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All Roads Lead to Tokyo? Olympic Preparations Amid a Global Pandemic

A Qualitative Study of How Norwegian Handball Players Mentally Prepared Ahead of the Tokyo Olympic Games and How They Experienced Their Preparations During the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Background: Mental preparation ahead of the Olympic Games (OGs) has been an area of interest for sports psychology researchers over several decades. However, Maher et al. (2020) proposed that there are few studies based on athlete perspectives of their experiences coping with pressure at this competition level (p. 421). The Covid-19 pandemic also placed athletes in a demanding situation as they had to deal with the suspension of sport activity, isolation, and general uncertainty—culminating in the first postponement of the OGs in peacetime. Athletes had to balance coping with everyday life in a pandemic with navigating training in ever-changing conditions, indicating it was particularly valuable to investigate mental preparations ahead of the Tokyo OGs.

Objective: The current study aimed to explore how Norwegian handball players of various experience levels mentally prepared for the Tokyo OGs and how they experienced their preparations during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Methods: Retrospective semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven handball players (four women, three men) who participated in the Tokyo OGs. A reflexive thematic analysis was completed to examine the findings.

Results: Extensive preparations were done on an individual and team level. These incorporated mental, tactical, physical, and practical elements. Individual efforts varied and there were indications of certain team differences. The first OGs appeared to be the most special and experience aided coping with the Olympic environment. Restrictions impacted preparations in some cases, though the teams mostly managed to follow their plans. Nonetheless, the pandemic made the players' everyday lives unpredictable, which was mentally exhausting for some. They coped with the uncertainties in different ways, though this often entailed focusing on the positive aspects. Overall, the players' respective contexts affected their perceptions of the pandemic and the postponement of the OGs, and their appraisals of various stressors and subsequent coping strategies.

Conclusion: Both teams prepared thoroughly. The indications of team differences and variations in individual preparations imply that there was no “correct” way to prepare—all roads led to Tokyo. Experience was beneficial in several ways, including coping with the Olympic environment. Some found coping with the effects of the pandemic mentally exhausting, thus potentially affecting preparations. Still, the players got to practice dealing with unexpected events, which could aid future coping efforts.

Keywords: Psychological preparation, handball, Olympics, coping, Covid-19

Sammendrag

Bakgrunn: Mentale forberedelser i forkant av OL har vært et interesseområde for forskere i idrettspsykologi i en årrekke. Likevel foreslo Maher et al. (2020) at det er få studier som baserer seg på idrettsutøvernes fortellinger om deres erfaringer med å håndtere press på dette konkurransenivået (s. 421). I tillegg satt Covid-19 pandemien utøvere i en krevende situasjon da de måtte håndtere nedstenging av idrettsaktivitet, isolasjon og stor grad av usikkerhet, som kulminerte i den første utsettelsen av OL i fredstid. Utøvere måtte balansere håndteringen av hverdagen i en pandemi med navigering av trening i stadig skiftende forhold. Dette tyder på at det kan ha vært spesielt verdifullt å utforske mentale forberedelser før OL i Tokyo.

Formål: Denne studien hadde som formål å undersøke hvordan norske håndballspillere med ulikt erfaringsnivå forberedte seg mentalt til OL i Tokyo og hvordan de opplevde forberedelsene under Covid-19 pandemien.

Metode: Det ble gjennomført retrospektive intervjuer med syv håndballspillere (fire kvinner, tre menn) som var en del av de norske landslagene under OL i Tokyo. En refleksiv tematisk analyse ble utført for å undersøke funnene.

Resultater: Det ble gjort omfattende forberedelser på individ- og lagnivå. Disse inkluderte mentale, taktiske, fysiske og praktiske elementer. Individuelle forberedelser varierte og det var indikasjoner på visse lagforskjeller. De første OL-ene en deltar i ser ut til å være de mest spesielle, og erfaring var positivt for å håndtere det olympiske miljøet. Restriksjoner påvirket lagenes forberedelser i noen tilfeller, selv om de stort sett fikk fulgt planene sine. Likevel gjorde pandemien spillernes hverdag uforutsigbar, og dette var mentalt utmattende for noen. Usikkerheten ble håndtert på ulike måter, eksempelvis innebar dette ofte å fokusere på det som var positivt i situasjonen. Samlet sett påvirket spillernes respektive kontekster oppfatningene av pandemien og utsettelsen av OL, samt vurderinger av stressorer og påfølgende mestringsstrategier.

Konklusjon: Begge lag forberedte seg grundig. Indikasjonene på lagforskjeller og variasjoner i individuelle forberedelser antyder at det ikke var én «riktig» måte å forberede seg på—alle veier førte til Tokyo. Erfaring var nyttig på flere områder, blant annet for å håndtere det olympiske miljøet. Noen opplevde effektene av pandemien som mentalt utmattende, noe som kan ha påvirket forberedelsene. Likevel fikk spillere trent på å takle uforutsette hendelser og dette kan være positivt for fremtidig stressmestring.

Nøkkelord: Psykologisk forberedelse, håndball, OL, stressmestring, Covid-19

Forord

Det har nå snart gått fem år siden jeg startet på Norges idrettshøgskole. Det har vært en reise med både opp- og nedturer, men studietiden her har gitt meg mye. Jeg har fått dyrke mine faglige interesser med hjelp fra kunnskapsrike forelesere og dyktige klassekamerater, samtidig som jeg har satt umåtelig stor pris på studentmiljøet og alle opplevelser det har gitt. Jeg vil rette en takk til alle som har bidratt underveis, dere har gjort studietiden min til noe jeg sent vil glemme. Jeg er også takknemlig for muligheten til å fordype meg i et tema som lenge har vært fascinerende for meg, nemlig hvordan man kan forberede seg for å prestere under press. Å skrive selve masteroppgaven har vært en tidkrevende prosess, som både har vært enormt lærerik og tidvis frustrerende. Jeg har lagt ned mye arbeid, og håper og tror at sluttproduktet er verdt å være stolt av.

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Abbreviations

CATS	The cognitive activation theory of stress
EC	European Championship
EYOF	European Youth Olympic Festival
IOC	The International Olympic Committee
NOTC	The Norwegian Olympic Training Center (Olympiatoppen) ¹
OGs	Olympic Games
SDT	Self-determination theory
SET	Self-efficacy theory
SPC	Sports psychology consultant
TTSC	The transactional theory of stress and coping
WC	World Championship
YOG	Youth Olympic Games

¹ Will be used to refer to support personnel from NOTC and NOTC as an institution.

“I cried. We had a summary after the match against Spain and I was completely out of my mind. It was so hard not to be able to perform at my best when it mattered the most, so I just had to say it: I think this is absolutely horrible.”

Anders Mol, Olympic gold winner beach volleyball Tokyo,
on the turning point during the Games²

² (Lie & Saltvedt, 2022)

1.0 Introduction

Despite endless pressure to perform, win medals, and represent both their sport and nation in a good way, elite athletes work diligently and meticulously day after day to reach their goals. Years of hard work and dedication ultimately culminate in competitions where the odds are always stacked against them—where they can achieve or destroy their dreams in seconds. Only one athlete or one team can win every competition, implying that a greater percentage will fail rather than realize their ambitions. Consequently, facilitating peak performance when it matters the most is a quintessential attribute in those aspiring to be the best.

It's the most difficult thing, then, as an athlete—it isn't the number of training hours or traveling or anything—it's the pressure that's the hardest. That's what people don't understand; how demanding it is to have exams twice a week where all eyes are on you.

Endre, handball player on the national team

This statement epitomizes the sense of pressure elite athletes encounter in their daily lives. Contemplate how athletes might experience this in the Olympic Games (OGs)—the competition that is, perhaps, the pinnacle of their careers and that occurs every four years with intense scrutiny from the entire world—where the games, or exams, might take place every day. Consider Anders Mol's quote on the preceding page and what it was like for him not to perform his best during their preliminary rounds in the Tokyo OGs. Is it possible to fully prepare for the immense pressure imposed by the Olympic conditions? How do you go about doing so, particularly during a global pandemic? And how does your experience level impact the process?

This thesis aimed to explore how Norwegian handball players mentally prepared to perform in the Tokyo OGs, and how they experienced their preparations during the Covid-19 pandemic. To that end, this chapter outlines a variety of research. First, it addresses the pressure and choking literature before exploring findings within mental preparations and the Olympic context. It then examines the Norwegian sports culture and discusses the potential effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on athletes and their Olympic preparations. The second chapter describes the transactional theory of stress and coping (TTSC; Lazarus, 1966; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and research on stress and coping in sports. Though TTSC is considered the main theoretical framework in this thesis, additional perspectives, including research on, for example, choking, mental preparations, and coping, are used to supplement analyses and discussions.

1.1 Performing Under Pressure

Many researchers have examined the factors affecting choking (see Beilock & Gray, 2007). While some athletes successfully perform under pressure (clutch performance; Schweickle et al., 2021), others choke. To *choke under pressure* means performing worse than anticipated given one's skill level in a setting that increases the significance of good performance (Baumeister, 1984, p. 610; Beilock & Gray, 2007, p. 426). It is a combination of elevations in experienced pressure—any factor(s) that makes performing well on a specific occasion more critical—and subpar performance. Typical examples include soccer penalty shootouts (Jordet et al., 2009), basketball free throws (Maher et al., 2020), and field kicks in American football (Goldschmied et al., 2010). Self-focus and distraction theories are currently the two attention-based models most prevalent in the literature exploring the mechanisms underlying choking, with researchers debating whether they overlap (Gröpel & Mesagno, 2019, pp. 196–197).

Briefly summarized, self-focus theories (e.g., Baumeister, 1984; Beilock & Carr, 2001; Hardy et al., 1996; Masters, 1992; McNevin et al., 2003) suggest that a consequence of increased anxiety is the allocation of conscious attention towards the execution of a movement, thereby disrupting normally automated processes. This is often termed “*paralysis by analysis*”. Distraction-based theories (e.g., Eysenck & Calvo, 1992; Eysenck et al., 2007; Wine, 1971) are based on the presumption that athletes will allocate attentional resources to task-irrelevant cues under pressure (Roberts et al., 2019, p. 55). When these distractions surpass a threshold of attentional capacity, the attentional space available for high-level performance is reduced, and an athlete may choke (Mesagno et al., 2015, p. 159).

Research (e.g., Beilock & Carr, 2001; Lewis & Linder, 1997) has indicated that athletes can reduce the likelihood of skill failure in high-pressure situations by training on managing the attentional demands imposed by such circumstances (Beilock & Gray, 2007, p. 441). Self-focus-based interventions endeavor to reduce reinvestment of explicit knowledge and conscious control of skill execution (e.g., through dual tasks, analogy learning, and implicit learning; Gröpel & Mesagno, 2019, pp. 189–190). Meanwhile, distraction-based interventions assert that maintaining a task-relevant focus of attention before and during skill execution allows optimal sports performance (Mesagno et al., 2015, p. 163) and have, for instance, included pre-performance routines (Mesagno et al., 2008; Mesagno & Mullane-Grant, 2010).

Acclimatization interventions, simulation training, and dress rehearsals can also reduce the probability of choking. These approaches are designed to familiarize athletes with performance-related stimuli (e.g., music, applause, announcers, competitive uniforms, and equipment) so they no longer become distracted (Williams et al., 2015, p. 315). The practice environment frequently diverges from the competitive setting, and the greater number of stimuli present during competition, the more likely athletes are to face performance decrements (Williams et al., 2015, p. 315). Dress rehearsals involve going through the same sequence of events as in competition (including wearing the competition uniform); acclimatization or simulation training entails training under mild anxiety conditions (e.g., being filmed) to reduce anxiety-related effects and thereby adapt athletes to pressure (Mesagno et al., 2015, pp. 162–163).

Despite not being theory-matched to choking research, acclimatization interventions have been effective in several investigations (Hill et al., 2011; Lewis & Linder, 1997; Oudejans & Pijpers, 2009, 2010). Numerous anecdotal accounts also exist (e.g., practicing with loud recordings of previous competitions or hostile crowd noises), and athletes who perform successfully in the OGs have been found to use simulation training extensively (Orlick & Partington, 1988, pp. 114–115). Researchers have recommended “overtraining” athletes to prepare for worst-case scenarios, such as making a basketball player wait the duration of a timeout before a free throw (Williams et al., 2015, p. 316). More recent findings also support the effectiveness of such interventions; in a meta-analysis, Low et al. (2021) found that pressure/acclimatization training improved performance under pressure (pp. 155–159). They advised that instead of simply training more, one should increase the pressure during training. This allows athletes to improve coping in situations where they perform sport-specific skills. Doing so might be particularly relevant ahead of the OGs, where most are stressed and “everything” is a performance issue (McCann, 2008).

1.2 The Olympic Context

The areas of choking and performance under pressure have generated vast research interest over several decades, and the resulting knowledge offers several suggestions for how one might prepare for competitions. Nonetheless, the OGs distinguish themselves from other events; for most, they represent the epitome of sporting achievements. Research within the area contains several sports psychology consultants’ (SPCs) accounts. For instance, McCann (2008) underlined that the

differences between the OGs and other competitions are apparent in countless ways and that performance at the OGs often represents the defining moments of athletes' careers (pp. 267–268). Pensgaard and Duda (2002) described the OGs as one of the most challenging and prestigious competitions one can encounter, with a logic and life of its own (p. 219). Orlick (2002) stressed that while the performance demands are the same as in other competitions, the surroundings are markedly different (pp. 6–7). This included the expectations and demands, the media coverage and the overall hype of the event. Thus, Orlick argued, the OGs are unlike any other sporting event.

The special meaning attached to the OGs can be explained partly by it only occurring once every four years. Coupled with the enormity and the globalization of the sports industry, the result is worldwide interest and, thus, intense scrutiny and pressure (Arnold & Sarkar, 2015, p. 4). Arnold and Sarkar (2015) revealed numerous potential stressors, including selections, expectations, being a first-time participant, staying true to personal values, the rarity, distractions, performance considerations, coach-athlete interactions, motivation, and planning for the future (pp. 7–10). Solely those who can cope with the arising stress and anxiety will perform to their full potential. Hence, it is only natural that researchers have devoted more attention to understanding psychological preparation ahead of the OGs (see Gould & Maynard, 2009). Although there are several ways of viewing *psychological* or *mental preparation*, for the purpose of this thesis, it was defined as “those cognitive, emotional, and behavioural strategies athletes and teams use to arrive at an ideal performance state or condition that is related to optimal psychological states and peak performance” (Gould et al., 2009, p. 53).

1.2.1 Mental Preparations for the Olympics

Preparing for the unique context of the OGs appears to aid Olympic performance. For example, Orlick and Partington (1988) conducted a large-scale study with 235 Canadian athletes from the 1984 OGs, discovering that the best athletes prepared mentally for both training and competition (p. 115). These athletes had devised systematic methods for utilizing their strengths in competitions, including pre-performance strategies, competition focus plans, procedures for evaluation, and distraction strategies. The authors concluded that mental readiness was a critical performance component (p. 129). Successful teams in the Atlanta OGs also employed substantial mental preparations, with performance success associated with well-developed competitive plans and routines (Gould et al., 1999, pp. 386, 392).

Furthermore, mentally tough athletes have been found to take advantage of every aspect of their training environment, obtaining as much control over training preparations as they can (Jones et al., 2007, pp. 253–254). Participants in this research—coaches, SPCs, and Olympic and World Champions—suggested that mentally tough performers maximized every opportunity to learn and practiced becoming better than everyone else whenever possible. Combined, this evidence reinforces the necessity for mental preparations ahead of practice and competitions. Still, the question remains; how should one mentally prepare to perform at the OGs?

In 2009, Gould and Maynard reviewed the research on psychological preparations for Olympic performance. In essence, the literature suggested that the development of Olympians is a long-term process, both athletically and psychologically (pp. 1399–1404). Mental preparations begin when athletes enter the sports system and are influenced by several factors. The lessons for preparing for Olympic success involved physical, social, and situational factors. Summarized, this included planning efforts (e.g., distraction preparation, adherence to plans); physical training (e.g., managing training load, participation in international competitions); mental training, preparations, and sports psychology (e.g., preparing to deal with unexpected incidents, integrating mental training into a total preparation package); team factors (e.g., confidence, cohesion, coaching, support personnel, team training programs, selections); and external factors (family/friends, media and sponsors, equipment and travel/environmental factors, weather conditions). Similar findings have also been reported by those working closely with Olympic athletes (e.g., Arnold & Sarkar, 2015; Collins & Cruickshank, 2015).

Gould and Maynard (2009) also described multiple limitations of the existing research (pp. 1395–1396). This included that the research lacked prospective methods and that few studies examined the interactions between multiple variables associated with outstanding performance. Additionally, they accentuated the need for more theoretically driven studies and more precise performance measures (e.g., winning a medal is influenced by non-psychological factors, and self-referenced standards of success should also be used). Nevertheless, the authors concluded that the literature provided a starting point for planning Olympic preparation efforts in general and mental preparations in particular (p. 1406).

To synthesize the main points reviewed this far, the research indicates that the Olympic context distinguishes itself from other competitions. Although the competitive demands are the same as those athletes face regularly, the surroundings are notably different. Performing at the OGs is often—though dependent on sport—considered more prestigious than, for example, World Championships (WCs), thereby increasing the athletes' stake in their performance. This makes a prospective failure even harder to cope with and imply added pressure to do everything “perfectly” in the season leading up to the OGs and in the OGs themselves. To perform under such circumstances is not an easy task; however, it can potentially be facilitated through appropriate planning efforts. As demonstrated above, preparing for the OGs is a complex process that involves everything from physical and mental training to team cohesion, support personnel, and environmental demands. The cultural context might also affect preparations, which I explore in the subsequent section.

1.3 Implications of Cultural Contexts

Researchers have emphasized the influence culture has on performance at the OGs (Wagstaff & Burton-Wylie, 2018, p. 32). For example, Stambulova et al. (2012) analyzed Olympic preparations in complex coordination sports (CCSs; e.g., diving, figure skating, gymnastics) and underlined the impact of national sport systems and culture. Elucidating the disparities between Swedish and Russian cultural contexts based on their experience, they noted four points (p. 685): (1) The size of the country and the number of available candidates influence the selection process for the Olympic teams, and this impacts athletes' stress levels, (2) traditions for pre-Olympic team building differs, (3) the political dimension of the OGs varies between countries (e.g., more politicized in Russia than Sweden), and (4) there are diverse media traditions during the OGs (e.g., Swedish athletes can be interviewed during competitions which might be a distraction, whereas Russian athletes are often interviewed in the evening). While these reflections were directly related to the cultural contexts within CCSs in Sweden and Russia, they illuminated how national sport systems differ and indicated that such distinctions should be considered and integrated in preparations for the OGs. With this in mind, although the international findings regarding mental preparations for the OGs can serve as a baseline for Norwegian athletes, we should consider the Norwegian sports culture before attempting to extrapolate them.

1.3.1 The Norwegian Elite Sports Culture

Skille and Chroni (2018) examined the organizational culture of Norwegian Sports Federations and aimed to explore how it produces international achievements. Describing the Norwegian approach to elite sports as “quite distinctive” (p. 329), the results revealed that a hard-working team environment along with egalitarian structures provided a basis for a development orientation that is the center of the Norwegian elite sports culture (pp. 321–331). While a culture of hard work can describe any international sports achievement, the authors suggested that the team atmosphere—each team member supporting all other members—directly depended on the egalitarian idea: “Egalitarianism diminished the distance from the sport director to the national team coach and to the athletes” (p. 330). An absence of hierarchy resulted in short distances between administrative bodies and facilitated open dialogue. The authors remarked that while empirical evidence from other countries is lacking, they believed this to be a unique quality of the Norwegian elite sports culture and policy. Though variations are always present, they suggested that the overall Norwegian elite sports culture is based on meaningful processes for development that appear to permeate across sport-specific and cultural differences of sports federations (Skille & Chroni, 2018, pp. 321–331).

Skille et al. (2020) furthered these findings as they explored the organizational culture in Norwegian elite sports through interviews with the head coaches of the women’s and men’s handball teams. They identified three key elements (pp. 102–110). The organizational culture focused on *process over product*—performance rather than winning. The process was *athlete-centered* and *value-based*, albeit there were distinctions between the teams in what this meant practically. The authors emphasized that Norwegian societal expectations result from “the overall national culture in which egalitarianism, universalism, and collectivism are important ideologies with corresponding values.” (p. 109). The Norwegian sports culture accentuates humanistic values as fundamental in athlete development, viewing the whole person ahead of the system. This attitude was personified through the women’s coach’s focus on athletes doing things outside sports (e.g., getting an education). He looked for athletes who took responsibility for their journeys and a solid team-value system with individual balances (Skille et al., 2020, pp. 102–110). The men’s coach, in contrast, looked for athletes that fit the team’s culture—attempting to find athletes that fit together and committed to playing under the team’s value system of loyalty, precision, and effort.

To recapitulate, what is described here is an elite sports culture with egalitarianism at its core. Development is facilitated through open communication and a flat organizational structure, and the emphasis on process and seeing the whole person indicates the prominence of humanistic values. This implies a culture where athletes are obliged to contribute; they are not merely bystanders in their development who can passively abide by coach instructions and set training plans. Instead, athletes are expected to co-regulate, actively participate, and take responsibility in and outside sports (e.g., self-regulation; Zimmerman, 1989, 1990). This appears to be a valued component of the Norwegian sports culture.

1.3.2 Research on Norwegian Elite Athletes

As established, mental preparations in elite sports have been increasingly popular research areas. The Norwegian literature also displays the curiosity about what characterizes elite athletes and their performance. Among the researched themes are motivational factors, emotions, and coping strategies (Pensgaard & Duda, 2002, 2003; Pensgaard & Roberts, 2000, 2003; Pensgaard et al., 1999), athletes' mental and physical attributes (Boes et al., 2012), coaching and organization (Chroni et al., 2016; Skille et al., 2020), and mental health (Pensgaard et al., 2021). To my knowledge, however, there has been no explicit research regarding Norwegian athletes' mental preparations ahead of imperative competitions, specifically the OGs, and no comparison of experience levels in this regard.

1.4 The Covid-19 Pandemic and its Effects on Athletes and Preparations

As the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted people worldwide, it is natural to assume that elite athletes' training and preparations for the OGs have been influenced. Though restrictions and the pandemic's impact have varied between countries, all athletes needed to adapt training regimens in ever-changing conditions. In this sense it is especially fascinating to investigate Olympic preparations. When, if ever, have athletes had to navigate their training in response to unexpected events on such a large scale? Have they ever had to relate to so much ambiguity and lack of predictability, respond to so many competition postponements and cancellations, and adjust their training accordingly?

Pensgaard et al. (2021) completed a cross-sectional analysis of the prevalence of mental health problems among different groups of Norwegian athletes during a period

of the pandemic. The two most prevalent conditions were insomnia and depression; the risk of eating problems was significantly higher in females, whereas men were more at risk for gambling issues (pp. 2–5). There were fewer anxiety and depression symptoms in the Olympic/Paralympic athletes than in the elite and semi-elite sample. It should be noted that the former group received financial support and had access to an extensive support system (e.g., psychological personnel). The authors concluded that while some athletes welcomed the unexpected break, overall, concerns about finances as a direct consequence of the pandemic were substantial stressors. Accessibility to financial and professional support, keeping daily routines, and perceiving positive consequences of the pandemic seemed to be essential in coping.

These findings demonstrated some of the pandemic's effects on Norwegian elite athletes. As mentioned, the OGs are widely regarded as more meaningful than other competitions, conceivably more so for first-time participants who may not know what to expect. The potential turmoil of participating amid a pandemic might have brought additional feelings of insecurity and stress. Novel environmental demands have also been introduced for seasoned Olympians, as testing and other restrictions are factors not previously encountered. At the same time, the restrictions might have reduced the number of prospective distractions, which have been mentioned as factors possibly harming performance (e.g., Blumenstein & Lidor, 2008; Orlick & Partington, 1988). As demonstrated in the next chapter, numerous situational factors can affect how a person reacts to an event, which may or may not result in stress. For instance, the lack of spectators in the Tokyo OGs might be positive for some athletes and negative for others—it can be a source of energy or a source of pressure. Hence, how athletes appraises and copes with their circumstances can be crucial for performance success.

Finally, the research conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic has rapidly expanded during the writing of this thesis (e.g., Bowes et al., 2020; Clemente-Suárez et al., 2020; Csulak et al., 2021; di Fronso et al., 2022; Grønkjær & Frøyen, 2021; Gupta & McCarthy, 2021; Jaenes Sánchez et al., 2021; Jia et al., 2022; Jurecka et al., 2021; Leguizamo et al., 2021; Lundqvist et al., 2021; Martínez-Patiño et al., 2021; Nowak et al., 2021; Oblinger-Peters & Krenn, 2020; Reardon et al., 2021; Santi et al., 2021; Stambulova et al., 2022; Szczypińska et al., 2021; Wadsworth & Hargreaves, 2021; Whitcomb-Khan et al., 2021). Everything does not apply to the current study, and it is beyond the scope of this thesis to succinct them all. Still, the recent publication by

Rogers and Werthner (2022), exploring the experiences of Canadian athletes preparing for the Tokyo OGs, should be acknowledged. They discovered that the athletes used the pandemic as an opportunity to reflect on life in and outside sports, and that each individual's context (e.g., injury status, stage of career, first or last OGs) influenced their perceptions of the pandemic and the postponement of the OGs (pp. 8–13). They also highlighted the importance of social support and being more than an athlete, concluding that the athletes' narratives illuminated resilience in action.

2.0 Theoretical Frame of Reference

It is evident that the Olympic environment represents many potential stressors for participants. This includes the period leading up to the tournament (e.g., trials, qualifying events, and team selections), the OGs themselves (e.g., the grandeur of competition, media attention, and performing up to internal and external expectations), and the period following competitions (e.g., dealing with the aftermath of fulfilling or not fulfilling longtime dreams). In this thesis, TTSC (Lazarus, 1966; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) is used to describe how the many demands of Olympic participation impact athletes. This chapter explains the theory and additionally includes a section that demonstrates the stress research within sports contexts. It should be recognized that TTSC is not necessarily an ideal fit for the research questions and that several theoretical perspectives could have been employed (e.g., cognitive activation theory of stress, CATS; self-regulation theory; Ursin & Eriksen, 2004; Zimmerman, 1989). Still, TTSC was considered the most suitable to answer the research questions.

2.1 Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping

TTSC postulates how appraisal, coping, and emotions work interdependently—and in connection with personal and situational factors—to affect reactions to an event or an encounter (Lazarus, 1966; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In the following subsections, I present an overview of these elements and explore how they operate.

2.1.1 Stress, Appraisal, and Coping

Stress can be defined as a perceived imbalance between demands and response capability under circumstances where failing to meet the demands has important (perceived) consequences (McGrath, 1970, p. 20). This definition accentuates the person's subjective appraisal of a situation. Within CATS, the stress response is described as a “general, unspecific alarm occurring whenever there is a discrepancy

between what is expected or the ‘normal’ situation (set value) and what is happening in reality (actual value)” (Ursin & Eriksen, 2004, p. 572). In TTSC, Lazarus and Folkman (1984, 1985) emphasized the dynamic process between person and environment, claiming that an encounter must exceed one’s resources and be considered relevant to well-being to elicit a stress response (pp. 21, 152). These factors are assessed during the appraisal process, which occurs either consciously and deliberately or unconsciously and automatically (Lazarus, 1999, p. 82).

To exemplify, we can consider a handball player playing her first game for a new club. She wants to impress her team, so her performance carries great significance for her. They are also playing their rival team, and consequently, there is added pressure from the supporters to win and nervous energy in the locker room. In this scenario, the player’s experience of the situation hinges on her belief in her capacity to perform under the given demands. Being new to a team, playing their rival, and the fact that several players are fighting for playing time in her position may increase the perceived demands to such an extent that she no longer feels her abilities are enough to perform—her stress levels rising as a result.

Her appraisal of the situation determines her reaction and coping efforts. An appraisal is an interdependent process consisting of primary and secondary appraisal (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985, p. 152; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 31). These operate without a clear temporal ordering (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987, p. 147), and the interaction between them decides the degree of stress and content of the emotional reaction (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 35). There is also the concept of reappraisal, when new information from the person and/or environment changes the initial appraisal (p. 53). The following subsections examine the appraisal process.

Primary Appraisal. Primary appraisals are concerned with the motivational relevance of an event, and the quality and intensity of the emotional reaction depend on what and how much is at stake (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987, pp. 145–146). During the primary appraisal, one evaluates an encounter as (1) irrelevant, (2) benign-positive, or (3) stressful (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 32). An *irrelevant* encounter has no implications for well-being, whereas a *benign-positive* encounter suggests preserved or enhanced well-being. The latter encompasses pleasurable emotions (e.g., love or joy); however, might also cause feelings of guilt or anxiety. Consider, for example, a team on a winning streak who are ecstatic but may also be fearful awaiting their first loss.

According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), this demonstrates how appraisals are complex and depend on both the context and the person (p. 32).

There are three subcategories within the *stressful* appraisals: Harm/loss, threat, and challenge (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 32). In the *harm/loss* category, some damage (e.g., damage to self-esteem or the loss of a loved person) has already occurred. This can, for instance, be the feelings of failure after losing a game. The *threat* appraisal distinguishes itself as it allows for anticipatory coping; the harms/losses have not yet happened (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 32). To exemplify: Before a critical game, a team discusses the possibilities of winning and losing and prepare themselves for different scenarios to maximize their chances of victory. This grants the players time for reflection and provides an opportunity for perspective, reminding them that their worth does not hinge on the result. In comparison, if they strictly focus on winning and then lose, the players may not have prepared sufficiently for this alternative and might experience a longer coping process and/or cope in more maladaptive ways.

Challenge appraisals indicate opportunities for growth and pleasurable emotions rather than fearing potential negative repercussions (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 33). Threat and challenge appraisals are not mutually exclusive; they can appear concurrently and change as a situation unfolds. Consider, for instance, the findings that during midterm examinations, students experienced both feelings of threat and challenge during each phase of the exam (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985, p. 168). This included the anticipation stage before the exam, the waiting stage before grades were posted, and after grades were posted. It should not be implausible to propose that similar findings could be relevant for teams participating in the OGs.

Lazarus and Folkman additionally added *benefit* appraisals in their 1987 article. Benefit appraisals imply that one can feel positive emotions long-term and right after an event (Nicholls & Polman, 2007, p. 12). Lazarus and Folkman (1987) explain that social and cultural conditions, combined with personal psychological characteristics, determine whether a relationship is harmful or beneficial: A specific environmental circumstance only elicits harm or benefit appraisals when happening to a person with cognitive and motivational characteristics that make her/him susceptible to that situation, and vice versa (p. 145).

Secondary Appraisal. During secondary appraisals, a person evaluates potential actions to manage a situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 35). What can the handball

player mentioned earlier—playing her first game for a new club—do to manage her situation? Talk to someone about her nervousness? Avoid the feelings altogether? Lazarus and Folkman (1984) call secondary appraisals complex evaluative processes where one considers possible coping strategies and the chances of those strategies accomplishing the desired outcome, along with the chances of employing them effectively (p. 35). Secondary appraisals are essential in the appraisal process as the potential stressful reactions are affected by how much control a person feels they have over the outcome (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987, p. 146). As exemplified by the authors: Though there may be a risk of a damaging outcome, feeling confident that one can prevent it may reduce or abolish threat appraisals. However, the opposite also applies. For instance, if the stakes are high, any doubt can cause substantial stress, even when feeling that one has the power to control the outcome (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 35). Reflect, again, on the handball player: She will likely be fine if she feels assured that she possesses the skills necessary to manage the situation. Yet, she has never played a game for that team before. She has not had many hours to practice with her teammates, and their cooperation may not have had time to set. This can create enough doubt about her ability to increase her stress levels considerably.

Coping. We have established the interaction between primary and secondary appraisals, but there is also an interplay between appraisal and coping. Lazarus and Folkman (1987) define *coping* as “constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person” (p. 141). This is unlike the definition used within CATS (Ursin & Eriksen, 2004, p. 576), where coping is defined as a positive response outcome expectancy (e.g., believing one can cope). Whereby Ursin and Eriksen are predominantly concerned with the result of coping—reducing arousal—Lazarus and Folkman attempt to categorize and distinguish different coping responses. A challenge, then, is that one often looks for one “correct” coping solution (Abrahamsen, 2021, p. 25). This can be inconvenient as athletes face an abundance of potentially stressful stimuli and respond distinctively based on personal (e.g., coping repertoire) and environmental factors (e.g., time and resources available).

Lazarus and Folkman (1987) proposed two main types of coping: Problem- and emotion-focused (p. 147). Problem-focused coping suggests that athletes will attempt to do something proactively about what is causing them stress; emotion-focused coping

implies a version of reappraisal where one tries to alter emotions regarding an event. Consider an athlete who becomes extra nervous when her parents are present during games. She invites them to watch practices and games more often to deal with the situation (problem-focused coping). She becomes used to having them there, and her stress reaction eventually subsides. Alternatively, she could remind herself that her parents support her irrespective of her performance (emotion-focused coping). A final option is to avoid it altogether and hope the situation resolves on its own. This is termed avoidance-coping, and while it can relieve stress in the short term, it is usually considered ineffective in the long run (Madigan et al., 2020, p. 2). Roth and Cohen (1986) introduced avoidance and approach coping as “shorthand terms for the cognitive and emotional activity that is oriented either toward or away from threat.” (p. 813). There is also the classification of maladaptive and adaptive coping strategies; Carver et al. (1989) discussed functional and dysfunctional coping efforts when developing a multidimensional coping inventory (COPE; pp. 268–270, 280).

There exist several other perspectives as well. Compas et al. (2001) advocated using subtypes of the broader coping dimensions to cover the complexity of the coping process (p. 91). Within this understanding, information seeking, planning, and setting goals are examples of problem-focused coping, whereas seeking emotional support and meditation or relaxation are examples of emotion-focused coping (Nicholls & Polman, 2007, p. 12). In sports, Nicholls et al. (2016b) proposed using mastery, internal regulation, and goal withdrawal strategies to classify coping (p. 5). Didymus (2017) grouped different strategies based on their role in adaptive processes (p. 214). The suggested coping families were dyadic, escape, information seeking, negotiation, problem-solving, self-reliance, and support seeking (pp. 225–227). Consequently, as Norris et al. (2017) argued, the debate about how coping should be categorized remains unanswered (p. 94). However, using the TTSC framework, this thesis uses emotion- and problem-focused coping to classify strategies.

Emotions. Before illuminating the factors influencing appraisal, it is imperative to recognize the significance of emotions in the coping process. According to Lazarus (1999), the concepts of stress and emotions are more similar than different in terms of how they are aroused and coped with and how they affect psychological well-being, functioning, and somatic health (p. 36). It is proposed that stress often accompanies emotions typically deemed positive, such as gratitude, pride, and happiness. This can

result from fear that the circumstances responsible for the pleasurable emotions will disappear, so one might engage in coping efforts to sustain them longer (pp. 36–37). Lazarus refers to coping as an integral part of emotional arousal since contemplating the importance of an event always entails assessing what can be done about it, which then determines the following response. Thus, stress, emotions, and coping are interrelated concepts and should be considered as such (Lazarus, 1999, p. 37).

2.1.2 Person Factors Influencing Appraisal

Appraisals result from the relationship between a person and the surrounding environment. The personal characteristics highlighted as significant by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) were commitments and beliefs (p. 55). These variables impact the appraisal process by defining what is vital for well-being and shaping the understanding of the situation, and, thereby, the resulting emotions and coping efforts. They also contribute to the assessment of the outcome.

Commitments involve what is meaningful to someone. They have a motivating quality in determining what a person is willing to do to achieve their desired outcome (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, pp. 56–63). Commitments affect appraisals in several ways: They guide people into or away from situations that can harm, threaten, or challenge them, and influence cue-sensitivity and psychological vulnerability. As the authors exemplified, a committed athlete partakes in extensive training and avoids situations, even if they could bring pleasure, if they reduce athletic performance. This can mean declining a birthday invitation the day before a competition or leaving early when hanging out with friends to ensure proper restitution. It might also be illustrated by the findings of, for example, Orlick and Partington (1988), whose results indicated that total commitment to pursuing excellence was among the common elements of success for Olympians in practically every sport (p. 129).

Concerning vulnerability, which is proposed to be the most vital factor, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) suggested that the deeper the commitment, the greater the potential for threat or harm (pp. 56–63). The depth of the commitment also determines the effort put forth. Thus, it can motivate actions that may reduce threats and help sustain coping efforts when faced with difficulties. Additionally, the more public a commitment is, the more threatening it is to have it challenged. This is relevant in every circumstance where the consequences might be social criticism or damage to self-esteem. As Lazarus and Folkman (1984) contended, people fearing that they will give up on a commitment

(e.g., quitting smoking) often announce this to others, thereby putting added pressure on themselves to reach their goals (p. 61). This is interesting to discuss in a sporting context, where athletes are frequently asked about their ambitions. Some athletes claim that they should be able to state bold aspirations (e.g., medaling) without it adding pressure and becoming a scandal if it does not work out (e.g., Helene Marie Fossesholm; Fjellvang, 2021); whereas others avoid talking about results and refuse to state outcome goals (e.g., the Norwegian shooting team; Hoel, 2020).

We might also exemplify this with the Norwegian women's national team in handball. They have a long track record of success, winning back-to-back gold in the OGs in 2008 and 2012, bronze in 2016, and collecting several medals in European Championships (ECs) and WCs along the way (Håndballforbundet, n.d.-b). They are often considered favorites and expected to continue their line of results. When prompted about their aspirations before championships, they usually agree with journalists that they are among the favorites, though they continually accentuate that there are numerous strong teams and that only one can win in the end (Eide, 2021; Hellenes, 2021; Overvik, 2021). Attempting to avoid publicly stating outcome goals can be a sensible strategy. However, the constant queries from the media about what it is like to be favorites imply an added pressure to perform (see also Kristiansen et al., 2011). While one can merely speculate about the effects, it is not improbable that it might feel tiresome and/or threatening for some. A previous Norwegian Olympian described it as follows: "The media is a hidden stress factor, I think many athletes don't realize how invasive it can be, and how much it might affect you." (Kristiansen et al., 2011, p. 449). Athletes likely experience the requests to publicly state their ambitions differently. Based on the framework described here, their responses are affected by, for instance, their personal beliefs, sense of control, and self-efficacy. Nevertheless, if the goal is gold, every other result may feel like a loss—even when a medal is gained.

Beliefs are preexisting notions about the reality that impacts one's evaluation of environmental demands and how one interprets their meaning (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, pp. 63–80). There are beliefs about personal control and existential concerns. The former refers to feelings of mastery and confidence and can be general or situation specific. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) suggested that the general beliefs of control are most likely to affect appraisals under ambiguous circumstances: "the less ambiguity there is about a particular encounter, the more likely situational appraisals of control

will affect emotion and coping.” (p. 80). Existential beliefs (e.g., God, fate) impact what is considered important through the creation of meaning and can increase hope in adverse situations.

The circumstances surrounding the Tokyo OGs were highly ambiguous. Initially scheduled for 2020, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the OGs were postponed until 2021. This might have brought forward a range of emotions for athletes working towards this goal for the past Olympic cycle. While some may have been grateful for the time to mend injuries or improve their physical abilities, others might have felt frustrated that the restrictions did not allow them to prepare optimally (see e.g., Oblinger-Peters & Krenn, 2020). It is not unlikely that individual differences in beliefs and commitments have affected athletes’ responses and coping under these conditions. Additionally, imposed restrictions, available resources, and the general sense of uncertainty during the pandemic may have influenced athletes. Such situational factors impact stress and coping, which the following subsection exhibits.

2.1.3 Situation Factors Influencing Appraisal

There are several situational factors influencing appraisals (Table 1). Originally, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) included eight factors (pp. 82–114). In a sporting context, Thatcher and Day (2008) proposed adding self and other comparison and inadequate preparations (pp. 332–333). They also introduced a new definition of novelty based on the unlikeliness of genuine novelty in sports. Both definitions are included below.

Table 1

Situation Factors Influencing Appraisal.

Factor	Explanation
Novelty	Previous experience with a situation (directly or indirectly) or a situation with changes that have not been encountered before
Predictability	There are predictable environmental features that can be discovered and learned; a situation is unpredictable when such assumptions no longer apply
Event uncertainty	The probability of an event occurring
Imminence	Time before a stressful event
Duration	How long a stressful event lasts
Temporal uncertainty	Lack of knowledge of the timing of an event
Ambiguity	The information needed for appraisal is unclear or insufficient
Timing of stressful events in the life cycle	The context of an event; an occurrence that coincides with stressful events in other areas of life
Self and other comparison	Comparing physiological, psychological, or social performance elements with those of someone else
Inadequate preparations	Not feeling sufficiently prepared for competition

Note. Based on Lazarus and Folkman (1984, pp. 82–114) and Thatcher and Day (2008, pp. 332–333).

While not necessarily of specific interest to this thesis, several aspects of the mentioned factors can be related to self-efficacy theory (SET; Bandura, 1977). Self-efficacy involves believing in one's ability to do what is needed to accomplish a goal (Bandura, 1997, p. 3). Bandura (1977) differentiates between outcome and efficacy expectations (p. 193). The former is a person's estimate that a behavior leads to a particular outcome, and the latter is the belief that one can do what is required to reach that outcome. It is highlighted that one can believe that an action produces a specific outcome, yet behavior is not affected if there is doubt about the ability to perform that action successfully. Therefore, SET proposes that such expectations influences both initiation and persistence of coping behavior; they impact whether a person attempts to cope in the first place, their level of effort, and how long they persist when faced with challenges (pp. 193–194).

The efficacy interpretations can be impacted by performance accomplishments, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and emotional arousal (Bandura, 1977, pp. 195–200). Performance accomplishments might be relevant and are especially influential as they are based on personal mastery experiences (p. 195). Say, a handball player who has been in the OGs and won may have greater personal beliefs about accomplishing this again than a first-time participant who is unsure of what to expect (e.g., novelty, predictability). When faced with difficulties during the OGs, such as playing poorly during pre-camp or struggling to acclimatize, this can result in distinctive appraisals among the athletes. While experienced athletes may think they just need time to adapt, inexperienced ones might question their abilities and fear that they are not adequately prepared or that their playing level is not good enough.

To summarize, both personal and situational factors affect athletes' coping. In the OGs, novelty, as defined by Thatcher and Day (2008), is relevant for first-time participants. Because of the pandemic and resulting restrictions, it might also apply to seasoned Olympians. Event uncertainty, temporal uncertainty, and ambiguity are additionally likely to impact athletes, as the OGs were postponed and uncertainty regarding the completion prevailed. The varying Covid-19 restrictions between countries suggest that both self and other comparison and inadequate preparations may be pertinent. Timing in relation to other life events might also have been applicable for some athletes, depending on what was going on in their lives.

2.2 Stress and Coping in Sports

Stress and coping have been examined extensively in sports. Nicholls and Polman (2007) addressed a variety of research within the field in their systematic review. They asserted that the most used classifications of coping within sports psychology are the trait and transactional perspectives (p. 11). Whereas the former proposes that coping styles are stable, the transactional approach, as we have seen, considers coping a dynamic and changing process influenced by both internal and external factors. There is some evidence to support the trait perspective; however, most of the research supports the transactional approach (Nicholls & Polman, 2007, p. 16).

Several moderators and mediators influence the coping process, including age, gender, and ethnicity for the former, and motivational-orientation, self-confidence, and trait anxiety for the latter (Nicholls & Polman, 2007, p. 17). The findings concerning gender were equivocal. It is a common conception that men use more problem-focused coping, whereas women use more emotion-focused strategies. This has some support in the literature, though it is remarked that the research within the area has been weak. In terms of age, the main conclusion was that older athletes appear to cope more effectively with stress than younger ones (p. 18). The authors contended that adolescents might have much to gain from increasing their coping repertoire. Still, a core point noted is that teaching them strategies used by adult elite athletes could be counterproductive; gender, age, and individual differences should be considered.

The review also found differences between individual and team sports, with individual athletes utilizing coping strategies more often (Nicholls & Polman, 2007, p. 17). A suggested explanation was that individual athletes cannot attribute failure nor success to teammates; they are entirely liable for their efforts and performances. Kerdijk et al. (2016) explored coping and stress in team sports, examining the role of the social environment. The participants felt that others influenced their appraisal and coping in approximately 50 % of the stressful encounters (pp. 5–6). Intriguingly, this led to more adaptive problem- and emotion-focused coping strategies and a higher likelihood of appraising the event as a challenge instead of a threat. If a situation was considered threatening, more maladaptive strategies or no strategy were used. Influence from others was less likely to occur under these circumstances.

A general point emphasized by Nicholls and Polman (2007) is that much of the research has been affected by methodological issues, mainly due to the use of

retrospective approaches. Since then, other study designs have added to the literature, for instance, using training diaries to circumvent issues of recall bias (e.g., Didymus & Fletcher, 2012; Kerdijk et al., 2016; Nicholls et al., 2005; Nicholls & Levy, 2016). Notwithstanding the discussion of potential methodological limitations, the research within this area underlines the value of establishing a strong coping repertoire. Coping has been positively associated with sports performance (Nicholls et al., 2016b, p. 12) and psychological well-being (Nicholls et al., 2016a, p. 52). Thus, athletes should not overlook this aspect of their performance.

2.2.1 Organizational Stressors

There are numerous potentially stressful elements in a competitive environment. Hanton et al. (2005) discovered that elite athletes experienced more organizational stressors than competitive ones. The organizational stressors were associated with environmental issues (e.g., travel, the competitive environment), personal issues (e.g., goals, pressure from significant others, nutrition, injury), leadership issues (e.g., coach's attitude or coaching style), and team issues (e.g., atmosphere, communication; pp. 1134–1139). While athletes were also concerned with performance issues, the authors advised against focusing all future attention (applied and empirical) on prioritizing competitive stressors at the expense of organizational ones. This is evident in the literature published since, where researchers have dedicated considerable attention to examining the effects of organizational stressors (e.g., Arnold et al., 2017; Bartholomew et al., 2017; Didymus & Fletcher, 2017; Hanton et al., 2012).

For example, Neil et al. (2011) examined appraisals and the resulting emotions, further appraisals, and behaviors in a sample of elite and non-elite athletes from various sports. Discussing emotional orientation—“that performers interpret the emotions they experience as either beneficial or detrimental to performance, dependent on whether they believe that they have the resources to cope with their emotions.”—the authors emphasized the significance of individual differences in the appraisal process (p. 461). They underlined that although athletes experienced similar emotions in stressful encounters, these emotions were a result of individual cognitions based on the athletes' interplay with the surrounding environment and the meaning attached to this relationship (p. 466). The results of the study revealed that the athletes' stressors caused feelings traditionally viewed as inherently negative (e.g., nervousness, anxiety, and anger; Neil et al., 2011, pp. 463–469). When interpreted positively, the consequences

were increased motivation, effort (“I went out harder”), and concentration (“I kept focused on the game”). When considered debilitating, athletes got distracted and lost focus, their performance declining as a result. The authors proposed that the facilitative interpretations, in contrast, revealed a rationalization or restructuring of thoughts and emotions that helped the performer (p. 469).

Athletes will inevitably experience nervousness, anxiety, and other “negative” emotions—conceivably even in every competitive situation they encounter—which can cause an increase in stress levels. According to Hanton et al. (2012), elite athletes experienced having little control over organizational stressors, primarily appraised them as threatening or harmful, and felt they had few coping resources available (p. 276). Didymus and Fletcher (2012) concluded that appraisal is critical in athletes’ experience of their organizational environment, contending that they have “an element of choice” in how they react (pp. 1372, 1383). Therefore, focusing on interpretations of athletes’ emotions seems crucial if performance is not to deteriorate, in addition to education on readily available coping strategies. This can again be related to athletes’ beliefs in their abilities to tackle different scenarios (e.g., self-efficacy), implying that practitioners might wish to focus on both the interpretations of emotions that arise under various circumstances, and the strength of athletes’ beliefs in their capacity to perform the tasks required to excel in their sports.

3.0 Research Questions

There is a large and diverse body of work within the field of mental preparations for performance under pressure. However, as Maher et al. (2020) proposed, “there are very few published studies based on narrative accounts from elite athletes about their experiences managing pressure at the highest echelons of competition.” (p. 421). Within the mental preparation literature, Gould and Maynard (2009) stressed the research’s limitations, arguing that more theoretically driven studies are needed and more precise performance measures (pp. 1395–1396). Their suggestions remain valid. Additionally, as Arnold and Sarkar (2015) noted, while the best-practice knowledge of mental preparations for the OGs has evolved, the literature has mainly relied on individual consultant’s reports—including what they portray as “personal musings and anecdotal reflections” (p. 5). Hence, it is necessary to further expand the knowledge of this topic, both in general and within the Norwegian sports culture.

Furthermore, the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted people worldwide and caused cancellations and postponements in many sporting events, including the OGs for the first time in peacetime (IOC, 2020). This left athletes in a highly unpredictable situation. In Norway, research suggested that while some athletes managed to look positively on the sudden break, others experienced anxiety and depression symptoms and were left with concerns due to an unstable income (Pensgaard et al., 2021). The personal significance of performing at the OGs and the ambiguity surrounding their organization and completion might have caused stress and added pressure. Therefore, the importance of facilitative appraisals and coping resources may have been extra prominent during the preparations for the Tokyo OGs (TTSC; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Consequently, as a result of the need for greater understanding of elite athletes' mental preparations for the OGs, combined with the Covid-19 pandemic and its ramifications, the following research questions are posed:

How did Norwegian handball players of various experience levels mentally prepare to perform at the Olympic Games in Tokyo? And how did they experience their preparations amid the Covid-19 pandemic?

4.0 Method

This chapter presents the methodological considerations relevant to this thesis. First, it defines the underpinning theoretical assumptions and my role as a researcher. It then describes the participants and the procedure for data collection and analysis, before exploring pertinent ethical dilemmas and the study's trustworthiness.

4.1 Theoretical Assumptions and Reflexivity

Adopting a realist ontology and constructionist epistemology (Braun & Clarke, 2013, pp. 27–30), the current study used an ideographic approach (Sparkes & Smith, 2014, p. 16) through retrospective semi-structured interviews to explore the experiences of Norwegian handball players preparing for the Tokyo OGs amid the Covid-19 pandemic. Regarding reflexivity, Sparkes and Smith (2014) contended that “The connections between the self and study are often powerful forces in shaping many aspects of the research process, from the topic selection to the way the data are reported and how these are interpreted.” (p. 19). Personal factors influencing the research process included theoretical orientations and prior experiences along with, for example, age, gender, and ethnicity. While I had not conducted qualitative research previously, I have

tried to mitigate the effects of my inexperience, for instance, through pilot testing, as mentioned later in this chapter. To ensure a transparent process where it is possible to understand the reasoning behind the methodological choices, I will first describe my interest in the current study's topic. Further mentions of reflexivity are included to discuss rigor in qualitative research (Subsection 4.5.2).

Several years ago, a long-time fascination with peak performance and the motivation and dedication required to become an elite athlete led me to study sports psychology. To this day, why someone performs at their best when it matters the most and others fail to do so still intrigues me more than most other issues within the field. Delving deeper into the empiric evidence on mental preparations for performance under pressure during my bachelor thesis, the matter of performing in what many view as the biggest competition of all—the OGs—piqued my interest. Discovering evidence suggesting that it is, in fact, possible to prepare for the immense pressure one faces when provided the opportunity to achieve a life-long dream, such as Olympic gold, I felt the need to develop my understanding of how some of the very best athletes do this.

The participants in the current study are handball players. Choosing handball as a sport was both pragmatic and due to personal interest. Although I would have had easier access if I had interviewed athletes from several sports, I believed that selecting one would allow me to gain a more comprehensive understanding and a better chance of providing valuable advice for that specific sport. Handball is a popular sport in Norway with many resources; knowing this included mental resources, I presumed these athletes would have interesting insights on the subject in question. Because it is a team sport, there are also more players to choose from. I assumed that this would ease the recruitment process and reduce the risk of identification. Though I never played myself, I have always enjoyed watching handball championships. Spending a large part of my life playing team sports also meant appreciating the unity and support a team can offer. Based on this, and my curiosity about how the best got to where they are, I sought to explore how Norwegian handball players mentally prepared for the Tokyo OGs.

4.2 Participants

Participants were recruited via purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002, p. 244), meaning I contacted players who could provide valuable information. I contacted eleven handball players, eight of whom agreed to contribute. One later withdrew due to a lack of time. Thus, seven handball players (four women and three men) participated in the

study (Table 2). Because the Norwegian handball players participating in the OGs represent a small sample and may be easily identified, descriptive information is kept to a minimum to protect anonymity. Averagely, the participants had ten years of experience playing for the senior national team ($M = 9.7, SD = 6.0$), and nine senior championships ($M = 9.3, SD = 5.1$). The participants were grouped together based on their experience level: Three were identified as having some experience (up to 10 years on the national team), and the remaining four were labeled very experienced (10 years or more). Aside from two players, the participants were first-time Olympians in Tokyo.

Table 2

List of Empirical Contributors: From Pilot-Testers to Interviewees.

Interviewee/ Pseudonym	Type of Contact	Level of Experience	Type of Interview
Student	Pilot testing (1)	International, retired	In-person
Student	Pilot testing (1)	Student-athlete, retired	In-person
Athlete	Pilot testing (1)	International, first-time Olympian	In-person
Student	Pilot testing (2)	Student-athlete	In-person
Student	Pilot testing (2)	Student-athlete	Zoom
Athlete	Pilot testing (2)	International	In-person
Student	Pilot testing (2)	Student-athlete, retired	Zoom
Anna	Interview	First-time Olympian	-
Bea	Interview	Olympic experience	-
Caroline	Interview	First-time Olympian	-
Dina	Interview	Olympic experience	-
Endre	Interview	First-time Olympian	-
Fredrik	Interview	First-time Olympian	-
Georg	Interview	First-time Olympian	-

Note. Limited information is provided on the handball players' interviews to protect anonymity.

(1) = First round of pilot testing, (2) = second round of pilot testing.

The experience level did not merely distinguish itself on an individual basis; the general distinction between the teams should also be acknowledged. While the women's team has a long-standing record of success—winning medals in ECs, WCs, and the OGs over several decades—the men's team has gradually improved and become a team to be reckoned with in the fight for medals (Håndballforbundet, n.d.-a, n.d.-b). Their first medal came in 2017, a silver in the WC, and since they have placed between 2nd and 7th. Because they have not qualified for the OGs since 1972, neither the players nor most of the staff members on the team had prior Olympic experience.

The sample size was principally a pragmatic consideration. These players were difficult to reach, and recruitment was an extensive process. There had to come a point where recruiting was no longer an option if I would finish my thesis on time. Conceivably, not all themes were “saturated”, but it is a question if that should be a goal in a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021b). Irrespectively, considering the level and experience of these players, they provided an information-rich sample highly specific to the aim of the study, hence requiring a smaller sample (Malterud et al., 2015, p. 1755). Their contributions are valuable regardless of sample size, though the number of participants also followed what Braun and Clarke (2013) proposed to be adequate for a small project using thematic analysis (6-10 interviews; p. 50). Thus, seven players were considered sufficient to examine the research questions (see also limitations, Section 6.1).

4.3 Procedure

I made the first effort to contact the players approximately three months following the OGs. [Team staff members] were contacted via email by my main supervisor or me and asked for participant suggestions. They received substantiating information on the project and what it would mean for the players to partake (similar to the informed consent form, Appendix A). We received no reply and, therefore, attempted to contact the players directly. It should be noted that one [team staff member] replied when the project was in progress. Nevertheless, these players are experts within their field, and gaining access can be challenging (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2011, p. 167). Thus, I aimed to contact as many as possible through gatekeepers (Holloway, 1997, as cited by Sparkes & Smith, 2014, p. 77). These could be siblings, friends, acquaintances, and/or support personnel working directly with the teams or the players via the Norwegian Olympic Training Center (NOTC). The gatekeepers helped me gain access by providing contact information, recommendations for whom to reach out to, and/or contacting the players on our behalf. The players I approached received messages that were personalized yet similar in content via text, email, or social media. These typically referenced a gatekeeper that had recommended I contact them and/or had provided the way of communication (see Appendix B for an example).

The players were informed about confidentiality and the purpose and significance of the study (see Appendix A for the complete consent form). We then made plans to find a time and possibly place for the interview at the players’

convenience. Initially, I wished to conduct face-to-face interviews as digital interviews can be considered impersonal (Sparkes & Smith, 2014, p. 89), which may complicate the process of building rapport. Building rapport is a fundamental part of an interview and involves “establishing a safe and comfortable environment for sharing the interviewee’s personal experiences and attitudes as they actually occurred” (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006, p. 316). Because of fewer visual cues during online interviews, assessing the interviewee’s body language and level of engagement might also be challenging. This can influence the depth and quality of what is communicated (Purdy, 2014, p. 164). Yet, due to Covid-19 restrictions and the players’ busy schedules, conducting the interviews digitally presented the most viable option. Nevertheless, when examining the use of Zoom in qualitative data collection, Archibald et al. (2019) discovered that the majority of participants (69 %) preferred it over in-person interviews, phone, or other videoconferencing platforms; labeled “the closest thing” to a face-to-face meeting (pp. 3–4).

I completed the interviews over three months (between four and six months following the OGs), from November 2021 to January 2022. This coincided with championship preparations for both teams, which can be an ethical dilemma. Still, the players were in control of the timing of the interviews and could choose when it would be most fitting for them. I conducted six interviews on Zoom and one in person, either in a soundproof office at the Norwegian School of Sport Sciences or at home using a VPN. I asked the player available for an in-person interview for preferences regarding location to ensure comfort and security in the environment (Sparkes & Smith, 2014, p. 18). This interview was also completed on campus. Duration ranged from 64 to 94 minutes ($M = 74$, $SD = 9.7$), and interviews were recorded on a dictaphone. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and later analyzed in MAXQDA. Another student listened to some difficult-to-hear passages to ensure quality control during transcription. This was mentioned in the consent form, and the segments did not include personally identifiable information. When formatted correspondingly to the present document, the transcriptions totaled 200 pages.

4.3.1 Pilot Testing

I conducted extensive pilot testing (e.g., Purdy, 2014, p. 165) with three primary aims: (1) To develop and receive feedback on the interview guide, (2) to receive feedback on the style of interviewing and questioning (Sparkes & Smith, 2014, pp. 91–

92), and (3) to become comfortable with the interview situation and increase confidence. I also wanted to test the suitability of several on-campus locations, positioning in relation to the interviewee, and other practical dilemmas. This was done before I knew I would conduct most of the interviews digitally.

I completed seven pilot interviews over two rounds (Table 2). The first round was conducted early and included two interviews with students with sport experience, one of whom had won several ECs and WCs. These worked primarily to refine the interview guide and improve my interview skills. A third pilot interview was completed with an athlete who participated in the Tokyo OGs. This was the person most similar to my participants (Purdy, 2014, p. 165) and represented the most critical pilot interview. In addition to asking for feedback, this interview was recorded and listened to in order to assess questioning style (Sparkes & Smith, 2014, pp. 91–92). I also discussed the interview guide (e.g., suitability and order of questions, whether it was understandable or too vague) with supervisors and other students on several occasions. I completed the second round of pilot testing right before data collection began. Two were conducted in person using different locations, one with a student with sport experience and one with an international level athlete having competed in WCs and Tokyo qualifiers. The other two were completed on Zoom to familiarize me with doing digital interviews.

An example of the feedback received during pilot testing was to add more follow-up questions, as some were experienced as relatively open and therefore difficult to answer. When interviewing, I attempted to ask the main questions without leading the athletes in any direction. If the answer did not cover all the points of interest, I had an array of follow-up probes available. I actively contemplated and reflected on every decision made during the pilot interviews. These decisions included the positioning of devices, body language, whether to take notes by hand, having the interview guide on the computer or the table, time of day (e.g., early, mid-day, afternoon, or evening), and so forth. Altogether, the pilot testing allowed me to collect vital information about the interview guide and the interview process.

4.3.2 Interview Guide

I based the interview guide (Appendix C) on previous research on mental preparations and the OGs (e.g., Arnold & Sarkar, 2015; Gould & Maynard, 2009; Orlick & Partington, 1988). Before the interview started, I included an informational segment where I presented relevant information and interview guidelines (e.g.,

confidentiality, right to withdraw consent, a mention of the recording device, and prompts to ask questions; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2011, p. 149). I added a short introduction about me to build rapport and make the players more comfortable sharing information about themselves (e.g., Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 93). Lastly, I disclosed that I work for NOTC but had no obligation to rapport the results to anyone besides my supervisors.

I developed the interview guide to establish a comfortable atmosphere where the players felt safe to share their experiences, based on advice described by, for example, DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006, pp. 316–317). The opening question (“Can you tell me a bit about yourself and your handball background?”) served as an icebreaker, along with follow-up questions that provided background information (Purdy, 2014, p. 164). The main section incorporated one segment for each research question (e.g., “Can you tell me a bit about how you mentally prepared for the OGs?” and “Can you tell me a bit about how the pandemic affected your preparations?”). To end the interview, the players reflected on potential advice for a younger version of themselves (and first-timers for some). It is a common suggestion to start with “easy” questions before moving on to more complex ones, based on the belief that the interviewees become less reluctant to answer as rapport builds during the interview (e.g., Purdy, 2014, p. 164). I noticed this during the interviews as participants often gradually displayed more relaxed body language (when this was visible). After the recording ended, I informed the participants about receiving the results and transcription (the complete version or what they would be quoted on). I also asked if we could contact them again if necessary and advised them that they could contact us anytime.

It should be acknowledged that the interview guide was rather extensive. The most crucial questions were highlighted in dark red fonts to maintain focus, and I continually adapted the guide, which allowed for a more personalized approach. While using the same template, I refined it ahead of every interview, primarily based on the players’ experience level. I also noticed that specific questions felt redundant and/or did not aid the acquisition of meaningful data, whereas others should be added and/or the wording adjusted. This emphasizes a degree of inductivity in the process. It is also essential to recognize that I used the interview guide loosely, and questions were included or left out based on the participants’ responses. While researchers have stated that asking less often generates higher quality data (Sparkes & Smith, 2014, p. 92), a

comprehensive guide served as a safety net for an inexperienced interviewer. My relationship with it also evolved with experience (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 95). As self-efficacy increased, I became more relaxed, used more follow-up questions, and adjusted the order more, allowing the players to lead to a larger extent and producing richer data.

Finally, although follow-up questions should be as non-directive as possible (e.g., “How did that make you feel?” rather than “Didn’t that make you feel strange?”; DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006, p. 316), I noticed that in some cases this did not come as easily for me. My inexperience sometimes caused me to be more leading than I wanted to be. However, I made a conscious effort to formulate questions as openly as possible. There were also occasions when I felt more vulnerable, and I observed instances where the conversation possibly was steered away from discussing something personal at length (more so early during data collection and/or when the age gap was bigger). For example, when interviewing one of the very experienced players, I was hesitant to probe about something that had been a cause of discomfort/emotional distress. This was likely based on a combination of factors, including my inexperience, the timeframe, and potentially the player’s elite status.

4.3.3 Interviewing Elites

Only including Olympians made recruitment challenging. According to Odendahl and Shaw (2002), attaining access to elites requires creativity and substantial preparation, the proper credentials and contacts, and a dash of luck (p. 307). The employment of several gatekeepers did aid the process in several ways. For example, the response rates were vastly different when gatekeepers contacted players on my behalf compared to when I contacted them directly, particularly via email. Some emails appeared to be forgotten or ignored, and I often had to send reminders. One player also commented that they could end up in “junk mail”. Due to hectic schedules and championship preparations and completion, it took anywhere from a day to several months to receive a response. Hence, as Mikecz (2012) proposed, finding a suitable medium to reach the interviewees and contacting them well ahead of time might be fundamental (p. 483). He further illuminated the prominence of flexibility, which seems quintessential in elite interviews, for example, in terms of scheduling (Mikecz, 2012, p. 483), flexibility with data collection methods (Stephens, 2007, pp. 209, 212), and available time (e.g., interviews being shorter than desired; Conti & O’Neil, 2007, p. 71). Despite being conducted in fields entirely dissimilar to mine and their contributors

representing a different elite, I encountered all these challenges. For instance, one player had a limited amount of time, and the interview was shorter than preferred. This participant was also unable to respond to follow-up questions via email.

Furthermore, as Mikecz (2012) suggested, elites might be trained to represent themselves and their organization, are used to being asked about their opinion, and may get into monologues instead of answering the hard questions (p. 484). I observed examples of this, with the primary issue being my aversion to interrupt. It primarily occurred in one interview where we had enough time, thus not appearing to be a problem. The relationship between researcher and participant is commonly hierarchical, with the researcher “holding the power” and controlling the interview (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 88). The assumption is often the opposite with elites (Mikecz, 2012, p. 484). Consequently, while conceivably holding some power as the researcher, as a young female student interviewing highly successful athletes of all ages, there was at least the possibility of them dominating the conversation (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 89). By and large, I did not think this was an issue. I was “close” in age to some of the players, which I felt was positive in eliciting common ground. Further, as mentioned, I attempted to establish trust and rapport, and my job at NOTC seemed valuable in some instances. This could, for example, be related to knowing who the players were referring to when mentioning support personnel, recognizing the differences in the amount of cooperation between the women’s and men’s teams with NOTC, and so on. Another practical example of how I attempted to establish rapport and a comfortable atmosphere was discussing the Olympic clothing line with some participants.

4.3.4 Using Zoom for Data Collection

I followed the Norwegian School of Sport Sciences’ internal regulations for using Zoom in data collection (Appendix D). Though according to school policy, my data were classified as “yellow” (Appendix E), guidelines for using Zoom only referenced “orange” or “red” data. These were followed and included, for example, being on campus (or using a VPN), using a virtually soundproof room, restricting chat options, and locking the meeting once the participant had entered.

4.4 Data Analysis

I completed a reflexive thematic analysis based on the guidelines by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2013, 2019, 2021a). The process began during data collection and

transcription when I familiarized myself with the data. I continued by reading the interviews and making notes in the margins regarding questions, thoughts, and potential meanings attached to specific excerpts. This was done by hand, whereas I completed the rest of the analysis in MAXQDA. The main aim of this phase was to gain an overview of the interviews as I had conducted them over a long period. I began coding after concluding this phase: Reading an interview and highlighting what was interesting concerning the research questions. I reread the highlighted sections and gave them names, grouping together those similar in content. I sought to maintain the nuances of the players' descriptions, trying to retain the narratives that diverged from the dominant story (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 89).

I repeated this process with every interview. I completed the women's transcriptions before I did the men's separately to get an overview of potential differences. The codes were then combined. It is noted that the analysis was done abductively. I attempted to be as inductive in my coding as possible when analyzing the women's interviews. During the process, I realized that constructing pre-determined higher-order categories, based mainly on the interview guide, made sense to gain an overview of large data material. Coding the men's interviews was more deductive, with coded segments put into specified overarching categories. Still, no categories were set in stone, and I remained open to creating new categories, eliminating old ones, merging or relocating them.

The analysis moved on to grouping codes together, producing categories and subcategories. I reread codes and categories numerous times to ensure correct labeling. I transferred the codes to Excel to remove duplicates and reduce the number of codes. I constructed candidate themes by reviewing codes and categories and grouping them together, and then added the quotes that demonstrated the categories best to the spreadsheet. I simultaneously began writing, rereading selected quotes and other quotes in MAXQDA if necessary to get a bigger picture of the theme. I went back and forth between phases, grouping codes together, moving categories around to create new impressions, writing, selecting new quotes, and sometimes rereading parts of the transcriptions. I continually reviewed the themes individually and whether the thematic map mirrored the meanings of the entire data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 91); I started with seven overarching themes and eventually reduced them to three.

When writing the results, I translated the quotes from Norwegian to English. They were slightly adapted for readability, though this did not change their meaning. Alterations included removing or replacing pauses with punctuation and deleting “ehms” and repetitions of similar words. I provided the players with the original and translated quotations for their validation of the translation and content. My main supervisor also approved the translations. Once I finished the first draft of the analysis, I stepped away for a few days to come back with a fresher set of eyes. I repeated this when sending in later drafts. Overall, analysis was a process of moving back and forth between the phases presented by Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 87), constantly assessing different-level themes. The analysis was also, to some extent, shaped by discussions with others (e.g., supervisors, fellow students, and support personnel working with the teams), which enriched my understanding of the players’ context and challenged my interpretations. Privacy was maintained in such discussions.

4.5 Ethics and Trustworthiness

4.5.1 Ethical Considerations

The project was approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (Appendix F). Participants received substantiating information on the study during recruitment through an informed consent form (Appendix A). [Team staff members] also received a similar form by email, though this did not need to be signed. I stored the data according to school policy (Norges idrettshøgskole, 2019). After careful consideration and discussions with several faculty members and the IT department, it was decided that storing the data on encrypted flash drives (one in use and one backup) secured in locked cabinets would be a safe solution. I always accessed the raw data through the flash drives and never saved them on my computer. The identification key was stored separately in a locked box in a locked office.

Privacy and Reducing the Risk of Identification. I deemed the risk of identification, specifically indirect identification, one of the most critical ethical dilemmas. The players have a public profile, and their teams (including the support personnel) represent a small group of people. Identification is a risk in general and within their teams and surrounding environment. Consequently, I prioritized this in every stage of the research process. I continuously acted to circumvent potential pitfalls, including anonymizing third parties and censoring easily identifiable features during transcription. While writing the results, I removed the information I had not redacted

during transcription. I strongly emphasized selecting quotes that did not provide much information about personality and/or stories or information that could be recognized. This included, for example, preparatory rituals, information that could indicate playing position, or other general preferences. I read the quotes multiple times, alone and in conjunction with every quote from that player, to ensure to the greatest extent that information that could lead to indirect identification was not revealed. One person with extensive handball knowledge also read the thesis to confirm that the players were not identifiable. While it is near impossible to guarantee complete anonymity—especially relating to teammates or support personnel and family or friends who know the players well—I have incessantly acted on their behalf to protect their anonymity.

4.5.2 Rigor and Trustworthiness

The criteria for assessing quality in qualitative research have been debated by many (e.g., Ronkainen & Wiltshire, 2021; Smith & McGannon, 2018; Sparkes, 1998). Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021a) have proposed several criteria that can be applied to thematic analyses. I have strived to fulfill many of these (e.g., specifying the type of thematic analysis, being active in the research process, having a thorough coding process where I give equal attention to each data item, and balancing analytical narratives and extracts), though it has not been possible to accomplish them all. This study could also have utilized other methods in line with previous recommendations (e.g., Smith & McGannon, 2018; Tracy, 2010; Tracy & Hinrichs, 2017). This has not been feasible to complete to the desired extent based on available time and resources. For instance, I presumed that the participants nor I had time to commit to member reflections (Braun & Clarke, 2013, pp. 282–285; Tracy, 2010, p. 844). Aiming to achieve this could have further increased the difficulty of recruitment because the participants would need to contribute with more than just one interview.

However, this study adopted an approach where supervisors acted as *critical friends* offering alternative perspectives and promoting reflection by challenging explanations and interpretations (Smith & McGannon, 2018, p. 113). Furthermore, I have strived for transparency throughout the research process (sincerity; Tracy, 2010, p. 840). This has included, for example, incorporating substantiating information about how I developed the interview guide and how my relationship with it changed during data collection. It has also entailed reflecting on my experience interviewing elites and my attempts to build rapport; knowledge of how my inexperience as an interviewer may

have affected the results; and clarifying my role as a researcher (including underlying theoretical assumptions and why I wanted to study this topic; Braun & Clarke, 2021a, pp. 345–346). Conducting extensive pilot testing was a part of improving my interview skills and, thereby, an attempt to reduce the potential effects of my inexperience. I have persistently endeavored to accurately represent the participants through the analysis, selection of quotes, and the final written results (ethical considerations; Tracy, 2010, p. 840). The players also chose between receiving the complete transcriptions or what they would be quoted on to provide feedback and alterations, if necessary, whereby they all chose the latter.

Finally, I have continually contemplated how I influenced the research process (reflexivity; Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 37). I attempted to maintain a research journal (Sparkes & Smith, 2014, p. 21), although the entries in that specific document were somewhat sporadic. I still actively reflected throughout the entire process. Following every interview, I made notes on how the interview went (e.g., general tone/mood, rapport-building, body language) and points of interest such as a participant becoming “closed” or my reaction to what had been said. I read these reflective notes during transcription and analysis. General reflections on the process, such as how to transcribe or which ontology and epistemology underpinned my research questions, were frequently discussed with fellow students and supervisors, who provided insights that increased my understanding (e.g., critical friends; Smith & McGannon, 2018, p. 113).

5.0 Results and Discussion

This thesis aimed to examine how Norwegian handball players of various experience levels mentally prepared for the Tokyo OGs and how they experienced their preparations during the Covid-19 pandemic. The following chapter depicts a chronological presentation of their experiences, using three overarching themes: (1) Failing to plan is planning to fail, (2) Balancing life and sports in a pandemic, and (3) Our Olympic experience. Table 3 displays the identified overarching themes, themes, and subthemes (see Appendix G for a visual representation of the analysis process). A discussion of relevant research is presented alongside the results. Each theme includes a short discussion, and the overarching themes end with a general one tying it together. Finally, the practical limitations of this thesis infer regulations for the scope of the discussion, and thus, it focuses on certain aspects of the findings.

Table 3

From Overarching Themes to Subthemes: How Elite Handballers Mentally Prepared for the Tokyo OGs.

Overarching theme	Theme	Subtheme
Failing to plan is planning to fail	Personal and team preparations	Preparations over time Game preparations
Balancing life and sports in a pandemic	The role of others	
	The significance of experience	
	A different everyday life	
Our Olympic experience	To be or not to be: The postponement of the Games	
	It's different in the Olympics	
	Thriving or surviving?	
	With time comes perspective	It ebbs and flows "We wanted it too much" Time to evaluate

5.1 Failing to Plan is Planning to Fail

Failing to plan is planning to fail describes how the teams prepared on a collective and individual basis, including the themes *personal and team preparations*, *the role of others*, and *the significance of experience*.

5.1.1 Personal and Team Preparations

This theme focuses on how preparing for the OGs was a comprehensive process. It includes the subthemes *preparations over time*, which describes the various areas included in the players' preparations, and *game preparations*, which contains the most prevalent preparatory approaches and a summation of individual preparations to showcase how the players spend game day and the day prior.

Preparations Over Time. Preparations involved numerous areas, including mental, tactical, and physical training; nutrition and acclimatization; and practical preparations, for instance, related to Covid-19 guidelines and familiarizing oneself with media and advertisement rules. First, several players reinforced the distinction between handball and individual sports. Whereas individual athletes can often focus their training exclusively on the OGs, handball players cannot. There are essential games to prepare for all season, and the leagues they play in do not take the OGs into consideration. Thus, their focus remains on club performance until the season ends:

Anna: I feel that maybe there's a bit of a difference from individual sports to handball because the OGs are what they are training for while in handball there is sort of—we have important things happening all the time.

Preparations were done as a team and individually. The female players accentuated their collective efforts. Anna explained their preparations as two-fold: The training camp before the final team selection, where they worked on building their team and their game, and the pre-camp in Japan, where they fine-tuned their performance. Close to the OGs, she stressed the significance of “keeping players warm” to ensure they feel safe to perform when given a chance. Bea revealed that they discussed the team’s journey in the London OGs, where they won gold despite a challenging preliminary round—underlining how a bad start does not necessarily dictate the rest of the OGs. Several players mentioned that the team has goal-setting processes before every championship, discussing their aspirations, chances of accomplishing them, and potential disruptions (e.g., media or stress). Caroline also highlighted the prominence of teambuilding and value-based activities in determining how they want to appear as a group and what matters to them on and off the court. She claimed that most of the mental preparations were individual but that they did work together to generate confidence.

Preparations seemed to vary depending on the role in the team and/or playing position. For instance, one player mentioned that when preparations shifted slightly from the previous championship, the player felt a bit uneasy, as exemplified below. It was unclear whether others shared these feelings. Nonetheless, ahead of the 2020 championship, this player expressed genuine confidence in the team; however, the feeling was not the same in the OGs. The changes in training prioritization particularly affected players in this position, leading to fewer repetitions of their skills and some alterations to their joint preparations. How this was described appeared similar to collective efficacy (Bandura, 1997). The current thesis has primarily focused on how the players experienced their individual preparations as part of a team, though it would be interesting to explore how the team’s collective efficacy impacted their performance (see also Ronglan, 2007).

I thought we would have [an extra focus on game phase 1] ahead of the OGs as well but we didn’t in the same way, and I think that made me feel a bit uneasy. We worked a lot on [game phase 2] during the first part when we were together and we were supposed to focus on [game phase 1] when we got to Japan [pause], but then a few days also went by because of acclimatization ... at least I felt that we didn’t have enough focus on [pause] [game phase 1] which I feel is an easy way to create confidence [Norwegian: *trygghet*] in a team.

When asked whether they simulated their competition environments (e.g., training with applause or booing), several remarked that they were used to loud games from their

clubs. Therefore, they did not need to practice performing in noisy environments. Moreover, the timing of the games in the OGs varied, and Dina revealed that their team got up at 5:00 a.m. during a training camp to see how they responded to early game preparations. Caroline pointed to tactical focus points, such as practicing the final minute of a game when they were up or down by one goal. Anna mentioned training matches, as this was the closest they got to real game scenarios. These allowed them to prepare against another team, try multiple tactics, and go through game-day routines.

In-season physical preparations generally entailed staying fit without being tired for club games. Dina stressed the importance of listening to your body when nearing the OGs, not risking minor injuries while striving to be in the best shape possible. After the season, some players emphasized taking advantage of their short vacations to do things that gave them energy. Bea explained that preparations for the OGs always differ depending on the location—predominantly concerning time zones and acclimatization. Acclimatization and nutrition were crucial focus points for many athletes ahead of the Tokyo OGs (e.g., Eijsvogels et al., 2021), and several players in the current study mentioned this. Although this was not as critical for them as those competing outside, both teams went through necessary preparations. In particular, the men's team had joint meetings covering the main nutritional challenges, whereas the women's team had individual conversations with a nutritionist (from NOTC), measured fluid loss during games and were advised on how to sustain energy (e.g., using energy gel).

All but one player worked individually with SPCs. On the women's team, the players contacted SPCs through NOTC, whereas the male players used external consultants. They valued the objective source, namely, someone who had no personal stake in the team. Whereas two players reached out to SPCs to prepare for the OGs, three had longer working relationships with theirs. There were variations in their relations; some worked more sporadically than others. For example, Bea has worked with her SPC for several years, mainly in relation to the national team and not as much in a club context. She accentuated acquiring knowledge and valuable tools from an SPC and employing them on your own, sharing that she frequently used her simplified version. In contrast, Dina contacted her SPC a year and a half before the OGs. Although it positively influenced her everyday handball life, she confessed that she may have hoped the benefits would be more pronounced during the OGs.

Dina: The OGs were one of the main reasons why I went in and tried to yeah get a bigger collaboration with [SPC] a year and a half before to somehow try to work some things out. So I feel like I really tried to prepare but I don't quite feel that it helped and therefore when I look back on it I don't really know what I should've done differently either because I truly tried.

The players illuminated different methods in their preparations. For instance, Endre used goal setting actively ahead of their first training camp: When he realized that he would play a different role than expected, readjusting his goals became a vital part of coping. Meanwhile, Caroline used visualization; envisioning herself playing well in critical games was imperative to prepare for the pressure and nerves that could occur. She created mind maps with her SPC that included her strengths and areas for improvement, which she used in her visualization. Similarly, Fredrik prioritized visualization ahead of the OGs, while Georg and Anna shared that they generally used it to prepare for various scenarios. Anna also sought advice from more experienced players regarding the OGs, while Fredrik talked to someone on the team staff. Both Fredrik and Endre talked with their SPCs about practical challenges:

Endre: We had been through a process of what the OGs were and how it worked and which pitfalls there were and stuff like that ... everything from bringing your own pillow to being able to bring [Norwegian candy], to trying to [pause] find routines even in such a unique situation, everything really. So I must say that the mental aspect we've also gone over thoroughly. How to deal with being in those crowds not least [pause], waiting in lines [pause], living in barracks [pause], everything.

Game Preparations. The players most frequently cited team meetings, video analysis, and visualization as elements of their game preparations. Every game was preceded by a meeting with video analysis, during which they assessed the opposing team's playing style, strengths, and what they [the Norwegian team] could do against them. Some also liked to prepare for this meeting. They discussed tactical elements, such as how aggressive the defense should be or whether they wanted to slow the game down or speed it up. This way, everyone had a shared understanding of the game plan and their responsibilities. The players also used video as a tool individually, though the time spent on it varied. For example, Endre watched individual clips and a minimum of one game that was fitting for the team they were playing, where the opponent was similar to them [the Norwegian team]. He acquired an overview of what characterized their game and individual players; however, the effect depended on the opponents' level:

Endre: If you face opponents that aren't that good it has an *enormous* effect, essentially because you can pretty much pick the players to pieces. But if you meet someone like [player], who can [do everything], then it has minimal effect, simply because you cannot prepare for everything.

Bea supplied another option: She preferred to live more in the moment and avoided spending too much time on video analysis. She noted that it can hamper her performance when plans to solve tactical responsibilities become too controlled. Some players also mentioned combining video analysis with visualization. For instance, Caroline described doing video analysis before game day, categorizing position-relevant elements and visualizing performing well. Going through numerous situations in advance facilitated the automatic occurrence of her actions during games.

Caroline: If I can't see myself [performing well] then I have to play the video until I [do] and I've also learned a technique that if I can't imagine it [pause], I'll play it in reverse [redacted] *and then* I can play it the right way because then [it will be correct].

Overall, the players used visualization in multiple phases of their preparations, some designating time for it and others doing it more sporadically and unconsciously. They mostly used it to familiarize themselves with various scenarios, though some also envisioned previous successful performances to generate confidence. Notably, although visualization is proposed to be one of the most popular skills within sports psychology (Short et al., 2002, p. 48), some have advocated the use of observation instead as it offers better control of the modifiers of neural activity (Holmes & Calmels, 2011, p. 242).

The players also included other elements in their preparations. Several mentioned discussing certain aspects with their teammates. This often entailed reflecting with players in the same position (e.g., how to solve their tasks, previous experiences, and, in some cases, joint video analysis), though one also conferred with their goalkeeper. Several players talked about setting task-related goals or having general tactical focuses relevant to their positions. The male players all wrote this down. Dina did the same—on a note, her phone, or a bottle—before critical games. She could become frustrated if she did not remember her tactical plans, and putting them in writing was a helpful reminder:

Dina: If things get very chaotic and hectic then it's a bit easy to forget the things you thought might work well because you often have variations you don't necessarily use that often.

There were individual differences in the players' preparations. For instance, Anna adjusted hers depending on whether she was part of the starting lineup, preparing for what she wanted to try from the beginning of a game compared to observing what worked from the sidelines. Fredrik emphasized his routines at home as he attempted to follow the same plan the day before and on game day, such as waking up at the same time and eating at similar intervals. However, he and Dina both commented that the routines were slightly different with the national team. Their habits were challenged as they adhered to joint timetables and different playing schedules, though the extent to which this affected them appeared to be subjective. Meanwhile, Endre illustrated the Olympic playing schedule (playing every other day) as fluctuating from great days to terrible ones. He described moving his preparations into game days, as seen below. If a game went well, he labeled the day after "the best day of the year", whereas it would be awful if the game went poorly. Nonetheless, he accentuated making the rest days positive regardless of the outcome.

Endre: Game days are shitty. You walk around constantly thinking about handball and you have this inner turmoil from you get up in the morning—you wake up a bit too early—to when you can't sleep after you've played a game in the evening, so game days are simply shitty, it's been that way my entire career. So I often move, unless we have an early game ... I move my preparations into that day, just to have something to do. I could have done it the day before but that day is so nice compared to the game day again so I would rather have one nice day and one day when you're truly at work.

Combined, a rendition of game preparations might look like this: The day before a game, the players often visualize and complete video analysis, go to practice and the team meeting before unwinding in the evening. On game day, they might stretch and/or do a light, often explosive, training session; visualize, go through video analysis, and possibly have a team meeting; relax, nap, or take a walk; and travel to the arena where most listen to music to get in the right mood. Some like to joke around while others go into their own bubble, and some have small rituals, such as the order in which they put their gear on or cleaning and taping their shoes.

Both preparations over time and game preparations were characterized by an individual focus, with the players adapting efforts based on their personal needs and preferences. The preparations were also multidisciplinary, in line with previous research (Arnold & Sarkar, 2015; Collins & Cruickshank, 2015; Gould & Maynard, 2009). The findings suggest that the players tried to prepare extensively for the size of the OGs, including talking to other players and support personnel. The differentiation of the OGs

compared to other championships will be discussed to a greater extent later (see Subsection 5.3.1). However, the importance of preparing for the event's magnitude is evident in the literature (e.g., Arnold & Sarkar, 2015; Gould & Maynard, 2009; Orlick & Partington, 1988). Working with SPCs was a particular individual element (previously underlined by SPCs, e.g., Gould et al., 1989; Orlick, 1989), which depended mainly on each player's context (e.g., position and/or role, stage of career, and general situation). Given that physical demands depend on playing position (Karcher & Buchheit, 2014; Krüger et al., 2014), it makes sense that psychological skills and needs are combined with other aspects of players' respective contexts.

5.1.2 The Role of Others

This theme focuses on how NOTC helped the teams in their preparations. They assisted with multiple areas, including health (doctors, physiotherapists, massage therapists), nutrition, sports psychology, physical training, and practical issues (e.g., clothing). Overall, the players were content with NOTC's contributions, although some noted that there are individual differences in how closely athletes cooperate with NOTC and that handball might not be the most involved sport. Nonetheless, the women's team appeared to work more with NOTC than the men, indicating team differences. The women underlined their satisfaction with their physical training, declaring that the balance in training load has improved and that it has been more enjoyable since it became increasingly individualized and tailored to handball.

Caroline: It's really fun because it's directed towards handball. [She/he] has also taught the coaching team a lot more about what kind of quantity and what kind of physical training you should have so, I think that may be the most important part from [NOTC] that has come into our team.

Endre focused on the conditions during the pre-camp in Japan, which he described as subpar due to the restricted space they had to move around. While Bea agreed that the circumstances were not ideal, her view of the issue differed as she focused on it not taking anything away from their preparations.

Endre: I think that individual athletes are a bit more prepared than team players in this, but that freedom, being told during pre-camp where you'll be staying for two weeks that you have 20 x 30 meters of lawn to move around on [short pause], it's not good enough [pause] to find joy in life.

NOTC also hosts pre-Olympic gatherings where aspiring Olympians can connect and discuss across sports while receiving information about the upcoming OGs. Most

players in the current study did not attend as it did not fit their club schedule, rather covering similar information during team meetings. Only two players were present for part of it. One found the sessions helpful, while the other thought it might be most beneficial for first-time participants and possibly more for individual than team athletes.

Having the “right” support personnel is critical for performance; they must understand the demands of elite sports and balance staying out of the way with facilitating performance by providing relevant services (Gould & Maynard, 2009, p. 1403). In a similar line, Arnold and Sarkar (2015) discovered that a central lesson from highly experienced SPCs to future consultants was recognizing the appropriate time to intervene instead of wanting to prove one’s expertise. NOTC is knowledgeable of the intricates of elite sports and has long-term experience preparing athletes and coaches for the OGs. They appear to utilize their expertise well, taking care of practical concerns and acting as facilitators, enabling athletes to focus strictly on their performance. However, the satisfaction level depends on the extent of the working relationships, as some noted that handball is not the sport working closest with NOTC. There were also disparities between the teams. For example, the women have worked with physical trainers from NOTC over several years, becoming increasingly satisfied with their training. The men’s team did not mention this to the same extent. Furthermore, the opinions on the Olympic gatherings were scarce as few had time to participate.

5.1.3 The Significance of Experience

This theme details how experience has influenced the players’ coping abilities and capacity to handle nerves. Their proficiency in dealing with challenges appeared to have evolved positively over time. Their younger selves had large emotional fluctuations and were preoccupied with mistakes and poor performances. However, coping efforts improved with experience, as did their ability to stay focused on what they could control. Some concentrated on gaining more confidence; some accentuated learning how to talk to themselves; others had become calmer. The two most experienced players indicated that the emotional balance has been enhanced considerably: They are satisfied and celebrate successful performances and still feel disappointed when things did not go as planned; however, in the latter scenario, rather than being inconsolable, they know what to do to get back. In contrast, Anna, a first-timer in the OGs, provided insights into the benefits of being less experienced:

Anna: It's always nice to sort of have as much experience as possible, but for my sake I also feel that when you haven't been a part of that much you're also able to face it with a little bit of [ehm] fearlessness in a way.

Experience seemed to have improved the players' ability to focus on the next opportunity and task at hand instead of their nerves. Although the degree of nervousness and how burdensome it is might be individual, some suggested that it will arise regardless of experience level. Nervousness was also considered a good thing: It indicates that what you do means something to you. It does not necessarily equal poor performance either; Dina proposed that sometimes "feeling good is a bit overrated". Still, nervousness can be overpowering, and some players advised that finding tasks and details to focus on could help avoid consequence-thinking. A strategy mentioned by Georg and Fredrik was resetting. For example, Fredrik reset by blocking out the part of the practice or game that went poorly. If the first half of a game was bad, he would tell himself that the game started in the second (e.g., "The game starts now ... we're down by three, but they started the game that way and there's nothing we can do about it").

Fredrik: I also think it's quite nice to sort of think about when you watch the game afterward that it was here, from this point I reset, and then you see that okay, from this point it went well and sort of learn that you can do it; stop and then say "Okay I'm resetting now".

These findings align with previous research proposing that elite athletes interpret their anxiety as more facilitative than lower-level athletes (e.g., Hanton et al., 2008; Hanton et al., 2004b). In particular, Hanton et al. (2004b) discovered that national-level athletes had more facilitative interpretations of cognitive and somatic anxiety symptoms than their club counterparts (p. 176). Hanton et al. (2008) also found that currently active elites with high experience reported significantly more facilitative interpretations of worry response and greater self-confidence than the past- and current-elite groups with low experience and the past-elite group with high experience (p. 148). Thus, appraisals of anxiety symptoms are also associated with self-confidence, with higher self-confidence related to more facilitative interpretations of competitive anxiety symptoms (Hanton et al., 2004a, p. 486). Together, this underlines the value of experience and supports the notion that it can improve appraisals of anxiety symptoms.

5.1.4 Tying it Together: Mental Preparations for the Olympics

Preparations were done largely in line with previous research. According to Gould and Maynard (2009), psychological preparations for the OGs involve physical,

social, and situational factors (pp. 1402–1404). This included several team and environmental factors and both physical and mental preparations. Since then, research on Olympic preparations has evolved. It has focused on numerous areas, for example, training load and training programs (Kvorning et al., 2017; Mujika, 2014; Robson-Ansley et al., 2009); SPCs' experiences and advice (Arnold & Sarkar, 2015; Portenga et al., 2012); sports psychology interventions (Henriksen, 2014; Richard et al., 2021); and some have presented experience-based frameworks (Collins & Cruickshank, 2015). Regarding the Tokyo OGs, research has focused on acclimatization (Carr et al., 2022; Eijsvogels et al., 2021) and preparations during the Covid-19 pandemic (Morris et al., 2022; Rogers & Werthner, 2022; Wadsworth & Hargreaves, 2021). The interest in these areas suggests that the focus of Olympic preparations is still multidisciplinary, with mental preparations needing to be viewed within “a broader sport science and logistical context” (Gould & Maynard, 2009, p. 1402).

The preparations over time can be split into team and individual preparations. The former focused on goal setting, tactical aspects, and creating unity and confidence (e.g., collective efficacy and team cohesion; Bandura, 1997; Carron & Chelladurai, 1981; Carron et al., 2002). Teams who perform successfully in the OGs have been characterized by personal- and team confidence and trust in their abilities to succeed stemming, for instance, from previous teambuilding activities (Gould & Maynard, 2009, p. 1403). The coaches of the included teams have explained involving the players in deciding goals, values, and rules/norms (Skille et al., 2020, pp. 107–109). The women's coach illuminated the notion of a robust team-value system with athletes taking responsibility for their journeys. The previous coach largely implemented this philosophy, establishing a culture aligned with the Nordic values of integration, interdependence, and egalitarianism (Hemmestad & Jones, 2019, p. 671).

Then, the fundamental idea was the “team as method”, where the group was greater than the sum of its parts (Hemmestad & Jones, 2019, p. 680). Smaller teams were formed within the group (e.g., a captain's team and a penalty shoot team), and the players were expected to observe one another and offer guidance for improvement. This culture remains, at least partly, as some mentioned discussing and/or doing video analysis with those in the same position. The women's team not only has a long history of success but an established culture of using each other as resources (Hemmestad & Jones, 2019), even though they are fighting against one another for playing time. While

the men did not talk about team efforts as actively, that is not to say that they do not implement actions aimed to, for example, generate confidence or use each other as assets. However, this may have been highlighted more in the women's team due to a long-standing culture compared to an up-and-coming team wherein the coach had to create a new identity with many young players (Skille et al., 2020, p. 108).

While there were team differences, both teams seemed to engage in little simulation training. Though there were examples, including getting up early to prepare for the various playing times during the OGs, this was not implemented systematically. The players appeared to be accustomed to the normal playing situations in their clubs due to the game frequency and the length of their seasons. Annual championships also provide many possibilities for "getting used" to the general championship scenario. In contrast, the Olympic environment offers added pressure and multiple novelties, as will be illustrated later (Section 5.3), particularly for first-time participants. The greater the number of different stimuli present during competition, the more likely it is that athletes will experience performance decrements (Williams et al., 2015, p. 315). Research has, in fact, shown that skill failure can be reduced by letting athletes practice coping with the attentional demands performance pressures induce (Beilock & Gray, 2007, p. 441). Hence, the number of new stimuli may be moderated by familiarizing athletes with them through acclimatization/pressure training, simulation training, or other strategies (e.g., Low et al., 2021, see also practical implications, Section 6.2).

5.2 Balancing Life and Sports in a Pandemic

Balancing life and sports in a pandemic encapsulates how the Covid-19 pandemic altered the players' daily lives and handball routines and how they experienced the uncertainties surrounding the postponement of the OGs. It includes the themes *a different everyday life* and *to be or not to be: The postponement of the Games*.

5.2.1 A Different Everyday Life

This theme explores how the pandemic affected the players' lives, and how they coped with these alterations. The players faced an uncertain everyday where games were suddenly postponed, and the athletes possibly placed in quarantine. The already long handball season (normally August/September to May) became even longer as they had to catch up on games. Combined with the OGs during the summer, when handball players usually have time off, they are currently finishing a two-in-one season. In total,

they have had a much higher overall load. Some experienced this as mentally exhausting, and they dealt with the unpredictability of the situation differently. As Dina noted, she “actually” did not experience extra stress, accepting that she would get the message of whether a game would be played when she got it. In comparison, Fredrik experienced that some players—including himself in some instances—could become passive during game preparations and think, “Oh well, it’s not certain that we’re gonna play anyway”. He portrayed a challenging setting:

Fredrik: We may have been in the bus for six hours and then we’ve gotten an answer on the Covid-tests that there is one positive, or two positives, and then we had to turn around and go home and spend 14 days in quarantine. So you went through a lot of mental preparations; you analyzed the players, got ready to play a game, you tried to get in the right mindset, and then it was just gone without you getting an outlet for it. So you often felt that you did a lot of preparations for nothing.

Another outcome of the pandemic was an increased risk of injuries. This has also been seen in soccer (Bundesliga; Seshadri et al., 2021) and baseball (MLB; Platt et al., 2021). Handball activity was suspended during the first lockdown, and the number of serious injuries was concerning when the new season started, as exemplified by Georg below. Although how the clubs handled this situation varied, the ones represented by this sample did it well. For instance, one club met up earlier in the summer than they usually would and had an extremely gradual increase in their training load. This team also had the advantage of a big roster, hence sparing their players.

Georg: There was a period when you thought “Okay who will get injured now—this week” sort of because there were ACL tears almost every weekend ... it was extreme for a while, so yeah it probably has something to do with the fact that we were less on the court and the body wasn’t prepared for the opening again.

Caroline: I know that for many teams it’s been a very high game load and then it eats away at you both mentally and physically.

Outside sports, a consequence of the pandemic was less social interaction. Although the first lockdown allowed some players to spend more time at home, the following season resulted in many not seeing friends and family for more extended periods than usual:

Dina: I live in [country] because I’m a handball player but it’s like, now that’s the only thing I could do and I haven’t [short pause], like I didn’t see [my family] for a year and a half and that’s a *very* long time not to see those closest to you. I think that can sort of have an impact prior to a big championship also because [short pause] it’s always very specific beforehand anyways but it’s been *very* closed ahead of these OGs.

In attempting to cope with the uncertainties, Dina illuminated being able to enjoy the things she could and how vital it was to have an “off switch”. The latter, however, could

be a challenge when fewer activities, such as socializing, provided natural breaks. Georg highlighted the benefits of team sports compared to individual sports, valuing that he could go to practice with 15 others while his friends sat at home in Norway, unable to meet. Fredrik underlined that being social (physically with teammates, and virtually) was imperative in dealing with the uncertain everyday life. He noted that they tried to concentrate on the positive aspects, such as appreciating that they could play, despite not always being permitted to do so.

Focusing on the positives was a common coping strategy for these players. For example, the first lockdown provided a lot of free time. This was an opportunity to implement a period of physical training and more rest than in a regular season, dubbed by some “a period you will never get back”. As seen below, the men’s team made a joint decision early to consider it an opportunity to gain an advantage. Although training was impacted by restrictions in some instances, such as travel quarantines making it difficult to meet for training camps, a missed camp afforded extra free time. The players also remarked that they generally managed to do things as planned and did not seem to experience this as an issue.

Georg: We can use this time extremely well and train very well, while others might not have the opportunity to do so. So we tried to see it as an advantage, then, that when we get out of this we’re gonna be even better trained than we were. And I think that most of the guys on the national team got a small boost from [that]—when they shut down and we agreed that “Okay we’re gonna be the fittest team when we’re done”.

Research has illuminated the dissonance between the usual structured, goal-directed environment elite athletes are used to and the aimless circumstances induced by isolation (Gupta & McCarthy, 2021, p. 6). Such incongruence caused a loss of motivation, negative emotions, ruminations, and psychological distress. The pandemic constituted a novel situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, pp. 83–84; Thatcher & Day, 2008, p. 333). The resulting ambiguity (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 103), such as not knowing how big an impact the pandemic would have or how long it would last, influenced athletes’ appraisals and may have made it challenging to put appropriate coping efforts in place. The uncertainty of lockdowns was demanding, not to mention the lack of control (Whitcomb-Khan et al., 2021, pp. 48–49). While some athletes quickly accepted the situation, others struggled to stay motivated in a highly unpredictable situation.

Changes in daily living also affected the players. Athletes have missed their normal lives with friends and teammates (Whitcomb-Khan et al., 2021, p. 48) and faced challenges regarding a lack of access to support personnel (Gupta & McCarthy, 2021, p. 5). They have also underlined the importance of social support in coping with the pandemic (Rogers & Werthner, 2022, pp. 10–11). Reduced social input can affect psychological well-being and mental health (self-determination theory, SDT; e.g., Deci & Ryan, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2000). It might also affect athletic performance. As Dina stated, natural breaks through socializing are vital to regain energy and think of something besides sports. Although these players reaped the benefits of team sports when training began post-lockdown, there was still a lack of social life outside of sports. While these and other athletes have embraced digital socialization, it is often considered not to be the same as spending time together physically (Whitcomb-Khan et al., 2021, p. 48). It is hard to precisely determine the impact these changes had, and there are likely individual differences as some are more comfortable with social distancing than others (Schinke et al., 2020b, p. 410). Still, preparations and performance levels may have been indirectly affected as opportunities to “turn off” completely have been limited, potentially affecting athletes’ well-being.

5.2.2 To Be or Not to Be: The Postponement of the Games

This theme captures how the players experienced the obscurity surrounding the completion of the OGs and their perceptions of the postponement. Although there was a great deal of uncertainty regarding the completion of the OGs in 2020, the players accepted the ambiguous and unpredictable situation and seemed to succeed in not using too much energy on things beyond their control. They were able to maintain perspective on the situation. For example, Caroline mentioned that varying restrictions would have caused unfair competition and a potentially dangerous situation injury-wise. Dina highlighted that a postponement would be the same for everyone, while Fredrik was glad it was held in 2021 as many only participate once. Bea observed that her attitude might have been different had this been her first OGs:

Bea: Had it been my first OGs then I probably would have been—I know there were many who were very stressed and scared that it would or wouldn’t happen and were very disappointed when it got canceled in 2020.

Nonetheless, there were substantial individual variations in the players’ perceptions. These appeared to be contingent on their respective circumstances, for example, their

role in the team and age or where they were in their careers. While two of the younger players focused on getting another year to improve and implied that it was beneficial for their standing in the team, one of the older players experienced it more negatively and expressed disappointment with the postponement. Moreover, although the players were grateful that the OGs were held, some had ethical reservations concerning the postponement and completion, as exemplified below. In particular, they emphasized the dissatisfaction among Japanese citizens and how the locals had to live under strict restrictions for longer than what would have been necessary had there been no OGs. Some also mentioned the financial side; it was unlikely that the International Olympic Committee (IOC) would cancel because they would lose income. Dreams would have been crushed had they chosen to cancel, though Georg noted that sports should not be the most important thing in the world—a point he appreciated being reminded of.

Fredrik: We've been allowed to play sports while they haven't been allowed to go to cafes; they aren't allowed to that. And then we're standing there fighting over a ball which in the grand scheme of things doesn't matter, when there's been a pandemic.

While these players primarily responded to the postponement with acceptance, others reported immediate emotional reactions of confusion, disappointment, and relief (Oblinger-Peters & Krenn, 2020, pp. 5–6). Uncertainty was at an all-time high at the start of the pandemic when no one knew how the situation would unfold, and the ambiguity surrounding the OGs predominated athletes' narratives. Understandably, some felt relieved when IOC finalized the decision to postpone. In line with TTSC, the increase in predictability (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, pp. 85–87) may have facilitated the situation by making it easier to employ appropriate coping efforts. In other words, athletes could begin to reflect on what the decision meant for them and how they would manage their circumstances. This interpretation is supported by the current study, as the players' perceptions of the postponement appeared to rely principally on context (see Rogers & Werthner, 2022 for similar findings among Canadian Olympians).

The perceived consequences of the postponement have been prolonged physical and psychological pressure, lack of motivation, concerns about future performance and living and occupational careers, and opportunities for performance enhancement and recovery (Oblinger-Peters & Krenn, 2020, pp. 6–9). The participants in the current study managed to maintain perspective rather than worry about qualifications or possibilities for cancellation, which has also been reported elsewhere (Gupta & McCarthy, 2021, p. 7). For some players, ethical dilemmas concerning the OGs were an

added focus of attention, which was reasonable given the emphasis on Japanese discontentment with the OGs. For example, Kato (2021) found that 80 % opposed Japan's hosting (p. 5). Irrespectively, it is necessary to illuminate that the current study's findings could have been different had the players been interviewed earlier in the pandemic when it was unknown if the OGs would be completed. They had already been to the OGs at the time of data collection and had time to adapt to and accept the numerous changes brought on by the pandemic, which likely affected their perceptions.

5.2.3 Tying it Together: Sports During the Covid-19 Pandemic

The pandemic has caused an unprecedented situation that has affected athletes worldwide. Lockdowns and restrictions have altered training practices (e.g., Bowes et al., 2020; Clemente-Suárez et al., 2020; Gupta & McCarthy, 2021; Whitcomb-Khan et al., 2021), and athletes have experienced several negative consequences. This has included loss of motivation (Gupta & McCarthy, 2021, p. 6; Oblinger-Peters & Krenn, 2020, p. 7; Whitcomb-Khan et al., 2021, p. 50), financial concerns (Bowes et al., 2020, p. 9; Schinke et al., 2020b, p. 411), an increase in stressors and stress levels (di Fronso et al., 2022, p. 84; Reardon et al., 2021, p. 7; Schinke et al., 2020a, p. 270), and a higher prevalence of symptoms of mental health issues (Pensgaard et al., 2021, pp. 2–4). Yet, “Moments of quietness present openings to reflect, re-evaluate, revise, and reform plans.” (Schinke et al., 2020a, p. 272). Consequently, the pandemic also provided opportunities, such as exploring non-athletic identities (e.g., Reardon et al., 2021, p. 6; Wadsworth & Hargreaves, 2021, p. 4). The understanding that permeates most of the studies is that though the pandemic and postponement of the OGs presented challenges (e.g., quarantines, social isolation, loss of sporting activities and motivation), the circumstances were, at some point, accepted and reframed to something positive (e.g., a chance to rest, mend injuries and improve skills; Gupta & McCarthy, 2021; Oblinger-Peters & Krenn, 2020; Rogers & Werthner, 2022; Whitcomb-Khan et al., 2021).

However, appraisals of the situation have been contingent on the athletes' contexts as disparities emerged (e.g., financials and time points in one's career). The decision to postpone the OGs has equaled deferring retirement for a year for some, while it provided time to heal injuries and enhance performance for others. This is similar to the results of the current study, in which the players' personal circumstances impacted their perceptions. Coping efforts were also dependent on the individual: While some relied on seeking emotional support and reappraising the situation to gain

perspective by appreciating being allowed to play sports (e.g., emotion-focused coping; Lazarus & Folkman, 1987, p. 147; Nicholls & Polman, 2007, p. 12), others were quicker to accept that there was nothing they could do about the situation (similar to a mindful/acceptance approach, see e.g., Henriksen et al., 2020). Individual differences in coping and appraisals have been highlighted in the literature (Neil et al., 2011, p. 461). Such variations in coping strategies and effectiveness could, for example, result from differences in beliefs of control (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, pp. 65–67) or self-efficacy (e.g., Bandura, 1997), or could potentially be related to certain personality traits (e.g., the Big Five; McCrae & Costa Jr., 2008; McCrae & John, 1992). Regardless, how the players handled their situations during lockdowns and quarantines might have affected their overall energy levels and readiness to perform, thereby indirectly affecting their performance.

5.3 Our Olympic Experience

Our Olympic experience focuses on the players' experiences during the OGs and their evaluations of their preparations and performance, including the themes *it's different in the Olympics*, *thriving or surviving*, and *with time comes perspective*.

5.3.1 It's Different in the Olympics

This theme illuminates what makes the OGs different and what it is like to be a first-time participant. The players all described the OGs as distinct from other championships. Overall, they portrayed the OGs as special, largely due to only occurring every four years. There are fewer chances of winning a medal compared to ECs and WCs which are held every other year. The frequency indicates an added sense of significance, and former participants have often described the pressure as higher than in other competitions. The players all agreed with this notion. For instance, Dina mentioned that it takes less to get her head out of the game, while Fredrik stated that more resources are invested in their performance (e.g., from NOTC); hence, more people depend on them. The event itself is also immense; some suggested that it is nearly impossible to imagine how big the Olympic Village is and the resources required to organize the OGs. Increased media attention and general interest also add to the pressure and further distinguish the OGs from other championships, in addition to the involvement of numerous sports and thousands of athletes. Altogether, this creates a

high-pressure environment filled with new stimuli and impressions that can both inspire and interfere with your focus:

Bea: There are many factors that are a bit more disturbing because ... when it's the OGs you have [pause] thousands of athletes from different nations, you have men's handball teams, you have big stars walking around in the Olympic Village which—the Olympic Village is a lot bigger, normally you live in a hotel and then you go down to the first floor and eat breakfast and then you go back up to the room again. While here, you're supposed to walk maybe from [laughter] 500 to 1500 meters to get to the dining hall, so there's a lot more [pause], yeah other factors.

The logistics are more complicated than in other championships, and staying in the Village comprises a variety of potential disruptions. Some remarked that simply arriving was “completely overwhelming”. There are bigger distances to cover, and normal activities (e.g., eating and transportation) take longer than usual. For example, some mentioned the travel time to the arena—between 40 and 60 minutes—which resulted in less handball practice, particularly for those who did not get much game time. Thus, everyday routines were disturbed. The players stated this as a general difference between being with the national team and their club and specifically in the OGs. The disparities included a slight change in game day routines, having less time between games and less time to rest and recuperate, having a joint schedule compared to deciding everything for yourself, and always having people around you. According to Georg, many things that they were accustomed to being perfectly organized were not the same in the OGs:

Georg: Everything from food to transport to meeting rooms—just very small things that we are used to being in order and that run smoothly. Like we just get a timetable, meet there do [that] ... but the transport in the OGs may have stolen some focus, or that we lost some focus because it was a half hour late, which gave us a little less time in the arena. Yeah stuff like that, or that many of us eat the same on game day before a game and then they might not have it in the cafeteria or in the dining hall. And then there's some focus on things like that, which we really expect to be in order and that everyone tries to get in order, but it doesn't work because it's such a big event.

The first-time participants particularly emphasized all the new impressions. As suggested by Bea, your first OGs are the most special. Dina remarked that it is an entirely different bubble compared to other championships and that there is much to learn in knowing what the OGs entail. It might be in a new place the second time you participate, but the setup will be the same and you will know what to expect:

Bea: I've always thought that the first OGs really were the biggest because it's the first time you experience it and you don't know what you're heading into because, there's

something completely different like you have a dining hall that's the size of three football fields and there's a fitness center that is just gigantic where it's [pause] like maybe 50 treadmills and there are 50 bikes and there are a bunch of squat racks and there are lots of different kinds of people ... doing lots of different workouts and exercises and things that you've never seen before ... but then ahead of the next OGs again it's sort of the same as it was in the first one.

The players reflected on advice for Olympic preparations that they would give a younger version of themselves. Some were also prompted about what it is most imperative to know for a first-timer. They commonly focused on the distinction from other championships. For example, they emphasized balancing the new impulses and their enjoyment of the experience with the need to avoid the impressions diverting their attention away from their performance. Some players also considered whether serving as an alternate in the OGs or competing in the Youth Olympic Games (YOG) would be helpful. They speculated that the latter could be similar to the OGs and that it could be an unconscious advantage allowing for faster processing of the new stimuli.

According to Blumenstein and Lidor (2008), there is a “unique psychological and social atmosphere in the Village that is felt by even the most experienced athletes and coaches.” (p. 288). There is a general understanding in the literature—shared by athletes, coaches, and SPCs—that the Olympic context distinguishes itself from other championships (e.g., Arnold & Sarkar, 2015; Blumenstein & Lidor, 2008; Gould et al., 1999; McCann, 2008; Orlick & Partington, 1988). First-time participants have to cope with numerous novelties, and how to deal with the size of the event should be continued to be reinforced for the next generation of Olympians. Experience can aid preparations for these circumstances, but it might not need to come solely from previous Olympic participation. Athletes competing in European Youth Olympic Festivals (EYOF) face similar stressors, both organizational (e.g., food, housing, transportation, and venues) and competitive ones (e.g., size and prominence of competition; Kristiansen & Roberts, 2010, pp. 689–690). The most stressful experience was the novelty of the environment, and some of the more inexperienced athletes found it challenging to focus on their tasks. Speaking with former participants can also improve athletes' comprehension of the multidimensional Olympic atmosphere (Wylleman et al., 2012, p. 691). Thus, there are several ways to gain valuable experience that might aid future Olympic performance.

5.3.2 Thriving or Surviving?

This theme describes the Olympic life in Tokyo, including how the pandemic affected the OGs and the players' perceptions of their life in the Olympic Village. The

pandemic shaped the OGs as the players had to live under strict restrictions, including daily testing, mask mandates (also during training), and not being allowed to leave the Village. The players embraced the situation in distinct ways. For example, although he was grateful for the experience, Fredrik felt that the restrictions partly ruined his Olympic experience. He described being a bit naïve going into the tournament, hoping they could walk around more freely without masks when they entered the Village (after daily testing during pre-camp). Anna illustrated the overall situation as follows:

Anna: Everything was very strict then, a lot of routines on mask-wearing, who are we supposed to be with, we were very careful with everyone else we were with because we didn't know—for example, we suddenly heard that there had been [Covid-19] in different apartments. Yeah it was sort of uncertain and we tried to kind of be strict at the same time as we were in the dining hall with everyone else, and it was kind of—you were also around others all the time but, I do think in a way that it was defined by the fact that it was [Covid-19] there.

Anna further suggested that had the OGs not been so heavily influenced by the pandemic, they might have been able to let loose and have more fun, which could have improved their overall experience. Meanwhile, Bea focused on adaptability, implying that there was no point in being irritated that you had to wear a mask or other restrictions when that was beyond their control. She stated that they spent most of their time in the hotel during regular championships and that the more you focus on how different it is, the worse it will be. Still, having previous Olympic experience, she mentioned at least having the option of doing other things (e.g., seeing other events). She continued to say that watching a handball game can both provide and steal energy, depending on individual preferences for game preparations.

Because of the pandemic, there also were no spectators. Even though the players had been through a season without audiences and had gotten used to the situation, they portrayed it as dull and dreary. For instance, one player said it was sad that family and friends could not be there. While the players did not think the lack of spectators affected the outcomes, they remarked that packed arenas offer energy, inspiration, and motivation. Not having an audience made the games less noisy, and the silence allowed the players to hear everything. Some found this strange, though it made communicating easier. Observing that the quiet provided more time to think, Dina pondered that you get more distracted when a lot is going on, which can be beneficial if the crowd increases your adrenaline and engagement. Fredrik supplemented this by saying that you depend more on yourself to reach the right arousal level. Making the best of the situation, Georg

remarked that it allowed closer contact with other players and more opportunities to laugh at silly things (e.g., a bad tackle). Georg and Fredrik both suggested that cheering could give the other players an energy boost.

Fredrik: But it's really empty, it's not—that's not why we play handball. We play handball to have full stands and lots of people cheering and watching, so that's also a part of it and a factor then—that you didn't get the full experience of having spectators.

Georg: You sort of forget that the arena is empty then. Yeah because normally we cheer a lot towards the audience, but when the audience isn't there then it's maybe more cheering towards your teammates; and they also get some energy from it, so more personal cheering sort of.

According to Wallace et al. (2005), studies examining the effect of an audience on performance have generally confirmed the intuitive belief that spectators can increase athletes' motivation and effort (pp. 432–435). Yet some findings indicate that it can be harmful; performance pressure and overcautious performance can be induced even by supportive audiences (the “home choke”, e.g., Baumeister & Steinhilber, 1984; Butler & Baumeister, 1998), although findings have been equivocal (e.g., Tauer et al., 2009). This can be exacerbated if athletes focus more on avoiding failure than achieving success (Wallace et al., 2005, pp. 432–435). Wallace et al. (2005) summarized the research by stating that audience support is beneficial when a task requires more effort than skill or when motivation is lacking. On skill-based tasks, it can foster pressure, failure avoidance, and choking. Still, accomplished athletes are accustomed to performing with audiences. Thus, as some players in the current sample noted, the lack of spectators might have provided a more novel situation, though Fazackerley et al. (2022) concluded that the absence of spectators due to the Covid-19 pandemic seemed to have minimal effect on the National Rugby League players' performance indicators (p. 5). Motivation is also high when performing in the OGs; thus, it is likely that it did not impact performance, as the players themselves concluded.

Despite being affected by regulations due to the pandemic, athletes in the OGs still got to live in the Olympic Village. In the current study, the male players all brought up the social life and living situation in Tokyo. A positive aspect was socialization across sports. They enjoyed meeting other Norwegian athletes—appreciating the unity and opportunity to exchange experiences with athletes from different backgrounds. However, the living situation could also be demanding. They were usually between six to ten players in an apartment where most had to share rooms. This meant that they

were constantly around others and never completely alone. As Fredrik revealed, this lack of privacy could influence other areas:

Fredrik: I'm usually pretty good at sort of resetting and dealing with the things that I can't do anything about, that's what it's like sort of, but then again that's easier when you have the opportunity to disconnect and when you aren't living on top of someone for yeah six weeks [ehm] because during the fourth, fifth week it gets a bit more challenging [laughter] than it was during the first days maybe.

Staying in the Olympic Village offers many internal and external stressors (e.g., Arnold & Sarkar, 2015; Blumenstein & Lidor, 2008; Kidd, 2013; Kristiansen et al., 2013). The lack of privacy, distractions, and the general stressful atmosphere are among the psychological barriers that can interfere with preparations (Blumenstein & Lidor, 2008, p. 288). Athletes have noted similar concerns for years, including buses never being on time, dining hall queues, and noisy partying (Kidd, 2013, pp. 484–485). The players in the current study talked more about organizational than competitive stressors, similar to previous findings (Hanton et al., 2005, p. 1132; Kristiansen & Roberts, 2010, pp. 693–694). According to Hanton et al. (2012), elite athletes experience little control over organizational stressors (p. 276). Still, they have an “element of choice” in how they react, and their appraisals of their surroundings are critical in shaping their experience of the organizational environment (Didymus & Fletcher, 2017, pp. 1372, 1383). Moreover, although athletes experience similar emotions in stressful encounters, these result from individual cognitions based on their interactions with their environments (Neil et al., 2011, p. 466). While living under the same circumstances, the players in the current study appraised and coped with them differently. The varying appraisals may result from experience level/age: Research has shown that older/more experienced athletes cope more effectively and possess a more extensive coping repertoire (Nicholls & Polman, 2007, p. 18). These interpretations are similar to the players' perceptions of experience as they improved their emotional reactions and coping efforts with age.

5.3.3 With Time Comes Perspective

This theme portrays the players' assessment of the OGs and their opinions on what they could have done differently, including the subthemes *it ebbs and flows*, “*We wanted it too much*”, and *time to evaluate*.

It Ebbs and Flows. Neither team reached their goal during the OGs. The women's team aimed for gold and ended with bronze, whereas the men's team intended to fight for medals but lost their quarterfinal. While the women were satisfied with

turning around their performance, they were disappointed not to get the opportunity to fight for the gold, as exemplified below. Using self-referenced standards of success (Gould & Maynard, 2009, p. 1396), the women's results are the same as in the last OGs. They did, however, win the ECs six months prior (and WCs six months later). Thus, they seemed to perform at a slightly lower level than usual. The men placed 6th in the WCs six months before the OGs (between 2nd and 7th since 2017) and performed within their normal range. Notably, handball is a complex sport with many factors that can potentially influence the results. This should be kept in mind when considering these self-referenced standards of success.

Caroline: It's clear that we were enormously disappointed after the OGs because we had such high expectations [pause], yeah so you were left a bit empty afterward because you really wanted something more but at the same time I was very, very proud of that bronze medal, and it meant *so much* to me to get an Olympic medal even if it wasn't gold.

Bea talked about the team's experience dealing with the semifinal loss and how they worked to refocus on the last game. She described individual variations in coping, with some needing help to get ready for the new game and some needing more time than others. To refocus, they had meetings with and without the team staff, with the latter described by Bea as a "very nice talk that helped many move forward". She noted that although some players were tremendously disappointed, they were able to put it behind them and "put on a face" for the game. Following the bronze final, they again allowed themselves to be disappointed with the semifinal.

Bea: You give room so that, we can all be disappointed today but when we get up tomorrow and are playing the bronze final then people need to be ready. And if you aren't ready then you have to try to hide it a bit or yeah at least get out at zero so you don't drag anyone else down.

The teams faced problems collectively and individually. For instance, on the women's team, Anna faced a challenge that led to thoughts she had never encountered before, while Dina was frustrated with her playing level and the amount of pressure she put on herself. Both teams had players who sustained injuries, and especially for the women's team, this was brought up as an issue that created turmoil within the team and the staff. Dina explained the opposing views of the situation: The staff became stressed and worried about how to potentially switch the injured player with an alternate.

Dina: It became a bit like, a bit of unrest in the group that "What? But, there isn't talk about replacing her or what's happening now?" and *that* I think we could have stopped

a bit sooner and *that* I sort of regret ... [having an injured player] hadn't necessarily made me so stressed in another championship as it does in the OGs—and it's like many small things like that that get a lot bigger just because it is what it is.

While the women's team had an easier journey to playoffs, winning every game, Fredrik thought they had a tough preliminary round. They lost two out of five games (facing, e.g., Spain, Germany, and France) only to be put up against another one of their biggest competitors, Denmark (reigning World Champions), in the quarterfinal. While they gave it their wholehearted attempt, he suggested that they “ran out of wind”:

Fredrik: We had someone who got [injured] and were unsure about one of the guys; people were a bit half-beaten in a way and then [short pause], I think we struggled a bit during the final game of coming all the way up and seeing the opportunity of winning. But then again that's my assessment [laughter].

Not achieving their goal was disappointing; however, Georg noted that reaching personal goals may help the process of moving on. In his case, he had a relaxed relationship with the OGs. Although it was a dream, he stressed that you are there to do what you do every day. He received more trust than anticipated and deemed his experience exclusively positive, saying that when the opportunity arises, “You just have to try to take it”. Not everyone shared similar experiences; there was substantial individual variation. For one, Endre's experience was not what he had hoped, and he had to lower his expectations. Mental exercises became crucial in the coping process. He used his SPC for emotional support and received assignments to focus on outside handball, such as making playlists, buying souvenirs, and finding control and structure in the “Olympic life”:

Endre: I talked to my mental coach and [she/he] helped me through those periods and *especially* considering the situation we were in [short pause] where we were locked so to speak inside a barrack [ehm] that the whole world thinks is so incredibly great and exciting [short pause], and it's an apartment of 50 square meters with paper-thin walls and you live six people inside it or seven.

These findings are similar to those of Rogers and Werthner (2022), who examined Canadian athletes' experiences while preparing for the Tokyo OGs during the pandemic. They described the various contexts of their participants (e.g., qualification and injury status, being a first-timer compared to going for a final OGs) and how these influenced each athlete's navigation of the pandemic (p. 13). In the current study, Caroline's context involved, among other things, being a first-time Olympian. Although she responded with disappointment due to not reaching their goal of a gold medal, she was still extremely satisfied with the bronze. Meanwhile, the postponement of the OGs

had inverse effects for Georg and Endre; hence, their appraisals of the effort put into working towards the tournament and the team's result were distinctive. Overall, this emphasizes individual needs in the coping process and the importance of players' respective contexts in determining their appraisals of a given situation.

“We Wanted it Too Much”. The women's team—where most players already have gold medals from ECs and WCs and are missing the Olympic gold in their collection—accentuated the pressure during the OGs. A consequence of the team's performance history is high external expectations. Being part of a team with a genuine chance of winning, combined with the marginal semifinal loss during the Rio OGs, generated immense pressure and a notion of it being all-or-nothing this time. They explained wanting it too much, as illustrated by the example of “attempting to score three goals in a single offense”. Altogether, these OGs held a great deal of personal significance for many of the players:

Dina: In 2016 we lost the OGs on the smallest margin in the semifinals and there was [short pause], I think there was sort of a lot surrounding that year and it was like “Okay now it's four years and then it's gonna be us” ... and then an extra year went by as well with [Covid-19] and it could actually have been good for us, we got some players back ... but then things still get a bit like [short pause], yeah just like “Okay we *have to*” we have to so badly and then we get *exactly* the same team we lost against in '16 in *exactly* the same semifinal it's like so much that influences things.

Bea: It's almost like you're sort of more scared to lose than you're [pause] happy to win and then you sometimes get in the way of your own game because you become so “oh no” when you see that you're behind and you become afraid to lose and then it's just, you just play even worse. Instead of thinking “Okay we actually made it to a semifinal in [the OGs]” ... rather than maybe going into the game and thinking “The last OGs we also lost in a semifinal, we can't do that again”.

They used several strategies to alleviate the pressure—as a team and individually. Although they talked about the pressure during preparations, some suggested that they could have talked about it even more. Individually, most players explained attempting to normalize the situation, for example, by imagining playing regular championship games and reminding themselves that they were facing the same teams as usual. Further attempts to reduce the pressure involved trusting their abilities and knowing that playing at their normal levels is often enough; preparing for various scenarios, such as through visualization; talking to teammates to generate a sense of security in their game; knowing that they have effectively prepared tactically through video analysis; and physical preparations. Managing expectations was another strategy, such as thinking

that the pressure was not as major as people said and reminding themselves that they were the only ones who knew how well they had performed in training. The players generally considered experience with challenging situations beneficial, though they recognized that nerves and pressure could affect you regardless (see Subsection 5.1.3).

Under such circumstances, performers try to do everything to ensure that they execute their tasks as well as possible. Ironically, these efforts can lead to failure. We have seen that it is beneficial to let certain performance aspects run automatically to prevent choking (Section 1.1). This will free attentional space for the performance components that genuinely require conscious attention, thus facilitating performance (self-focus theories, e.g., Beilock & Carr, 2001; Masters & Maxwell, 2008). If an athlete starts overthinking (paralysis by analysis), the pressure might, for example, lead to more cautious decision-making; choking in team sports can be reflected in athletes avoiding plays that could decide the game's outcome (Wallace et al., 2005, p. 432). The authors used the example of a basketball player who would typically not hesitate to go for a jump shot opting for a pass when the game is on the line.

The degree of caution depends partly on the extent to which athletes are oriented toward failure rather than success, as failure avoidance has been shown to predict choking (Wallace et al., 2005, p. 433). Thus, we recall Bea's comment that they were overly fixated on what they could lose. Though it is difficult to say whether their team choked in the semifinal, they did perform below their normal level in a situation with increased pressure. When the pressure was lifted, they played at their usual level and won the bronze. While they attempted to prepare for the pressure, it appears that this did not have the desired effect during the semifinal. Thus, it could be advised that preparations should be implemented more systematically on a team level (see e.g., Collins & Cruickshank, 2015; Gould & Maynard, 2009). This could also include specific interventions in line with the research on self-focus or distraction theories, acclimatization, or simulation training (see also practical implications, Section 6.2).

Time to Evaluate. The players were predominantly satisfied with their preparations. The women agreed that their team had done their preparations well, and several noted that their team consisted of many high-level players. Dina added that she felt that they were more prepared now than at the previous OGs and numerous prior championships, whereas Anna highlighted that they could have used more players during the tournament and might have benefitted from more resistance in the

preliminary rounds. Overall, the women reflected on how several players were overly invested and increased the pressure they put on themselves, with many focusing on this being their last chance. Dina recommended that they could have talked even more about the personal significance they placed on the OGs. She suggested that this could have increased their awareness and helped them work their way out of it as a team. Caroline and Anna focused on the preparations ahead of the semifinal; Caroline proposed they could have discussed the mental side of things more, and Anna thought they generally could have prepared better. Although it was difficult to say whether it would have made a difference, she felt they could have done more:

Anna: With handball it's very much about what the opponent is going to do and when you look at the game in isolation they were very good at preparing for what we did and having a good tactic for how to stop it and I think that maybe we didn't have [pause] as good a preparation regarding that. Because that's also, in a way you never know what the opponent is going to do [ehm] against us to try to stop it but it's also a bit about what you can, or as a team then could have prepared for, and it's sort of a bit about preparations but also what in the game we could have changed then and there.

There were larger variations in the men's team. Georg was content with the preparations and thought they made the best out of the Covid-19 situation. Although Endre was thankful for the experience and learned from it, he said it sort of felt like a waste of time and effort to devote so much physical and mental energy to making things work when there were no results. Still, if given a chance to do it again, he would mostly do the same aside from playing more handball during their vacation and having closer monitoring of their individual training. While unsure if it would have mattered and knowing it would have been tough after a long season, he suggested that they would have benefitted from training from day one. It is, indeed, possible that more training could have helped their team. However, this could also have caused further strain and increased the level of mental exhaustion after a challenging season. As postulated by Gould and Maynard (2009), athletes and teams that do not perform well at the OGs are often overtrained, which can be the result of preparing too much in an effort to get the "edge" and not taking enough mental and physical breaks during the process (p. 1402).

Fredrik felt content with his personal preparations but observed that he was mentally tired after a demanding season and wished he had entered the tournament with a fresher mind (e.g., inadequate preparations; Thatcher & Day, 2008, pp. 332–333). When prompted if they could have done anything differently to achieve a different result, he remarked that this was partly up to the team staff. Upon further reflection, he

commented that they may have desired more time or better use of their time. Even though their preparations—with contributions from NOTC—were thorough, and they had a good idea of what to expect even as first-timers, he remarked that they still “didn’t really know” and that “there are just some things you can’t learn without the experience”. He suggested that he could have been better at blocking out the pressure and emotions you have after a long season until after the tournament. He also thought that they could have talked more about what it would be like and what they should be aware of, as many things appeared to distract them (e.g., restrictions and changes in regular routines). The following excerpts reflect his perceptions of the situation and how he coped with it:

Fredrik: I thought it was very, very tough. I had just played, I don’t know 60–70 games with [club] and the national team and then I had ten days of vacation before it was [time for] pre-camp and then you were going to Tokyo, and I’m actually exhausted after a long season and suddenly you’re put in a situation where you’re supposed to perform *now*. So it was clear that you weren’t at 100 % neither physically nor mentally when you were down there in Tokyo but, I don’t really think the other nations were either.

[Talking about how he handled the situation by reinforcing the positive sides] You got to go home shortly [after the season] and you got to meet family ... I also really enjoy being with the national team, it’s a cool group we’re on [a trip] with ... and you were gonna represent Norway in the OGs, the first time the men’s national team are in the OGs ... we [he and his SPC] talked quite a lot about what you were looking forward to and what would be cool about it.

5.3.4 Tying it Together: The Olympic Context

The athletes’ appraisals of the Olympic atmosphere are affected by multiple personal and situational factors (TTSC; e.g., Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In the current study, appraisals seemed to be influenced by the initial importance placed on the OGs (having a relaxed attitude compared to thinking about it for years), age/experience (older/more experienced players seemed to cope better; Kristiansen & Roberts, 2010; Nicholls & Polman, 2007), and general context (e.g., injury status, personal factors; Rogers & Werthner, 2022). Appraisals might also be linked to certain personality traits, such as being introverted or extroverted in dealing with the lack of privacy (e.g., Connor-Smith & Flachsbarth, 2007). The difference between being a first-time participant and having previous Olympic experience has also been described on an individual and team level. The first-timers appeared to focus more on the size of the event and the novel impressions. Similar findings have been reported during EYOFs (Kristiansen & Roberts, 2010). SPCs have described adjusting their approaches before

and during the OGs depending on whether the athletes are first-timers (Arnold & Sarkar, 2015, p. 8; Blumenstein & Lidor, 2008, pp. 295–297). This included, for example, giving them more attention as they settled into the unfamiliar environment of the Village (p. 295). Hence, it seems reasonable to argue that first-time Olympians should be prioritized in Olympic preparations.

Covid-19 was an added factor to consider for both seasoned Olympians and first-timers. The pandemic may have impacted preparations (level of mental exhaustion) and the OGs (coping with restrictions). Although the first-time participants now know what the OGs entail, they have not experienced the “true” magnitude of the Olympic atmosphere. For instance, dealing with families and significant others, getting tickets, and coping with the frenzy associated with the OGs are commonly cited distractions (Gould & Maynard, 2009, p. 1402). While the latter has been relevant to a certain extent, there would likely be more hype under normal conditions. Partying has also been a problem since some athletes finish competitions before others (Arnold & Sarkar, 2015, p. 9; Kidd, 2013, pp. 484–485). However, because the athletes had to leave Tokyo shortly after finishing their events, this is unlikely to have been a major issue. Lastly, the athletes were unable to experience any cultural aspects of the host nation as they were not allowed to leave the Village. Thus, the Olympic environment can incorporate more distractions and potential stressors than the current study’s participants experienced. Athletes and coaches might wish to consider this ahead of the next OGs.

6.0 General Discussion

The current study employed retrospective, semi-structured interviews to explore how seven Norwegian handball players of varying experience levels prepared for the Tokyo OGs during the Covid-19 pandemic. This section summarizes the findings and discusses the study’s drawbacks and practical implications. The results revealed extensive preparations involving numerous areas (e.g., mental, physical, tactical, and practical), and the indications of differences between the teams and individuals signify that there are several ways to prepare for the OGs. Preparations were also conducted under extraordinary circumstances as the players balanced sports and daily life during a global pandemic. They encountered an unpredictable everyday characterized by sudden game postponements, increased game load, and diminished social lives. The inevitable postponement of the OGs was accepted through maintaining perspective on the situation, though individual implications depended on personal circumstances. While

the players were good at focusing on the positives, some experienced the situation as mentally exhausting, which may have affected preparations.

6.1 Limitations and Future Directions

While the researched area is unexplored among Norwegian elite athletes and this study provides valuable insights into how athletes and coaches within the Norwegian sports culture can conduct Olympic preparations, there are several limitations to the current project. First, my inexperience as an interviewer inarguably affected the process, although I conducted extensive pilot testing to minimize these effects. Nevertheless, due to the subjective nature of qualitative methodologies, I have impacted the inquiry from start to finish. This includes the choice of topic and participants, data collection methods, the focus of the interviews, the formulation of questions and probes, and the analysis and writing of the results. I have endeavored to maintain transparency throughout the process by incorporating detailed descriptions of my role as a researcher, my interest in this area, and rich explanations of the procedures and rationale behind the methodological decisions.

Second, the participants' elite status signifies both a strength and a limitation. Based on their level, these players are a unique and information-rich sample, and their perceptions represent a valuable addition to the existing literature. Conversely, it is also a drawback, for example, due to their lack of time (see also Subsection 4.3.3). I have kept the characteristics presented to a minimum to preserve their anonymity and redacted information to reduce the risk of identification. Consequently, I excluded relevant data on the varying demands of playing positions. Thus, future research may examine the diverse psychological demands of playing positions/team roles, which can make it easier to individualize sports psychology interventions and improve their delivery and effectiveness. Finally, including elite athletes led to a limited sample size. While some themes were prevalent among all the players and seemed closer to being "saturated", other themes provided more significant fluctuations in reflections and would have benefitted from other narratives. Still, it is emphasized that the players' characteristics are highly specific to the study's aim, so a smaller sample is necessary (Malterud et al., 2015, p. 1755).

Third, quality criteria, such as member reflections (Braun & Clarke, 2013, pp. 282–285; Tracy, 2010, p. 844) have not been included due to limited time and resources. A fellow student listened to some difficult-to-hear passages when possible,

which helped determine what the participants said in some instances. Optimally, I would have included more quality criteria than those mentioned. Still, several criteria have been fulfilled, although this has not always been stated explicitly. In addition to what was cited previously (Subsection 4.5.2), there is a meaningful coherence in the study's aim, methods, research questions, and interpretations, and I have noted several ethical considerations that are specific to the included sample (Tracy, 2010, p. 840).

Finally, the current study was retrospective and prone to recall bias. The players likely forgot certain things during the last Olympic cycle; for example, one player mentioned that they are already preparing for the next OGs by introducing new players to their team. Yet, none of the players mentioned this when describing their teams' preparations over time. What the players recall and focus on can also rely on their performance (e.g., concentrating solely on negative factors after failing to meet expectations). While researchers have advocated using more prospective methods (Gould & Maynard, 2009, pp. 1395–1396), this could not be achieved within the timeframe of this research. Ideally, one could follow a group of athletes for an entire Olympic cycle and combine prospective and retrospective interviews with observations over time to examine whether the players do what they say. One could also include the perspectives of relevant support personnel. However, few researchers have the time and resources to do so, and it would impose even greater demands on a group of participants that are already challenging to recruit. Therefore, future research should continue to use prospective methods where possible, preferably in combination with other methods such as observation.

Notably, interviewing athletes from a different sport may have provided another type of preparation with a more extended preparation phase and, therefore, the opportunity to focus more on training for the OGs. Handball players have long seasons and cannot prepare in the same way that many individual athletes can. Still, these players' knowledge advanced our understanding of how we can prepare for the OGs within the Norwegian sports culture. Thus, future research may aim to continue this line of inquiry by exploring the narratives of both individual and team athletes with differing levels of experience. In this way, the best practice knowledge can be synthesized for improving mental preparations for the OGs in a variety of sports.

6.2 Practical Implications

The current study contributed to the literature on how elite athletes mentally prepare for the OGs and how they cope with adversity. The main takeaways can be synthesized in the following points: (1) The Olympic atmosphere is unique, and preparations should reflect this; (2) there is no “one-size-fits-all” approach to Olympic preparations; (3) experience benefits athletes in general, and the OGs in particular; and (4) athletes’ appraisals of stressors and choice of subsequent coping strategies are dependent on their respective contexts.

6.2.1 *There is No “One-Size-Fits-All” in Preparing for the Olympic Environment*

The Olympic atmosphere is characterized by numerous impressions and distractions, a lack of privacy, and an added sense of pressure. This can be especially overwhelming for first-time participants. Hence, SPCs might want to adapt their approaches accordingly (see Arnold & Sarkar, 2015; Blumenstein & Lidor, 2008), and those working with aspiring Olympians should continue to reinforce how the OGs differ from other competitions. Customizing preparations will likely result in well-prepared athletes; as the current study showed, the players were mostly satisfied with their preparations. It is evident that they prepared thoroughly, which is a common tendency among successful athletes (Gould et al., 1999; Gould & Maynard, 2009; Orlick & Partington, 1988). There was no single “correct” solution—the participants varied their approaches depending on their needs. Thus, coaches and other support staff should prioritize individualization when planning Olympic preparations with their athletes.

On a team level, the interviews left the impression that both teams prepared well, though they have distinctive traditions and conducted their preparations accordingly. It appears that the women’s team have had more time to develop their traditions, and their established culture (Hemmestad & Jones, 2019) may have benefited their preparations (see Subsection 5.1.4). It would be interesting to pursue this research further (e.g., through longitudinal studies). Still, because mental preparations were reported to be mostly an individual responsibility, it is an option to integrate them more systematically on a team level ahead of future OGs (see e.g., Arnold & Sarkar, 2015; Collins & Cruickshank, 2015; Gould & Maynard, 2009). Doing so across disciplines might also benefit the surrounding support personnel; an integrative approach may increase confidence and reduce stress in team staff, who often have a significant stake in the athletes’ performance (Collins & Cruickshank, 2015, p. 25).

However, unforeseen incidents will always occur. In fact, research has shown that first-time Olympians who generally feel well prepared might still be caught off guard and feel unprepared for the magnitude of the event (Jensen et al., 2014, p. 48). Nonetheless, Collins and Cruickshank (2015) suggested that “just as with the military traditions that spawned P⁷ approach, rigorous and open debriefs on such ‘unexpecteds’ have, in our experience, often shown that they clearly could and should have been anticipated and planned for” (p. 25). While it is impossible to know precisely which scenarios the team staff and players in the current study had prepared for, both parties appeared to respond with stress in situations that, imaginably, could have been planned for (e.g., dealing with injuries). Knowing that normal issues might be more stressful in the OGs (everything is a performance issue at the OGs; McCann, 2008), it is possible that some type of pressure or simulation training (see e.g., Low et al., 2021) could have been implemented successfully.

Potent to this discussion is the difficulty of simulating the Olympic environment, especially with the limited time handball players spend with the national teams. Although the example of getting up early to see how the body responded is in line with this thinking, it needs to be systematic to be effective. Creating difficulties for the players by, for example, rescheduling travel times, meeting places, and so forth, could improve their ability to cope with stress and last-minute changes and enhance mental flexibility. This would likely be advantageous in the multidimensional Olympic environment. Another option is familiarizing players with the Olympic context through technology. This can involve using pictures and videos; however, could also include walking around in the Olympic Village using VR. Though some athletes may opt to save this experience for when they get to the actual OGs, it could be an option for those who prefer to plan extensively.

6.2.2 How Experience and Context Affect Athletes and Their Coping Processes

As the players in the current study gained experience, they noted smaller emotional fluctuations and improvements in their focus and coping effectiveness. Previous studies have supported the idea that coping improves with experience and that younger athletes are less effective in coping (Kristiansen & Roberts, 2010, p. 694; Nicholls & Polman, 2007, p. 18). Therefore, emphasizing the benefits of an extensive coping repertoire for less experienced athletes is advised. Still, coping strategies cannot necessarily be extrapolated between athletes (Nicholls & Polman, 2007, p. 18); the

current study underlined that appraisals and coping are a result of each player's context. This could include age, where they were in their careers, experience level, injury status, playing positions, and other aspects. Similarly, the interviews left the impression that more experienced first-time participants may cope more efficiently with the Olympic environment and various challenges that can arise during the OGs (e.g., due to a more extensive coping repertoire). Further research is needed to confirm this.

There also seem to be several ways to gain valuable experience before participating in the OGs. Being an alternate can be advantageous because an athlete becomes familiarized with the setup and participating in YOG or EYOFs may provide experiences similar to the OGs themselves (see Kristiansen & Roberts, 2010). Talking to those who have participated before is also recommended to improve athletes' understanding of the Olympic environment (Wylleman et al., 2012, p. 691). At the same time, focusing on the ability to restructure perceptions of what induces performance might be another suggestion. For instance, Anna saw the value of being less experienced instead of viewing it as a disadvantage. This is comparable to the notion that elite athletes often perceive their anxiety as more facilitative than debilitating (Hanton et al., 2004a; Hanton et al., 2008; Hanton et al., 2004b)—they continually emphasize the positives. How to enhance such capacities depend on the athletes: Their respective contexts will influence their appraisals of a given situation and their subsequent coping efforts.

7.0 Conclusion

The current study examined how Norwegian handball players with various experience levels mentally prepared for the Tokyo OGs and how they experienced their preparations during the Covid-19 pandemic. The players on both teams appeared to have prepared extensively through active measures (e.g., problem-focused coping). There were indications of some differences in the teams' preparations, with the women's team having had more time to develop their culture and traditions for preparations (Hemmestad & Jones, 2019; Skille et al., 2020). Experience was valuable in multiple ways, including coping with the immensity of the OGs and the various challenges in the Olympic environment. As Bea mentioned (pp. 62–63), the first OGs you participate in seem to be the most special. After participating once, athletes become familiar with the setup, and this seems to ease future participation.

The pandemic has represented an unprecedented situation, which some players found mentally exhausting. This may have impacted their well-being, which in turn could have affected preparations. Seeking emotional support and focusing on the positives were common aspects of coping, although the players' appraisals of their situations and subsequent coping efforts depended on their respective contexts. It is difficult to determine precisely to what extent the Covid-19 pandemic affected Olympic preparations for these players. Still, the pandemic gave them practice in dealing with uncertainty and unexpected events. As Fredrik illuminated (p. 56), things have happened suddenly, and these experiences could be valuable for future coping efforts. However, the pandemic may have had a more significant influence on athletes who spent more time preparing exclusively for the OGs. Finally, although it was not the objective of this thesis, the collected data left the impression that these players' motivation was somewhat internal (SDT; identified regulation or more towards intrinsic motivation; Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 72). It would be intriguing to examine this further in future investigations.

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Appendices

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Appendix A

Athlete Consent Form

Vil du delta i forskningsprosjektet «Mentale forberedelser blant norske toppidrettsutøvere i forkant av OL i Tokyo»?

Dette er et spørsmål til deg om å delta i et forskningsprosjekt hvor formålet er å undersøke mentale forberedelser i forkant av OL i Tokyo, og hvordan koronapandemien påvirket disse forberedelsene. I dette skrevet vil du få informasjon om målene for prosjektet og hva deltakelse vil innebære for deg.

Formål

Prosjektet er en del av min mastergrad ved Norges idrettshøgskole (NIH), hvor jeg går studieretningen coaching og psykologi. Formålet er å utforske mentale forberedelser i forbindelse med OL.

Mentale forberedelser defineres her bredt som alle strategier, enten det er tanker eller handlinger, utøvere og lag benytter for å stille best mulig forberedt på konkurransedagen.

Vi ønsker å innhente informasjon om hva som skiller forberedelsene til utøvere med og uten olympisk erfaring, hvilken rolle Olympiatoppen (OLT) spiller i forberedelsene, og om denne informasjonen kan benyttes for å gi praktiske råd til fremtidige olympiere. Ettersom Tokyo OL ble utsatt som følge av koronapandemien ønsker vi også å utforske hvordan det har opplevdes å forberede seg i en periode preget av konkurranseutsettelse og -avlysninger.

Hvem er ansvarlig for forskningsprosjektet?

Norges idrettshøgskole er ansvarlig for prosjektet. Ansvarlig masterstudent er Eline Aase, biveileder er Henrik Gustafsson og hovedveileder og prosjektleder er Frank Abrahamsen.

Hvorfor får du spørsmål om å delta?

Hensikten med prosjektet er å samle inn data som kan frembringe anvendbare råd for din idrett frem mot neste OL. Du får spørsmål om å delta ettersom du deltok i OL i Tokyo, enten det var ditt første OL eller du har vært med tidligere. Mellom 6-10 håndballspillere bes om å delta i studien. Dette inkluderer spillere fra både dame- og herrelaget.

Hva innebærer det for deg å delta?

Dersom du velger å delta i prosjektet, innebærer det et intervju som vil vare ca. 45-90 minutter. Intervjuet vil gjennomføres av undertegnede (Eline Aase), på egnet sted til en tid som passer for deg. Dersom fysisk oppmøte av ulike grunner ikke er mulig, kan det også gjennomføres via Zoom. Intervjuet vil inkludere spørsmål om ditt forhold til mental trening, din opplevelse av OL sammenlignet med andre mesterskap, mentale forberedelser du har bedrevet på egenhånd samt forberedelser i regi av OLT, og spørsmål knyttet til koronapandemien og hvordan denne har påvirket forberedelsene. Intervjuet vil tas opp på lydopptak og deretter transkriberes. Du vil få tilsendt transkripsjonen i ettertid slik at du har mulighet til å fjerne eller legge til informasjon. Ved ferdigstilling vil du få tilsendt en kopi av det publiserte materialet.

Det er frivillig å delta

Det er frivillig å delta i prosjektet, og dersom du velger å delta kan du når som helst trekke samtykket ditt uten å oppgi noen grunn. Alle dine personopplysninger vil da slettes, og det vil ikke ha noen negative konsekvenser for deg hvis du ikke vil delta eller senere velger å trekke deg.

Ditt personvern – hvordan vi oppbevarer og bruker dine opplysninger

Vi vil bare bruke opplysningene om deg til formålene vi har fortalt om i dette skrevet. Vi behandler opplysningene konfidensielt og i samsvar med personvernregelverket. Som ansvarlig masterstudent vil jeg ha tilgang til datamaterialet, samt mine to veiledere. Noen sekvenser av intervjuene kan bli kvalitetssikret i transkriberingsfasen av én annen masterstudent. Disse lydfilene vil bli valgt på bakgrunn av lite personidentifiserbare data.

Datamaterialet vil lagres i tråd med NIHS retningslinjer for sikker oppbevaring av data. For å sikre ditt personvern vil navnet og kontaktopplysningene dine erstattes med en kode som lagres på egen navneliste adskilt fra øvrige data. Datamaterialet vil oppbevares innelåst, og alle personopplysninger vil være anonymisert i publikasjonen slik at du ikke vil gjenkjennes.

Hva skjer med opplysningene dine når vi avslutter forskningsprosjektet?

Opplysningene anonymiseres når prosjektet avsluttes, noe som etter planen er 01.06.2023.

Hva gir oss rett til å behandle personopplysninger om deg?

Vi behandler opplysninger om deg basert på ditt samtykke.

På oppdrag fra NIH har NSD – Norsk senter for forskningsdata AS – vurdert at behandlingen av personopplysninger i dette prosjektet er i samsvar med personvernregelverket.

Dine rettigheter

Så lenge du kan identifiseres i datamaterialet, har du rett til:

- Innsyn i hvilke opplysninger vi behandler om deg, og å få utlevert en kopi av opplysningene
- Å få rettet opplysninger om deg som er feil eller misvisende
- Å få slettet personopplysninger om deg
- Å sende klage til Datatilsynet om behandlingen av dine personopplysninger

Hvis du har spørsmål til studien, eller ønsker å vite mer om eller benytte deg av dine rettigheter, ta kontakt med Norges idrettshøgskole ved

- Hovedveileder og prosjektleder Frank Abrahamsen, epost: frankea@nih.no, tlf.: 94 18 89 82
- Biveileder Henrik Gustafsson, epost henrik.gustafsson@kau.se, tlf.: 0046 706 967 260
- Masterstudent Eline Aase, epost: aeline@gmail.com, tlf.: 95 90 22 39
- Vårt personvernombud Rolf Haavik, epost: personvernombud@nih.no

Hvis du har spørsmål knyttet til NSD sin vurdering av prosjektet, kan du ta kontakt med:

- NSD – Norsk senter for forskningsdata AS på epost (personverntjenester@nsd.no) eller på telefon: 55 58 21 17.

Med vennlig hilsen

Frank Abrahamsen
(Forsker/veileder)

Henrik Gustafsson
(Forsker/veileder)

Eline Aase
(Masterstudent)

Samtykkeerklæring

Jeg har mottatt og forstått informasjon om prosjektet «Mentale forberedelser blant norske toppidrettsutøvere i forkant av OL i Tokyo», og har fått anledning til å stille spørsmål. Jeg samtykker til:

- Å delta i intervju
- At mine opplysninger behandles frem til prosjektet er avsluttet

(Signert av prosjektdeltaker, dato)

Appendix B

Example of Recruitment Email

Fra: Eline aaeline@gmail.com
Emne: NIH undersøkelse om mestring av stress i forbindelse med mesterskap og Covid-19
Dato: 15. november 2021 kl. 13:14
Til: [REDACTED]
Kopi: henrik.gustafsson@kau.se frankea@nih.no



Hei [REDACTED]

Jeg heter Eline, og tar en mastergrad ved Norges idrettshøgskole retning coaching og idrettspsykologi. [REDACTED] anbefalte meg å kontakte deg i forbindelse med mitt masterprosjekt – [REDACTED] mente du kunne være interessert og ville ha noe å bidra med. Jeg fikk mailadressen din fra [REDACTED] og jeg håper det er greit at jeg tar kontakt her.

Hensikten med prosjektet er å undersøke mentale forberedelser i forkant av OL i Tokyo. Vi er spesielt interesserte i forskjeller mellom erfarne og mindre erfarne utøvere, samt hvordan Covid-19 pandemien har påvirket forberedelsesprosessen. Vi håper prosjektet kan utvikle anvendbare råd som kan brukes i forbindelse med store mesterskap i fremtiden, men vi trenger utøvere som er villige til å stille på intervju for at det skal være mulig! Det er foretrukket om intervjuene skjer ansikt til ansikt (sted er fleksibelt), men de kan også gjennomføres på Zoom, og vil vare ca. 45-90 min.

Er dette noe du kunne tenke deg å delta på? Vi har full forståelse for at du har en hektisk hverdag og mottar mange henvendelser, og ønsker å gjennomføre dette på en måte som forstyrrer deg minst mulig. Vi hadde satt enormt stor pris på din deltakelse!

På forhånd, tusen takk for at du vurderer å delta.

På vegne av forskergruppen (Frank Abrahamsen, Henrik Gustafsson, og meg)

Med vennlig hilsen,

Eline Aase
Masterstudent i coaching og psykologi, NIH
aaeline@gmail.com | +47 959 02 239

Appendix C

Interview Guide Template

Intervjuguide mal

Ramme

(Før båndopptak)

(Uformell prat)

- Takke for intervju
- Informasjon:
 - o Rett til å trekke samtykket, konfidensialitet
 - o Bruk av Zoom og båndopptaker
 - o Mulighet for å stille spørsmål underveis
 - o Intervjuguide på PC, kommer til å ta notater for hånd underveis
 - o Kort om meg (inkl. jobb OLT), mine interesseområder, overordnede tema for intervjuet
- Åpne for spørsmål
- Spørre om de er klare til å sette i gang, sette på båndopptaker

Introduksjon og innledende spørsmål

Bakgrunnsspørsmål

- **Fortell litt om deg selv og håndballbakgrunnen din?**
 - o Hvorfor startet du med håndball?
 - o Hvor lenge har du holdt på med håndball?
 - o Hvor mange år har du vært på landslaget (senior)?
 - o Hvor mange mesterskap har du spilt for Norge (senior)?
 - o Evt. andre idretter
- Kan du fortelle litt om livet ditt som idrettsutøver?
 - o Hva er viktig for deg for at du skal trives i laget?
 - o Hva er viktig for at du skal prestere bra?

Mental trening

- **Kan du si noe om hvor viktig du tror det mentale er for prestasjon?**
- **Hvordan vil du beskrive ditt forhold til mental trening?**
 - o Hva er mental trening for deg?
 - o Strukturert vs. sporadisk
 - o Hvor lenge, hvorfor/hvorfor ikke drive med det
 - o Mentale teknikker og introduksjon for disse

OL

- **OL er et hovedmål for mange utøvere, og mange tidligere deltakere opplyser at presset er større der enn i andre konkurranser.**
 - o Hva tenker du om dette?
 - o Hvordan håndterer du situasjoner der du opplever mye press?
 - Hvordan håndterer du nerver? (Stressmestringsstrategier?)
- Opplever du at OL skiller seg fra andre mesterskap?
 - o Hvordan/hvorfor ikke/utdype
- Når ble du/dere tatt ut til OL?
 - o Kan du beskrive hvilken betydning det har hatt for dine forberedelser?
- Kan du beskrive hvilke forventninger du hadde i forkant av dette OL-et?
 - o Kan du fortelle om forskjellen i forventninger før ditt første OL sammenlignet med dette?
 - o Dersom du tenker på forventningene du hadde i forkant, kan du beskrive hva du sitter igjen med i etterkant?

Hoveddel del I: Mentale forberedelser**Egne/lagets forberedelser**

- Vi har allerede snakket litt om mental trening (evt. referere til hva som ble sagt).
Kan du beskrive hva du tenker på når jeg sier mentale *forberedelser*?
 - o Hvordan vil du *definere* mentale forberedelser?
 - o Mentale forberedelser kan defineres på mange måter, men den definisjonen jeg har valgt er bred og innebærer alle strategier, enten det er tanker eller handlinger, du som utøver eller dere som lag benytter for å stille best mulig forberedt på konkurransedagen.
- **Kan du fortelle litt om hvordan du har forberedt deg mentalt til OL?**
 - o **Forberedelser over tid vs. forberedelser i forbindelse med selve konkurransedagen**
 - F.eks. kan du ta meg gjennom forberedelsene du gjør dagen før kamp og på selve kampdagen?
- Det finnes mange eksempler på konkrete ting utøvere har gjort for å forberede seg til viktige konkurranser. Dette kan være å trene med høy lyd (applaus, buing osv.), trene i konkurransedrakt, eller å tilpasse utstyr eller værforhold slik at de ligner konkurransescenario mest mulig.
 - o **Har du noen eksempler på ting du eller laget har gjort?**
 - o **Kan du si noe om hvordan du synes det har fungert?**
- Hvordan forberedte du deg til OL sammenlignet med andre mesterskap?
 - o **Dersom du/dere fikk muligheten til å forberede deg igjen, er det noe du ville gjort annerledes for å få et annet resultat?**

- Har konkurranseforberedelsene dine endret seg over tid? Hvordan?
- Legger trener/støtteapparat vekt på mentale forberedelser, eller er det noe du gjør på eget initiativ?
- **Har du møtt noen utfordringer i OL-forberedelsene?**
 - o Hvordan håndterte du X?
 - o Var det situasjoner i oppkjøringen/forberedelsene du opplevde som stressende/utfordrende?
 - Kan du fortelle litt om hvordan dette opplevdes for deg?
 - Hvordan håndterte du dette (stressmestring)?
 - o Hva fungerte/fungerte ikke?
 - o Ville du gjort noe annerledes i dag?
 - o Hvis du tenker på erfaringsnivået ditt, hvordan tror du det har påvirket måten du håndterer utfordringer på?
 - Har måten du håndterer ting på endret seg fra du var en ung spiller (eksempelvis junior og frem til i dag)?

Olympiatoppen sine forberedelser

- **Kan du fortelle hvordan Olympiatoppen har bidratt i dine/deres forberedelser?**
- Olympiatoppen arrangerer blant annet samlinger i forbindelse med OL.
 - o Var du til stede på en slik samling, fysisk eller digitalt?
 - Når var samlingen(e)/hvor lenge før OL var samlingen(e)?
 - Dersom nei; har du fått tilbud om støtte eller oppfølging utenom?
 - o Kan du fortelle hva dere gikk gjennom på samlingen(e)?
- **Er det noe du ønsker kunne blitt gjort annerledes?**

Hoveddel del II: Forberedelser under Covid-19

- **Kan du fortelle litt om hvordan pandemien har påvirket forberedelsene dine til OL?**
 - o Jeg har blant annet hørt at det har vært mye skader etter gjenåpning.
 - Opplever du at det stemmer?
 - Har du/dere tatt noen grep for å være kampklare?
 - o I tillegg har for eksempel treningsstentrene vært stengte i perioder, og mange har vært nødt til å endre treningsvanene sine.
 - Hvordan opplevde du dette?
 - o Kan du fortelle litt om hvordan det opplevdes at kamper eller turneringer har blitt endret, utsatt eller eventuelt avlyst?
 - Hvordan har du/dere håndtert dette (strategier)?
- **OL skulle opprinnelig arrangeres i fjor, men ble utsatt til i år. Det har vært mye usikkerhet knyttet til gjennomføringen, både i fjor og i år.**

- **Kan du fortelle litt om hvordan du har opplevd dette?**
- Dersom tidligere OL-deltakelse; hva har vært de største forskjellene i oppladningen til OL i år kontra tidligere?
 - Førstegangsdeltaker; kan du fortelle litt om hvordan du har opplevd å være førstegangsdeltaker i OL?
 - Hvordan har det vært å delta i sitt første OL under en pandemi?
 - Hva har vært de største forskjellene i gjennomføringen av OL i år sammenlignet med tidligere (mesterskap for guttene)?
 - Eks.: Dere er vant til høy trøkk og mye lyd, og plutselig er det helt stille. Påvirket dette kommunikasjonen? (Hvordan?)
- **Sett i ettertid, og i lys av korona og de reglene som var gjeldende, hva kunne eller burde blitt gjort annerledes? (Forberedelser, oppladning, gjennomføring)**

Avslutning

- Nå har vi snakket en del om OL, hvordan du og laget har forberedt dere til mesterskapet, og hvordan du har opplevd å forberede deg under en pandemi.
 - **Hvis du skulle gitt deg selv et råd for noen år siden angående forberedelser til OL, hva ville det vært?**
 - Råd til førstegangsdeltaker?
 - Har du noen tanker om hva som skal til for at du hadde vært mottakelig for et slikt råd? (Har det noe å si hvem rådet kommer fra, tidspunkt mm.?)
- Er det noe som ikke har kommet frem du ønsker å legge til?
- Takk for intervjuet (skru av båndopptaker)
- Informasjon om tilsending av transkripsjon for endringer og mulige løsninger for det
- Kontakt dersom de har ytterligere spørsmål, kommer på noe de tenker er relevant, eller vi har glemt noe

Appendix D

Regulations for Using Zoom to Collect Research Data

Rutine for bruk av Zoom til innsamling av forskningsdata ved NIH

1. Virkeområde for denne rutinen

Denne rutinen gjelder for all bruk av Zoom som omfatter eller behandler persondata klassifisert som oransje eller røde etter instruksen «Om eierskap og klassifisering av data ved NIH - hvordan vurdere hvilken klasse du skal bruke». Rutinen gjelder for all bruk av Zoom i forskningsprosjekter ved NIH.

Merk: det er ikke tillatt å benytte Zoom utenfor NIH (<https://nih.zoom.us>) til innsamling av forskningsdata.

2. Forutsetninger

2.1 Tekniske forutsetninger

- Man skal kun bruke NIH sin variant av Zoom, som bruker NIH-bruker ID og Feideinnlogging (SSO), på adressen <https://nih.zoom.us/>
- Den parten som er ansvarlig for samtalen og eventuelt opptak skal kun benytte NIH-eid og -driftet utstyr.
- Utstyret skal være godkjent for behandling av oransje og røde data etter NIHs retningslinjer for lagring.

2.2 Andre forutsetninger

- Den som er ansvarlig for samtalen skal ha satt seg inn i, og følge, hele denne rutinen.
- Eventuelle unntak av hele eller deler av denne rutinen skal være godkjent av [avdelingsleder IT ved NIH](#).
- Skal det gjøres opptak skal det innhentes godkjenning fra kan bare lagres på utstyr eid-, satt opp- og driftet av NIH.

- Den som er ansvarlig for prosjektet, dvs. prosjektleder, skal sikre at alle godkjenninger er på plass.
- **Merk:** Gjennomføres samtalen som en erstatning av fysisk møte i forskningsprosjekter, så kan det være nødvendig med endringsmelding til NSD.

3. Gjennomføring av zoom-intervjuer med oransje- eller rødt innhold

Punktene under skal følges for gjennomføring av alle zoom-møter til innsamling av data med oransje eller rødt innhold. Punktene som spesifikt gjelder opptak kan en se bort fra om det ikke tas opptak.

3.1 Før intervjuet starter

- Send ut informasjonskriv og samtykkeerklæring før datainnsamling starter, slik at informert samtykke er på plass før intervjuet.
- Til gjennomføring av intervju kan bare utstyr eid-, satt opp- og driftet av NIH brukes.
- Den som er ansvarlig for intervjuet skal ha gjort seg kjent med Zoom som verktøy og testet at alt virker uten sensitivt innhold. Det skal benyttes generert møte-ID, ikke ens personlige møte-ID. [Bruk funksjonen «Generate automatically»](#). Denne ID-en skal kun formidles til de som skal delta i møtet. Merk at om kalender i Outlook eller lignende benyttes for å kalle inn deltakere, så skal ikke møte-ID ligge åpent. Den må enten utelates fra innkallingen, eller innkallingen må settes privat.
- Møter skal passordbeskyttes. Passord for møter skal ikke gjenbrukes og kun oversendes de som skal ha tilgang til møtet. Det skal benyttes venteromsfunksjon for å slippe inn bare riktige deltagere. Dette heter «Enable waiting room», og er ikke det samme som «Breakout room».
- Om det skal benyttes deling av skjerm for å vise frem tekst eller bilde, sørg for å stenge ned e-post, andre dokumenter og/eller andre programmer for å minske risiko for deling av feil innhold.
- Om chatte-funksjonen ikke er strengt nødvendig for gjennomføring av møtet – så skal funksjonen skrues av.
- Gjør klar påkrevd informasjon som skal gis til deltakere før møtet starter.
- Påse at det ikke er fare for lydlekkasje der samtalen utføres. Sikre at lyd ikke overhøres av uvedkommende. Hodetelefoner bør benyttes der det er praktisk mulig.
- Påse at uvedkommende ikke har innsyn til skjermen under samtalen.

3.2 Spesifikke tillegg dersom det skal gjøres opptak

- Opptak kan bare lagres på utstyr eid-, satt opp- og driftet av NIH. Opptaket transkriberes så raskt som mulig. Deretter skal opptaket med en gang slettes eller lagres i NIHs sikre sone for forskningsdata.

- Gjør klar egnet lagringssted for opptak på NIH PC som skal brukes. Dersom opptak skal lagres i NIHs sikre sone for forskningsdata, må du sørge for at det er lagt til rette for dette (registrer prosjektet i Prosjektweb, og ta kontakt med IT avdelingen).
- Navngi mapper eller filer med opptak entydig så det er lett å holde orden, men unngå personidentifiserende navn på disse.
- Det kan være lurt å skru på funksjonen «Add a timestamp to the recording» for å lette navigering i slutført opptak for evt. klipping eller sladding av deler av opptaket.
- Vurdér om det skal benyttes «virtual background» for å hindre at andre personer, bakgrunn og/eller dokumenter kommer med på opptaket.

3.3 Under samtalen / opptaket

- Når deltaker(e) er sluppet inn i møtet, sjekk at det ikke er deltakere som ikke skal være der.
- Om det er uvedkommende inne i møtet, avslutt straks møtet og [IT avdelingen om avviket](#).
- Sjekk at alle innstillinger er satt som ønsket – for eksempel at chat er skrudd av om den ikke skal brukes osv.
- Lås møtet.
- Noen deltagere ønsker kanskje ikke å fremstå med reelt navn i opptak. Dersom det skal benyttes chat eller deling av skjerm, vurder å be deltakere endre navn i møtet.
- Om det skal gjøres opptak, gi informasjon om dette og annen påkrevd informasjon.
- Informér om chat skal benyttes eller ikke, og om den skal lagres eller ikke.
- Om det hender eller sies noe under møtet som må fjernes i etterkant, legg merke til tidspunktet for lettere å kunne klippe/sladd.
- Om det ikke gjøres opptak, men en tar notater av møtet/samtalen så merk at notatene kan ha samme klassifisering som samtalen.

3.4 Etter samtalen / opptaket

- Når samtalen er over – stopp opptaket.
- Avslutt møtet ved å klikke på «End» og velg «End Meeting for All» for å sikre at alle blir stengt ute fra møtet.
- Om det er gjort opptak så kan maskinen trenge noe tid på å behandle opptaket. La maskinen gjøre seg ferdig før du lukker lokket eller skrur av datamaskinen.
- Sjekk at opptak har blitt lagret på ønsket sted, og at du vet hvor det ligger.
- Slett eventuell unødig informasjon. For eksempel kan lydfiler slettes om man kun skal benytte video.
- Du må så raskt som mulig slette opptaket (etter transkribering), eller overføre det til NIHs sikre sone for lagring av forskningsdata.

Appendix E

Classification of Data



Om eierskap og klassifisering av data ved NIH - hvordan vurdere hvilken klasse du skal bruke

All informasjon skal ha en entydig og identifiserbar eier. Det skal være mulig å finne ut hvem som er ansvarlig for at informasjonen er vedlikeholdt, oppdatert og riktig merket. Eier av informasjonen er ansvarlig for de vurderinger som ligger til grunn for plasseringen i en gitt kategori. Der det ikke kan identifiseres en eier, er administrerende direktør ansvarlig for informasjonen.

Eieren av informasjonen er ansvarlig for å:

- Sikre at informasjonen er plassert i riktig klasse ut ifra disse reglene.
- Gjøre en vurdering når informasjonen *byter* klasse.
- Påse at all lagring, behandling og bearbeiding av informasjon foregår på tekniske løsninger som er godkjent for dette.
- Regelmessig sjekke at man oppfyller eventuelle *endringer* i kravene.

Informasjonen skal alltid plasseres i en tilstrekkelig sikker klasse. På NIH har vi fire klasser data, grønn, gul, oransje og rød. Dersom du er i tvil om du skal velge å klassifisere data, f. eks. oransje eller gul, skal du velge høyeste nivå, altså oransje.

Åpen eller fritt tilgjengelig (Grønn):

Informasjon som *kan* eller *skal* være tilgjengelig for alle uten særskilte tilgangsrettigheter.

Mye av den informasjonen NIH forvalter er åpen, enten som konsekvens av mål og hensikt med NIHs virksomhet eller som resultat av pålegg om åpenhet i lov, forskrift og annet regelverk som regulerer offentlig forvaltning og virksomhet. Andre deler av informasjonen har ingen krav om beskyttelse selv om den ikke ligger åpent tilgjengelig.

Denne klassen benyttes dersom det ikke forårsaker noen skade for NIH eller samarbeidspartner dersom informasjonen blir kjent for uvedkommende.

Eksempler på slik informasjon er:

- En web-side som presenterer en avdeling, et kurs eller en enhet som legges åpent ut på internett.
- Studiemateriell som ligger åpent, men som er merket med en gitt lisens og/eller opphavsrett.
- Forskningsdata som ikke trenger noen beskyttelse (forskeren står ansvarlig for denne vurderingen).
- Undervisningsmaterieill som ikke trenger noen beskyttelse (underviseren står ansvarlig for denne vurderingen).
- Administrative dokumenter/arbeidsdokumenter som ikke trenger noen beskyttelse.



Merk at selv om noe av denne informasjonen skal være *tilgjengelig* for alle, skal likevel informasjonens integritet sikres ved at kun personer og brukere med riktige rettigheter har tilgang til å *endre* informasjonen. Merk også at selv om informasjonen kan være åpen, er det ikke fritt frem å velge hva du gjør med den.

Begrenset (Gul):

Dette er informasjon som ikke er åpen for alle. I lover eller annet regelverk er det ingen krav om at informasjonen av denne kategori skal være åpen. Dette er altså all informasjon som ikke er klassifisert som åpen, fortrolig, eller sensitiv.

Informasjonen må ha en viss beskyttelse og kan være tilgjengelig for både eksterne og interne, med kontrollerte tilgangsrettigheter. Denne klassen benyttes dersom det vil kunne forårsake en viss skade for NIH eller samarbeidspartner dersom informasjonen blir kjent for uvedkommende. Informasjonen har kun relevans for eller er innrettet mot en begrenset brukergruppe enten ved NIH eller ved institusjoner og organisasjoner NIH har samarbeid med.

Eksempler på slik informasjon kan være:

- De fleste administrative dokumenter eller andre arbeidsdokumenter.
- Informasjon som er unntatt offentlighet.
- Mange typer av personopplysninger.
- Karakterer.
- Studentarbeider.
- Eksamensbesvarelser.
- Upubliserte forskningsdata og –arbeider.

Fortrolig (Oransje):

Dette er informasjon som NIH er pålagt å begrense tilgangen til i lov, forskrift, avtaler, reglementer og annet regelverk. Fortrolig benyttes hvis det vil forårsake skade for offentlige interesser, NIH, enkeltperson eller samarbeidspartner dersom informasjonen blir kjent for uvedkommende.

Eksempler på slik informasjon kan være:

- Personalmapper.
- En del informasjon om f. eks. sikring av bygninger og IT-systemer.
- Forskningsdata og datasett av stor økonomisk verdi.

**Sensitiv (Rød):**

Dette er informasjon som NIH er pålagt å begrense tilgangen til i henhold til lov om behandling av personopplysninger med tilhørende forskrift.

Eksempler på slik informasjon kan være:

- Sensitive personopplysninger (inklusive helseopplysninger).

Lagringsguide

Denne guiden forteller hvor du kan **behandle**, **lagre**, og **bearbeide** informasjon.

	Åpen	Begrenset	Fortrolig	Sensitiv
Privateid datamaskin, nettbrett eller mobiltelefon (BYOD)	•	(7)		
NIH-eid hjemmemaskin (4)	•	(7)		
NIH-driftet datamaskin - ikke kryptert (4)	•	•		
NIH-driftet datamaskin – kryptert (4)	•	•	(1) (3)	
Minnepinne/ekstern harddisk	•			
Minnepinne/ekstern harddisk - kryptert	•	•	(1) (3)	
Personlig e-post (Gmail, Hotmail eller liknende) (8)	•			
NIHs e-post (Exchange, Office 365)	•	•	(2) (3)	
Personlig skytjeneste (Dropbox, Google drive eller liknende)	•			
NIH Hjemmeområde («H:-disken»)	•	(6)		
NIH Fellesområde for NIH, seksjon eller avdeling (filområde eller i Sharepoint)	•	•	(5)	



	Åpen	Begrenset	Fortrolig	Sensitiv
NIH OneDrive (Office 365)	•	•		
NIH sikker sone	•	•	•	•
Public360	•	•	•	•
SAP og FS	•	•	•	•
Andre administrative systemer	•	•	(4)	
Canvas	•	•		

Merknader:

1. Oransje data kan lagres på datamaskin med kryptert disk, kryptert minnepinne eller kryptert eksternt harddisk.
2. E-post med oransje data kan sendes internt på NIH mellom NIH-brukere. Dersom e-post med røde data skal sendes til eksterne mottagere, skal innholdet krypteres før sending. Slik e-post kan **IKKE** synkroniseres ned til privat datamaskin, nettbrett eller mobiltelefon.
3. Det skal påses eller sikres at oransje data ikke lastes ned eller hentes ut til hjemmeområdet, datamaskiner uten kryptert disk, eller andre lagringssteder som ikke kan lagre oransje data.
4. Det anbefales generelt ikke å lagre dokumenter på lokal disk på arbeidsstasjonen din.
5. Oransje data kan lagres på fellesområde eller administrative systemer etter en egen vurdering og eventuell tilrettelegging.
6. Informasjon som skal deles med kolleger, bør legges på et fellesområde, ikke på ditt hjemmeområde.
7. Gule data skal som hovedregel ikke behandles på privat maskin. Men noe bruk er tillatt gitt at en følger retningslinjer for bruk av privat maskin.
8. All NIH-relatert kommunikasjon skal foregå via NIHs e-postsystem og med din NIH-adresse som avsender.

Appendix F

Approval from the Norwegian Centre for Research Data

25.11.2021, 09:56

Meldeskjema for behandling av personopplysninger



NSD sin vurdering

Prosjekttittel

Mental forberedelse blant norske toppidrettsutøvere i forkant av OL i Tokyo

Referansenummer

275873

Registrert

10.09.2021 av Eline Aase - elinea@student.nih.no

Behandlingsansvarlig institusjon

Norges idrettshøgskole NIH / Institutt for idrett og samfunnsvitenskap

Prosjektansvarlig (vitenskapelig ansatt/veileder eller stipendiat)

Frank Eirik Abrahamsen, frankea@nih.no, tlf: 94188982

Type prosjekt

Studentprosjekt, masterstudium

Kontaktinformasjon, student

Eline Aase, aaeline@gmail.com, tlf: 95902239

Prosjektperiode

01.08.2021 - 01.06.2023

Status

01.11.2021 - Vurdert

Vurdering (2)**01.11.2021 - Vurdert**

NSD har vurdert endringen registrert 29.10.2021.

Det er vår vurdering at behandlingen av personopplysninger i prosjektet vil være i samsvar med personvernlovgivningen så fremt den gjennomføres i tråd med det som er dokumentert i meldeskjemaet med vedlegg den 01.11.2021. Behandlingen kan fortsette.

25.11.2021, 09:56

Meldeskjema for behandling av personopplysninger

OPPFØLGING AV PROSJEKTET

NSD vil følge opp underveis (hvert annet år) og ved planlagt avslutning for å avklare om behandlingen av personopplysningene er avsluttet/pågår i tråd med den behandlingen som er dokumentert.

Kontaktperson hos NSD: Anne Marie Try Laundal
Lykke til videre med prosjektet!

18.10.2021 - Vurdert

Det er vår vurdering at behandlingen av personopplysninger i prosjektet vil være i samsvar med personvernlovgivningen såfremt den gjennomføres i tråd med det som er dokumentert i meldeskjemaet med vedlegg den 18.10.2021, samt i meldingsdialogen mellom innmelder og NSD. Behandlingen kan starte.

DEL PROSJEKTET MED PROSJEKTANSVARLIG

For studenter er det obligatorisk å dele prosjektet med prosjektansvarlig (veileder). Del ved å trykke på knappen «Del prosjekt» i menylinjen øverst i meldeskjemaet. Prosjektansvarlig bes akseptere invitasjonen innen en uke. Om invitasjonen utløper, må han/hun inviteres på nytt.

TYPE OPPLYSNINGER OG VARIGHET

Prosjektet vil behandle alminnelige kategorier av personopplysninger frem til 01.06.2023.

LOVLIG GRUNNLAG

Prosjektet vil innhente samtykke fra de registrerte til behandlingen av personopplysninger. Vår vurdering er at prosjektet legger opp til et samtykke i samsvar med kravene i art. 4 og 7, ved at det er en frivillig, spesifikk, informert og utvetydig bekreftelse som kan dokumenteres, og som den registrerte kan trekke tilbake. Lovlig grunnlag for behandlingen vil dermed være den registrertes samtykke, jf. personvernforordningen art. 6 nr. 1 bokstav a.

PERSONVERNPRINSIPPER

NSD vurderer at den planlagte behandlingen av personopplysninger vil følge prinsippene i personvernforordningen om:

- lovlighet, rettferdighet og åpenhet (art. 5.1 a), ved at de registrerte får tilfredsstillende informasjon om og samtykker til behandlingen
- formålsbegrensning (art. 5.1 b), ved at personopplysninger samles inn for spesifikke, uttrykkelig angitte og berettigede formål, og ikke behandles til nye, uforenlige formål
- dataminimering (art. 5.1 c), ved at det kun behandles opplysninger som er adekvate, relevante og nødvendige for formålet med prosjektet
- lagringsbegrensning (art. 5.1 e), ved at personopplysningene ikke lagres lengre enn nødvendig for å oppfylle formålet

DE REGISTRERTES RETTIGHETER

Så lenge de registrerte kan identifiseres i datamaterialet vil de ha følgende rettigheter: innsyn (art. 15), retting (art. 16), sletting (art. 17), begrensning (art. 18), og dataportabilitet (art. 20).

NSD vurderer at informasjonen om behandlingen som de registrerte vil motta oppfyller lovens krav til form og innhold, jf. art. 12.1 og art. 13.

Vi minner om at hvis en registrert tar kontakt om sine rettigheter, har behandlingsansvarlig institusjon plikt til å svare innen en måned.

25.11.2021, 09:56

Meldeskjema for behandling av personopplysninger

FØLG DIN INSTITUSJONS RETNINGSLINJER

NSD legger til grunn at behandlingen oppfyller kravene i personvernforordningen om riktighet (art. 5.1 d), integritet og konfidensialitet (art. 5.1. f) og sikkerhet (art. 32).

For å forsikre dere om at kravene oppfylles, må dere følge interne retningslinjer og/eller rådføre dere med behandlingsansvarlig institusjon.

Ved bruk av databehandler (spørreskjemaleverandør, skylagring eller videosamtale) må behandlingen oppfylle kravene til bruk av databehandler, jf. art 28 og 29. Bruk leverandører som din institusjon har avtale med.

MELD VESENTLIGE ENDRINGER

Dersom det skjer vesentlige endringer i behandlingen av personopplysninger, kan det være nødvendig å melde dette til NSD ved å oppdatere meldeskjemaet. Før du melder inn en endring, oppfordrer vi deg til å lese om hvilke type endringer det er nødvendig å melde: <https://www.nsd.no/personverntjenester/fylle-ut-meldeskjema-for-personopplysninger/melde-endringer-i-meldeskjema>

Du må vente på svar fra NSD før endringen gjennomføres.

OPPFØLGING AV PROSJEKTET

NSD vil følge opp ved planlagt avslutning for å avklare om behandlingen av personopplysningene er avsluttet. Lykke til med prosjektet!

Appendix G

Visual Representation of the Thematic Analysis

Figure 1

Visual Representation of the Thematic Analysis.

