement of the Tokyo 2020 OG, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, on Brazilian Olympic athletes.

This study is part of the research agenda of the *Grupo de Estudos Trabalho e Esporte* (Work and Sports Research Group) (NETE) and is based on discussions of Organizational and Work Psychology, which address a worker's precariousness and suffering, unregulated work, and social psychology in sports (sports being a field of precarious work). The epistemology adopted in the study followed the assumptions of social constructionism (P. K. Spink, 1996; M. J. P. Spink 1999; Ibáñez Garcia, 2001), in line with the guidelines for Organizational and Work Psychology.

## Method

### Research design

Based the study's aims to focus on «[...] the processes through which people describe, explain, or account for the world in which they live (including themselves)» (Gergen, 1985, p.266), social constructionism was applied as an epistemological approach. Language is important in the interaction and communication between people (M. J. P. Spink et al., 2014). It is especially emphasized in action (discursive practices), since it is the way for people to produce meanings and position themselves in everyday social relationships (M. J. P. Spink, 2010). Perceiving discursive practices as languages in action, our view is directed toward the implications of speech and its possible consequences. When we refer to «discourse» or «discursive practices,» we also intend to contextualize it, from the perspective of an action directed toward something or someone that is endowed with historicity and culture.

A study is never neutral. It assumes the existence of individual choices because one cannot grasp all the complexities or be everywhere. Thus, the choices made in this study are understood as a fundamental part of our interactions, our choices, and our political views (Latour, 2012; Law, 2004; Mol, 1999).

Accordingly, a constructionist study does not aim at «collecting» information or seeking a ready, complete «truth» that is just waiting to be «unveiled» by the researchers. Rather, researchers and participants collaborate on the interview in action, which provides processes for negotiating meanings. The process behind doing this kind of research maintains, transforms, and challenges the positions that emerge during its production (Aragaki et al., 2014).

### Participants

Athletes over the age of 18 who had already qualified for the Tokyo 2020 OG were interviewed. This study followed all ethical precepts regarding the dissemination, data collection and consent of the participants. A total of 11 athletes (eight males, three females) were interviewed

between February 4 and April 26, 2021. Since the OG published the new schedule on March 30, 2021, only three athletes were aware of this information at the time of the interview, as shown in Table 1.

The interviewees participated in the following sports: athletics (four individuals), boxing (one individual), fencing (one individual), handball (one individual), archery (one individual), sailing (two individuals), and wrestling (one individual). Depending on sports' modalities, interviewees competed in teams (as is the case of handball), in doubles (as is the case of sailing) and individually (as is the case of athletics, boxing, fencing, archery, and wrestling).

Table 1.

*General data of the sample*

Fictitious name	Interview date	Sport	Sex	Age
Alberto	Mar. 2, 2021	Sailing	Male	39 years
Antônio	Mar. 10, 2021	Athletics	Male	26 years
Bianca	Apr. 1, 2021	Archery	Female	27 years
Fábio	Feb. 4, 2021	Athletics	Male	27 years
Gustavo	Mar. 4, 2021	Athletics	Male	30 years
Heitor	Feb. 12, 2021	Athletics	Male	25 years
Lorenzo	Feb. 17, 2021	Fencing	Male	28 years
Mariana	Mar. 24, 2021	Wrestling	Female	28 years
Robson	Apr. 22, 2021	Boxing	Male	24 years
Stella	Mar. 16, 2021	Sailing	Female	31 years
Vinícius	Apr. 26, 2021	Handball	Male	26 years

Thus, we interviewed athletes from these sports, representing 20% of the total number of sports of the Brazilian delegation in the Tokyo OG (qualified in a total of 35 sports).

### *Instruments*

A script with semi-structured questions was prepared for the interviews. Given the contemporary nature of this topic, no validated interview script on the subject was available that could serve as a guide. As a result, the script was prepared based on discussions among the professors and students in the *Grupo de Pesquisa Esporte e Trabalho*. A fluid dialogue was sought, beginning with a triggering question: «How has the postponement of the Olympic Games impacted you?»

By narrating their experiences, the interviewees recalled their memory about the subject, meanings, experiences, and perceptions. This study was not constituted exclusively by the web of questions that are formulated *a priori* because the participants operated, developed, and subverted the pre-established scripts, revealing their own demands.

A notebook, pen, and audio/video recorder were used to record the interviews. Given the recommendations for physical isolation, the interviews were conducted virtually via the Zoom platform. No time limit for the conversations between the two users was imposed and a Zoom account was not required to participate in the call.

### *Procedure*

To recruit the Olympic athletes for this study, we used the «snowball» technique. In this nonprobability sampling technique, initial participants indicate other people who meet the same criteria, and they, in turn, indicate new candidates. This occurs successively until the proposed objectives are met, or until the «saturation point» is met. The «saturation point» is reached when the new candidates do not add any new information to the data already collected (Hudelson, 1994). For a consistent sample, people who know other members of the target population are selected. Thus, it is a chain-referral sampling.

However, recruiting participants was considerably difficult because several athletes were unsure of their Olympic qualification at the time of the data collection, since each sport has its own qualification criteria. Additionally, those who were qualified were focused entirely on their training or pursuing sponsorships, making it impossible to interview them.

### *Data analysis*

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and submitted to each participant to rectify or ratify any information before officially considering the verbal data as part of the study. The transcriptions followed the method proposed by Potter & Wetherell (1987). Next, we conducted a dialogical analysis, as proposed by Bakhtin (2006), based on the assumption that utterances are always in interaction, including written or verbal texts or even the dialogues that people have with themselves. In other words, any utterance implies the presence of present, past, and future speakers who are materialized in the notions of voices and orientation (Iñiguez, 2004). This means that all language is dialogical and the result of collective processes, and it implies a process of dialogical interanimation that occurs in a conversation.

Thus, the interviews were read carefully by the researchers responsible for the subsequent construction of «dialogical maps» (M. J. P. Spink, 2010). General categories derived from the research objective were defined to construct the map, while the order of the interview speeches was maintained to preserve the dialogical and local character of the meaning production of a certain subject. Next, columns were prepared in an Excel spreadsheet to organize the thematic categories identified in the interviews. Entire transcriptions were included, and statement excerpts were shifted to the pertinent column/category. Three thematic categories that enabled the dialogue during the interviews were identified as follows: a) inequalities and their impacts, b) the importance of supportive relationships, and c) the athletes' work.

## Results

### *Inequalities and their impact*

The postponement of the OG was a paradoxical experience. On the one hand, the postponement was beneficial since athletes could improve their training conditions, recover from injuries, or even receive a second chance to achieve an Olympic ranking. On the other hand, other athletes claimed that the postponement was negative, that their preparation was already at the tipping point, and that it would not be possible to withstand such pressure any longer. Among the athletes who faced a negative impact due to the postponement Stella, a sailing athlete, explained:

*Many impacts, right? The first is a huge psychological one. We have been doing physical, mental, technical work, everything, to ascend to the Olympic Games and the apex of our peak performance. (...) So March was already very close when everything stopped, right? (...) I think the biggest challenge in this sense is to be able to remain resilient and focused on the face of everything that has happened. (...) We have not had an international championship since December 2019, and for us, it is insane. We were in a very strong championship rhythm, and the European teams keep competing among themselves. They can travel, and we are isolated here in Brazil, so, technically, we are very worried about the lack of reference... (...) And it is one more thing for us to organize in our psychological work: how to face this moment and get to Tokyo prepared to compete. - Stella (Sailing athlete)*

Stella constantly refers to «we,» which indicates that her statements go beyond the limits of «I,» i.e., her own peculiar difficulties as an athlete. She was part of a group that was at crossroads in athletic practices (primarily training and competitions). Receiving no support and references with respect to their international competitors, she pondered whether it would be possible to compete on equal terms during the OG. Her doubts and concerns centered on how to maintain the resilience, focus and strength to continue in the discourses, so widely disseminated in the sports context, even if the «insane» aspect in her statements resisted and denounced the numerous difficulties of being a Latin American athlete. These conditions hindered the possibility of high-performance training and participation in «international events,» represented by the European competitions.

At the time of the interviews, vaccination was unavailable for the entire Brazilian population; the vaccination of the Olympic athletes began close to the OG on May 14, 2021. Further, there did not exist any training structure for most of the sports, in both practice and prevention, regarding measures to avoid the spread of COVID-19.

The guidelines of the Olympic sports practice in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic were prepared

in four volumes by the Brazilian Olympic Committee (BOC) and released on December 12, 2020. They served as an important guide for health measures. However, the athletes' statements indicate that the guidelines constituted a distant, empty materiality that contributed to neither the resumption of training and competitions, nor the prevention of the COVID-19 infection. Consequently, for Stella, as well as for other athletes, COVID-19 brought other new challenges, higher sporting inequality, and unpredictability.

The sense of a collective was also present in Bianca's statements (an archery athlete) about the difficulties arising from the postponement of the games:

*Wow, it had a very strong impact, because we were training hard. We were already prepared for the Olympics. To find out that it was canceled like that discouraged many athletes because we didn't know if there would be one next year, and, I don't know, if we would have another one in four years. - Bianca (Archery athlete)*

Even though the pandemic brought innumerable difficulties that challenged humanity and its institutions, both Bianca and Stella referred to the impact that the unpredictability of a new OG date had and criticized the unreliable communication with the athletes. Assuming that high-performance athletes are workers, (Bourdieu, 1983; Ferrando, 1990), and most are precarious workers in the Brazilian context (Camilo & Rabelo, 2019; Camilo, 2020), the lack of effective communication and support for athletes and teams from different organizations involved in the sports, demonstrated that the fundamental principles of Olympism (International Olympic Committee, 2011) were not sustained with respect to the overall care of the interviewees, as represented by the «we» in their statements.

Another interviewee, Fábio (an athletics athlete) also felt the unpredictability of the postponement. He went beyond his individual experience and referred to the collective difficulties of high-performance athletes in general.

*Like other high-performance athletes, I was preparing for this event. We've been preparing for four years for this moment. When it was taken away from us, this kind of disoriented us. A lot of people were training for that moment. A lot of people were only going to compete until that edition. (...) And it's not only the postponement. The training structures cannot be used because of the quarantine. There are some restrictions because of the quarantine. Competitions cannot be held abroad because of the quarantine. Countries close their borders, and we are left scattered about. - Fábio (Athletics athlete)*

Like Stella and Bianca, Fábio deals with issues beyond rankings and the individualistic logic behind victory, identifying himself with other athletes. He refers to several athletes who intended to stop competing after 2020 and how they would be further adrift. This includes cases where an athlete's body can no longer undertake such (Olympic de-

gree) training, the desire for pregnancy, or even various other commitments made to the sponsors, family members, as well as oneself.

Faced with such undesirable timing, doubts, a lack of support and reasonable training conditions, and a certain competitive equality, Alberto (a sailing athlete) denounced the lack of equality in training conditions and even called for the Olympics to be cancelled.

*At first, I thought it was very good (the suspension of the OG) because our duo was the youngest of the Olympic duos, with less time for training. We had been doing well, but we had a series of problems in 2019 (...) The pandemic came, so we spent the entire year of 2020 without meeting other teams, without meeting other opponents. At first, it was very good for us (...). Now, this has all become a bit of a nightmare because the teams got together in Europe. They are all on a Spanish island there called Lanzarote. Twelve, thirteen teams are training there in a total immersion. We have tried to go there twice, but we cannot. So, this is a little frustrating. Now we have reached a point where we need to train with someone. We need to measure our strength against someone, and we do not have a parameter (...) I'm even starting to get a little worried, and sometimes I even start to hope the Olympics don't happen. Because if it does, if this situation lasts longer, if Brazilians are forbidden to enter many places and cannot train with anyone until the Olympics, there will be no point in competing. - Alberto (Sailing athlete)*

Initially, Alberto recognized the postponement of the Games as an opportunity to train and perfect several techniques. However, when the international competitions resumed, and as he and his partner were forbidden to travel, he realized the clear disadvantage of the competitive conditions. The concern and frustration regarding the unavailability of another team to train with, made Alberto wish for the cancellation of the OG. For him, one of the sporting events most anticipated by elite athletes, had turned into a nightmare due to unequal conditions.

It is worth mentioning that the sporting mega-events that took place in Brazil (the 2016 Football World Cup and the 2020 Olympics) did not leave a sporting legacy, especially regarding sports infrastructure and support for athletes, as seen by Silva et al. (2021) in the City of Campinas in São Paulo/Brazil.

As proposed by Santos (2020), any quarantine is discriminatory, and it is highly difficult for certain social groups than for others, such as the global «South.» For the author, these groups share a special vulnerability that precedes and is aggravated by quarantine. In this conception, the South refers to a political, social, and cultural space-time, rather than a geographical space, and as a metaphor for the unjust human suffering caused by the exploitation of certain territories. In other words, the Brazilian Olympic athletes interviewed herein, inhabitants of the South,

felt and denounced the lack of equality aggravated by the pandemic, so that they could train and compete under equal circumstances. It appears the developing countries would participate in the OG as mere participants, helping to validate the performances of the «winners» from the rich countries.

### ***Caring and supportive relationships***

Following Alberto's reflection, Robson, a boxing athlete, said he felt the lack of preparatory training and contact with the other athletes. Even though it was not possible to maintain training and international competitions in the boxing context, support from the confederation and the team of professionals involved made a difference for him:

*The first rumor was that they were going to cancel (the OG), right? Well, I was floored, because it was four years of work. So, it had been four years of work, right, not thrown away, but you stop and think a little bit and say: «Man, now what? Do I wait until 2024?» So, it was like that. I was floored for a few good days, and then I started to think about the possibilities, of it being just a postponement, of this extra time, and so on. So, I am grateful for the Confederation because they didn't leave us alone at any moment. (...) I was kind of wondering what was going to happen and so on, and they were with us. They accompanied us to our training, and then we kept in touch with the coaches. They arranged for us to train at home and so on, and we kept in touch with the Confederation, the nutritionist, the psychologist, and the coaches the entire time, and we managed to keep training at home. Of course, it's not like training at the gym, like training with the guys, but we kept training the whole time while staying in touch with them. They sent us a training chart. The nutritionist gave us a diet. We had a psychologist and so on. So, in this respect, we were at ease. I had the equipment at home. I had punching bags. I had everything, you know, so I was at ease. - Robson (Boxing athlete)*

This report demonstrates how crucial it is for athletes to receive support for their training conditions (although not ideal) from a multidisciplinary team (coaches, nutritionist, and a psychologist). The importance of support for athletes, even if mediated by a digital platform (Zoom), when Covid-19, was recognized in the context of women's football by Jiménez-Barreto & Borges (2021), as an efficient alternative for social support and for the development of training, helping to adjust workloads and detecting situations of tension. Such aid, which was also possible in the context of Brazilian boxing brought Brazil three medals: one gold, one silver, and one bronze; two medals in the men's event and one medal for the women's event. Here, we observe the importance of multidisciplinary action (Argudo-Fuentes et al., 2020; Ponce-Carbajal et al., 2020) to yield human performance, and to support and promote biopsychosocial health (Rubio & Camilo, 2019).

*(...) I was privileged to have my friend, my training partner, with me every day in training so he could help me. It was just the two of us, so there was no danger for both of us, right? It was kind of just us training together, and my coach would give me the training sessions. - Mariana (Wrestling athlete)*

Unlike Robson, Mariana had the opportunity to train with a partner during lockdown, which made a difference for her during this period. This experience highlights the importance of the «other,» the training partner, with respect to their body fitness, engagement, and interest. Even though the athletes are not opponents, the individualistic logic that accompanies high-performance sports, common in the West, is broken here.

The postponement was also justified by the need to take care of and preserve the energies of the athletes and their respective technical committees, given the risks of infection from COVID-19, the dissemination of the variants, and the local community's exposure. However, these arguments, which were related to their own individual health, their collective health, and their committees or the health of the local community, were omitted by most of the athletes. Regarding this, Heitor (an athletics athlete) was in favor of postponing the OG due to public health issues:

*There is one good thing. There is no way we could have done the Olympics by risking our lives and the lives of the world population in an event of this magnitude. (...) But it's hard. It's hard because we are always at high voltage. When we slow down, especially when you're reaching your goal, it's an intense shock. Even though it's necessary, it was hard. (...) So, I believe that all the Committees, especially the Japanese Committee, were right to postpone and then continue. I don't know if there will be fans present. I hope so because it's a very big event, but we're hopeful. - Heitor (Athletics athlete)*

Aware of the public health risks and the movement of people that an Olympic event entails, Heitor says he understands the postponement. However, the postponement remains a complex decision when the players and their management have no control or knowledge of the future. In this observation, the athlete agrees and approves the postponement of the OG, to not «risk lives.» However, one sees the impossibility of questioning what other, varied issues the absence of the OG — or clarity about when (if) they would resume — could trigger, including the mental health of the athletes who «are always at high voltage» and had too abruptly «slow down.»

Supportive relationships with different people, also allowed the athletes who fell sick during the COVID-19 pandemic to rehabilitate themselves:

*(...) I stayed a week in the hospital. Thank God it wasn't COVID. It was another virus that caused all of this, but then I stayed a week in the hospital. I then came home, and it was more than three months of treatment at home. It was also very difficult to come back*

*little by little, but this obligation to stay at home helped me a little in my recovery. Because that was it. I had to stay quite at home, without doing anything. So, I think that if life was normal, I would be more anxious, you know? Anxious about getting better faster and everything else, so with the pandemic, I said, «Well, at least I have time to recover. I won't be far behind.» So, this gave me some comfort to be at home, not being able to go out, not having to train, not having anything. So, it ended up helping me a little in recovering from this problem that I had. - Vinícius (Handball athlete)*

Therefore, COVID-19 and the postponement of the OG was perceived positively, to the extent that the athlete could carry out his medical treatment without rushing to resume his activities and without the pressure to compete. Thus, Vinícius's speech disputes the narrative that illness in sports is often ignored. We are in the stranglehold of a system where workers have shaped their bodies to be high-performance achieving machines, working tirelessly to reach certain levels of excellence and meet the expectations of their goal-hungry work organizations (countries, teams, or clubs). Given this scenario, we must reflect: Is a high-performance athlete susceptible to illness?

### ***Highly intense work***

High-performance sports have progressively transformed into an extremely qualified and demanding market, both from a technical point of view (qualifications, perfection of movements, carefully calculated indices) and an economic point of view (the names of certain athletes regulate the investments of large conglomerates, and some even own shares in the stock market). Therefore, the athletes are not «amateurs,» and implicit synonyms include the terms «workers» and «professionals» (Rubio & Camilo, 2020).

In this sense, could the postponement of the OG have provided some much-needed rest to the athletes, because of lockdowns and the closure of clubs, gyms, and training centers in general? The interviewees deny this possibility. In their narratives, this period became an «opportunity» to train more and to adjust the elements that one did not «have time for» due to competitive calendars.

The issues arising due to intense training during the pandemic have already been identified in the literature, along with other impacts as follows. First, the loss of routines affects the athletes' mental and physical states. Second, attempts to maximize performance result in overtraining, increasing the likelihood of injury, and possibly leading to a sense of doubt and frustration. Third, although the strong support from fans and their community possibly provides athletes a sense of connection, unity, and pride, it may also make them feel highly anxious and overwhelmed (Taku & Arai, 2020). Corresponding to the points mentioned by Taku & Arai (2020) — the idea that the postponement

created an opportunity to train higher and enhance performance — Gustavo (an athletics athlete) remarked:

*(...) At this time, you have to try to be as optimistic as possible. How? For example, we'll do a training session that sometimes you won't be able to do in the competitive period. You have competitions every month. Every month, you're traveling to several countries. I used to arrive one day and travel the next, and sometimes you want to improve something, and you don't have the time. Now, we have all the time in the world. Let's improve here. Let's work on this here, based on this here. So, it was something that we took advantage of in the quarantine. - Gustavo (Athletics athlete)*

Gustavo tells us how he perceived the pandemic and «took advantage» of it. However, this narrative cannot hide how performance athletes need to always move; to work tirelessly even when the moment calls for isolation. Even though it is not crowded in athletics, especially during training sessions, human interaction, involving the athletes, technical committees, and the support staff necessary for different procedures, is undeniable. For a high-performance athlete, the request from health authorities to «stay at home» seems to have been interpreted as «take the time to train.» As discussed herein, high-performance athletes are workers, and we also detect a problem diagnosed in several other work contexts: presenteeism.

The term presenteeism refers to the workers' importance in an organization and has been used to describe the relationship between illness and reduced productivity, a consequence of excessive activities and feelings of job instability (Karanika-Murray & Cooper, 2018). Another interpretation is that workers may feel compelled to be physically present at their workstation, but are not entirely focused on their tasks due to physical or mental health problems (Bierla et al., 2013).

Given the unpredictability of a return to normal in the context of the Tokyo 2020 OG, athletes needed to stay active, even without an exact prediction of when they should be at the peak of their performance. Therefore, the sense of «obligation» to be at work (i.e., incessant training) and the emphasis on «taking the time to train something they could not before» can lead to unstructured routines and injuries. Paoli & Musumeci (2020) warned about the rapid resumption of competitions motivated by economic interests. The authors suggested that all the sports federations in the world, the IOC, and scientific sports societies take an unequivocal position on the issue, to protect the health and careers of athletes of any sport in any nation.

It is worth noting here that this reality can also meet with the numerous gender stereotypes present in sport, which stigmatize athletes who refuse the role of «performance machine», as fragile or «effeminate». This same narrative, which tries to assign certain sports to women and

others to men, is already developed in the context of school physical education and leisure (Fraguela-Vale et al., 2020). Therefore, Monforte & Úbeda-Colomer (2019) point out the need to combat gender inequalities that are (re)produced in the context of sport and physical education, which is almost always presented in a veiled way in the numerous practices that will involve later the professional athletes of different modalities. Therefore, there is a need for provocative studies in the area, which allow for the visibility and transformation of the numerous gender issues (Sánchez-Alvarez et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, it is undeniable that non-performance in the main sports event for several modalities affects the athletes' compensation. Accordingly, alternative ways to resume competitions were suggested, as Lorenzo (a fencing athlete) explained:

*We can quarantine for competitions. Because things have to go on, bad or good, quarantine or pandemic, in a controlled way that respects the sanitary rules. They have to go on. People have to study. People have to work, and we have to compete. - Lorenzo (Fencing athlete)*

The desire for a return to normalcy is set against a backdrop of economic crisis and vulnerability in Brazil and Latin America. According to a report by the Economic Commission for Latin American and the Caribbean (2020), the pandemic disproportionately affected the region. The regional GDP decreased from 6% to 0.2%, registering the lowest growth since the 1950s (0.4%). Given this scenario, the desire for the OG to resume is not unexpected, especially due to the precarious training conditions, as Antonio (an athletics athlete) emphasized:

*I'd say that my training conditions were terrible. I had to stop (...). And then I was left uncared for... I prepared a lot for the Olympics... and for me, it was a problem, the postponement, the pandemic. I did not face the fact that I would not have the Olympics in 2020 well because I had two serious injuries, and I stayed two seasons practically off the track, trying to get results, without a good structure, without a track for training, and everything else. I had no medical follow-up, no nutritionist. So, for me, it was a little more impactful because of all that, because of my mission of wanting to compete at a high level again. - Antônio (Athletics athlete)*

Due to precarious or non-existent training conditions, we assume that Antônio's serious injuries can be partly explained by his body's exposure to the upper limits of tolerance. Furthermore, he lacked specialized medical care and other health professionals who are essential for the rehabilitation process. Thus, through the perspective of a precarious and injured worker, the athlete did not find even a little bit of support for his performance and training. This explains his clear anguish about the postponement of the games, as the unpredictability of the event's future date could prevent his participation.

## Discussion

An analysis of the interviews suggested the presence of three axes of meaning: the postponement evidenced inequalities in the sports context and their impact, the importance of supportive relationships, and the athletes' work.

Among the findings of this study, we found a convergence related to the mental health aspects of the athletes in the Olympic/Paralympic quadrennium reported by Henriksen et al. (2020) including emotional expressions of relief, questions about whether the event would be rescheduled, feelings of disappointment and sadness, and the importance of acting collectively. However, this study expands the current understanding by providing evidence regarding the unequal training and support among countries, the precarious conditions, and the intensification of training for an event that had significant confusion surrounding the circumstances of its return.

The axis «inequalities in the sports context and their impacts» denounced the unequal training, support, and assistance between the athletes from the global North and those from the South, such as Brazil. The interviewees pointed to the lack of teams for training, prohibition of participation in international preparatory events, precarious national infrastructure, sometimes coupled with doubts, anguish, and even the desire for Olympics cancellation. Another dimension identified by this axis lies in the athletes' collective point of view, evident from the emphasis on «we» in their narratives, which indicates that their descriptions go beyond the limits of «I,» that is, their own personal difficulties experienced as an individual athlete.

As for the axis of supportive relationships, we observe the importance of the collective's support around the athlete: teammates, members of committees/confederations/staff, family members, and a multidisciplinary team (including psychology). The interviewees who said they received this support from their confederation were athletes of the sport that won Brazil three medals: one gold, one silver, and one bronze; two medals in the men's event and one medal in the women's event (boxing).

In the «athletes' work» axis, this period became a moment to intensify training, in an attempt to adjust elements that one did not «have time» for due to competitive calendars. It is necessary to be present constantly, regardless of the physical, psychological, or social conditions. Accordingly, we detected a proximity with the logic of presenteeism, which is widespread in the labor world, in the interviewees' statements. Owing to the existence of precarious training conditions, we understand why one of the interviewees suffered serious injuries, as their bodies are frequently pushed to perform beyond the limits of tolerance.

This study is not about individualizing the narratives herein, but about amplifying them and contextualizing them in a social, historical, economic, cultural, and political scenario. Contemplating the meanings of the postponement of the OG for Brazilian athletes is complex, further complicated by innumerable variables that are far from «neutral.» As Rosina & Veloso (2019) argue, the Olympic Movement spread a kind of impartial and neutral narrative that sports and politics do not engage, which facilitated the path toward universalization and equality, serving to «shield» the Olympic environment from the turbulent foreign policy that marked the twentieth century.

In addition to this reflection, there have been countless upheavals in the 21st century, including the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused severe anxiety for everyone involved in the Olympic Movement, as well as in its innumerable practices and rituals. In line with this idea, from the constructionist perspective, the existence of scientific neutrality is questioned, since it is understood that the pursuit of this dose of «impartiality» and the pursuit of a single, stable truth have become instruments of power and domination (Aragaki et al., 2014).

Nevertheless, in the «rigging game» (Dolores et al., 2014) woven herein, the statements made in the interviews presented blurred boundaries between the meanings of the postponement of the OG. A few stabilizing factors, such as recurring statements and firm perspectives regarding a specific issue (e.g., the lack of support for athletes from the global South, such as Brazil), provided crucial clarifications for action and changes in this field.

The results of this study may help psychologists, coaches, and managers of sport teams to understand the context experienced by Brazilian Olympic athletes. The results aim to help professionals broaden their viewpoint beyond an individualizing performance, which does not consider the contexts experienced. Moreover, this study suggests that public and private Brazilian agencies should contemplate improvements, for the different sports contexts in their agendas that go beyond the «Olympic year» or «medal count.» It also suggests a dialogue with the community involved with the Olympic sports, in order ensure that equality, hitherto absent, is provided to athletes from developing countries.

## Limitations

The participants interviewed in this study did not include all the Olympic sports that represented Brazil, as several were unavailable due to intense training. Therefore, it is necessary to expand the sample in a post-Olympic cycle for new studies. Additionally, this study leaves another possibility for research that we believe is urgent: the training/



working conditions of Olympic athletes from Brazil and other Latin American countries.

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