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Does home location put young athletes under pressure?

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Abstract

This paper examines how Norwegian (n=5) and Austrian (n=12) cyclists experienced the interaction with different stakeholders when participating at the UCI Road World Championship. Athletes were interviewed during and after the event in their respective home countries. In addition informal interviews with coaches and journalists were conducted. Findings reveal that the young athletes perceived the media to be a stressor when adding the 'home location' to the event; this was particularly true for the Norwegian men. The massive attention, extra-curricular activities added by sponsors and the expectation of excelling 'at home', placed pressure on them. In contrast to the Norwegians, Austrian athletes were less stressed as the local organisers were more focused on promoting cycling tourism than on Austrian success in the competition. The findings contribute to the literature by 1) emphasizing the significance of the media as a stressor, 2) identifying the factors that determine the level of stress on young athletes , and finally, 3) analysing the significance of home location for young athletes in the context of major sports events.

Keywords: *Event tourism; media stress; cycling events; athlete-journalist relationship; young athletes; sponsor demands*

1 Introduction

The particular challenges of organising major sports events has generated considerable interest in the sport management field. A distinctive characteristic of major sports events is the involvement of a large and varied number of stakeholders (Kaspar & Schnitzer, 2011) with athletes as *producers* being seen as a particularly important stakeholder group. However, athletes' perceptions of sports events are more often reported in sport psychology literature than in the event management literature. To the best of our knowledge event management studies putting athletes' perceptions as the central concern are related to improving the performance of the event organization as the research on the Youth Olympic Games shows (e.g. Peters & Schnitzer, 2015). According to the sport psychology literature athletes' success is related to effective organizational support (Fletcher & Hanton, 2003; Kristiansen et al., 2019). However, mounting a successful major event is expensive and the involvement of commercial sponsors and media is often a requirement. Among the expectations of sponsors and media is ease of access to athletes. The highest profile athletes live in the eyes of the media (Kristiansen et al., 2017) and as Wenner has commented "there could be no big-time sport without big-time media" (2015, p. 629). Managing the interaction between the media and athletes, especially young athletes, should be a central concern of event organisers.

One example of interdisciplinary research examining the athlete experience of competing at their home location explores the concept of home advantage. Research indicates that host nations of the Olympic and Paralympic Games have a statistically significant host nation advantage, which means that a higher number of medals are won by athletes of the host country than would be the case if the event were to be held abroad (Wilson & Ramchandani, 2018). However, the potential for a negative impact of home location on athletes due to the weight of expectations from the media is rarely

examined. In particular, young athletes, being less experienced in managing media attention, might feel more exposed to heightened expectations when competing at home.

For this study, we explored the UCI Road Cycling WC 2017 (RCW 2017) in Norway and the same event in Austria in 2018 (RCW 2018) with a threefold aim: first, to identify and analyse how junior cyclists perceive the often new and unfamiliar exposure to intense media attention when competing in their home country; second, to compare potential differences between athletes depending on their gender and nationality; and third, to explore how the athletes' perception of media and other stakeholders such as sponsors and their respective federations changes when they compete in their home countries.

To our knowledge, no research to date has examined the interrelationship between stakeholder management at major championships together with the perception of home location and media stress. We first provide an overview of the relevant literature before describing our methodology and context. We then present and discuss our results, concluding with implications for policy makers, especially in event management, and future directions for research.

2 Literature review

2.1 Young athletes and coping with stressors

Not all athletes competing at major sports events are used to a high media presence and they may consequently perceive an imbalance between the media environment and their resources to deal with it (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). This imbalance is often referred to as stress (McGrath, 1970). Environmental demands or external events encountered by an individual may be termed stressors (Fletcher et al., 2006) of which there are three major types: *personal* (personal life events); *competitive* (related to performance); and

organisational (coach, team contracts, events etc.) (see McKay et al., 2008). Previous research has usually treated stress emanating from the media as a category of organizational stressor (e.g., McKay et al., 2008); however, more recently it has been argued that the media act as a separate source of strain for elite athletes due to its complexity in addition to the medias's ability increase the perception of the other stressors when issues become public (Kristiansen et al., 2011). The expansion of mass media has expanded the previously narrow focus on results into an institutional complex of substantial social, cultural, political and economic importance (Rowe, 2004). In conjunction with the other event stakeholders the media may "create a celebratory sporting spectacle or it can destroy sporting careers" (Jarvie, 2006, p. 140). In addition to the traditional media the myriad of available social media networks are significant and can be positive as they keep athletes and organisations in the public eye Pedersen, 2014) as well as presenting opportunities to influence communication flow, brand management and commercial revenue, but they can also be a source of strain and performance decrement (Kristiansen et al., 2017). Preferably, young athletes should be prepared for working in this intense and complex media environment and learn how to manage and cope with traditional media and social media demands.

Stress theory suggests that being able to cope with perceived stressors is related to the development and execution of learned responses that successfully lower arousal by neutralising or minimising the importance of a threatening condition (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Physical, psychological, and social maturity are prerequisites for handling stress, and it may take time and training to develop. Older athletes are generally better prepared to cope with adversity than younger athletes (e.g., Bebetos & Antoniou, 2003) and they respond more frequently with concentration and focusing on what has to be done in order to cope in addition to being better able to control their

negative emotions following stressful events (Goyen & Anshel, 1998). Not only do older athletes tend to have a greater range of coping strategies than younger ones (Reeves et al., 2009) they also tend to have a stronger social support network especially from peers (Kristiansen & Stensrud, 2017; Reeves et al., 2009; Skinner & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2007). Older more experienced athletes often perceive increased media attention as an opportunity to present their sport to the public and themselves to sponsors.

Although there is a substantial number of potential stressors to be experienced by young elite athlete in a competitive setting academic research has tended to focus on a limited range often prioritising the relationship with coaches (Kristiansen & Roberts, 2010; Kristiansen & Stensrud, 2020; R. E. Smith et al., 2007) and parents (O'Rourke et al., 2011). The increasing importance of media stress for young athletes is less well researched (S. Parent & Demers, 2011). An exception is the research by Kristiansen and Lines (2014) that focused on the negative aspects of media stressors resulting from athletes' interactions with journalists or athletes' exposure to published media reports. The significance of home location for media stress and the role of the young athlete's entourage in affecting the potential for, and dealing with the consequences of, media stress is far less well researched.

2.2 Home location and home advantage

With regard to how athletes cope with extensive and/or negative media coverage (Kristiansen et al., 2017) we know that even world champions and Olympic winners perceive the media as stressful before, during, and after major events (Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2002; Kristiansen et al., 2011). However, after major success on home soil elite athletes will often talk about the magical experience of competing *at home*. One example is Bradley Wiggins who had a great year in 2012 with several wins including

the Tour de France. For him winning gold in the London 2012 summer Olympics was the “defining moment” of his year:

it’s only now that I look back and think about that. You normally do Olympics in other people's countries, but to do it on my own doorstep, two miles from where I grew up, I don’t think I ever really considered the impact of that at the time ... it was amazing really. (Eurosport, 2020)

That competing at home might create extra pressure is rarely spoken about in public with home location routinely analysed as ‘home advantage’ (Pollard & Pollard, 2005a). Home advantage is well documented and refers to the greater level of success when teams (Allen & Jones, 2014; Jamieson, 2010) and individuals (e.g., Koning, 2011) compete in their home country. A meta-analysis of 87 independent samples and over 260,000 games by Jamieson (2010) showed an overall home winning percentage of 60.4%.

According to Courneya and Carrón’s feed-forward model (1992) four factors tend to contribute to home advantage, namely: crowd support; being spared adverse effects of travel; familiarity with local conditions; and rules favouring the home team. This model assumes that game location factors feed into the psychological states of competitors, coaches and officials. The potential advantages of home location include encouragement from spectators (Berdell, Ciecka & Krautmann, 2013) and the capacity of spectators, particularly in football matches, to distract opponents and influence officials’ decision making (Wolfson et al., 2005). While some research has demonstrated a decline in the home advantage effect since the 1960s (Pollard & Pollard, 2005b) and suggested that, in team sports such as football, this might be due to the continued professionalism and market culture of the game (Allen & Jones, 2014) research has tended to be confined to the major commercial team sports and to

adult/experienced athletes (eg. Berdell, Ciecka & Krautmann, 2013). Consequently, we know far less about the impact of home location in individual sports and on young athletes and whether young athletes perceive vocal crowd support and high expectations from many stakeholders (Kristiansen, 2015) to be a basis for translating home location into home advantage.

2.3 Event stakeholders and conflicting interests

In research on events, the concept of *stakeholders* (Freeman, 1984) tends to be interpreted broadly and to include the organizing committee's staff and volunteers, the host region with schools, residents and tourism organisations, the media, national and international sponsors, the national and international federations and the host government (e.g., Hanstad et al., 2013; M. M. Parent, 2008). While Clarkson has described a stakeholder group as being composed of stakeholders having "similar interests, claims, or rights" (1995, p. 106), and one in which the continuing participation is necessary for success, no doubt stakeholders frequently have competing and, at times, conflicting, aims for an event. The young athletes may easily find themselves in the midsts of this cross-fire as the host city, federation and sponsors aim to generate as much benefit as possible from the championship. In these situations the athletes, particularly the youngest, might be taken by surprise by the additional and varied expectations emanating from different stakeholders. Peters and Schmitzer (2015) analysed the complex environment within which young athletes compete at major events. Key stakeholders in that environment include coaches, representatives of delegations, family and friends, federations who often provide important support in relation to the management of expectations and emotions generated at major sports events. Young

athletes may consequently be seen as ‘fragile’ stakeholder being under pressure when competing in media saturated sports events.

3 Methodology

After obtaining approval from the Norwegian Social Science Data Services, access was gained to conduct observations and interviews during the RCW hosted in Bergen from September 17-24, 2017, and in Innsbruck between September 22-30, 2018. Below, we provide an overview of the research context, followed by our data collection and analysis techniques in this instrumental case study (Stake, 1995). This type of case study is often used when the aim is to provide insight into an issue, such as the relationship between ‘home location/advantage’ and ‘media stress’ and where the case(s) then play a supportive role in understanding the issue.

3.1 Research context

The Road Cycling World championships typically attract approximately 1,300 athletes from around 70 nations. Only the elite men and women can participate in the individual time trial as they do this for their professional teams and not their nations. Women and men are divided into junior (age 17 and 18) and elite and men have an additional age group of under 23. Face to face interviews were conducted in Norway due to better access to athletes in Norway. In Austria athletes responded to the same questions in writing directly to the researchers after being contacted by the national cycling federation. Observation served as a secondary source of data to supplement the interviews.

The UCI Road Cycling World Championships (RCW) are the most prestigious annual event organised by the Union Cyclist Internationale (UCI). Media interest peaks on the final day with the men's road race with roughly 200 competitors from nearly 50

nations with some 800 accredited media personnel, including journalists and photographers. The immense national and international interest in cycling is stimulated by the footage from camera operators who ride on motorcycles with the cyclists and camera-equipped helicopters that follow the race, in addition to the journalists interviewing the riders before and after each event. The media are extremely close to the cyclists, and every heartbeat (and the rider's height and weight) is monitored, analysed and broadcast. At the RCW 2017 in Norway, there were 645,000 onsite spectators over the 10 days, approximately 520 million television and online viewers, and some 4,200 news reports (Holmen et al., 2018). Even though similar numbers were reached for the RCW 2018 in Austria (Innsbruck-Tirol, 2019), the contextual background of the host countries is different. In Norway, the interest in cycling has increased in the last two decades, inspired by the successes of Norwegian riders Kurt Asle Arvesen, Thor Hushovd, and Edvald Boasson Hagen. Another reason for this increased interest is the extensive annual coverage of Tour de France (TdF) provided by the national broadcaster TV2. As many as 35,000-40,000 Norwegians have travelled to France in recent years to follow the TdF live (out of a population of 5 million). The popularity of cycling is indeed remarkable in a country that mainly focuses on winter sports.

As far as the Austrian context is concerned, it should be mentioned that Salzburg hosted the RCW in 2006, but the Austrians were not as successful in road racing as their Norwegian counterparts. Nevertheless, Austria, and especially the region of Tyrol has been trying for years to establish itself as a tourist cycling destination by organising international cycling events and promoting cycling tourism. Austria would rather establish itself as a tourist cycling destination as an alternative to winter sports rather than become a hub for competitive road cycling (Schlemmer et. al, 2019).

3.2 Observations

A media-accredited researcher from our research group had access to press conferences, VIP areas, competition sites, and ceremony sites at both events. The second author was accredited for the Innsbruck 2018 RWC only and supported the first author when organisational and/or communicational issues arose. All race events were observed from a support- or press-car, as well as from among the spectators. Observations served as the background, and therefore secondary source of data. We paid strong attention to physical elements of social action and interactions surrounding athletes and journalists behavior (Belk, Fischer, & Kozinets, 2013). The field notes were written daily documenting observed practices of athletes, support personnel, journalists, volunteers, security staff, tourist spectators, and local spectators. These notes were important when preparing the interview guide, as questions were added based on observations made during the event to explore, explain and/or verify observations. Furthermore, with accreditation we could easily observe the number of journalist accessing the teams before and after competitions, this knowledge helped us later when deciding which athletes could provide greatest insight on the research question. In addition, the extensive observations also included talking to important stakeholders from the athletes support network (representatives from the federation, coaches, leaders, parents) and also media representatives and members of the local organizing committee and UCI. These informal interviews (n=21) helped refine our interview schedule and also provided context for the analysis of our interview data from athletes.

3.3 Interviews and interview guide

A purposeful and convenience sampling procedure (Bauer & Gaskell, 2000; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was adopted. *Purposeful* because we have a focus on both male and female junior athletes and their perception of competing at their home location with the

associated media pressure and attention. Purposeful also because we also wanted experienced athletes' voices in the sample as a basis for comparison. *Convenient* because our interview method depended on access to the participants. Access was obtained with the support from the national federation and the athletes' various team coaches. Due to more direct access to the Norwegian athletes, we managed to conduct oral semi-structured interviews with the athletes who we observed were receiving media experience during the championships (n=5). In Austria, where access was restricted young athletes, who had received media attention, responded to the same questions as those asked to the Norwegian athletes by providing written responses. In both cases we achieved access to 50 % of the relevant population.

The sample of athletes who agreed to answer our questions from both countries were professional and juniors and of both genders. The few male and female professional riders were included as a point of comparison with the data from the young athletes. All interviews were conducted within two months of the different RWCs, and athletes were informed that the information they provided would, should they wish, remain confidential, and that they could terminate the interview at any time. The semi-structured oral interviews were conducted wherever it was convenient for the participants, and they lasted between 35 and 55 minutes. The interview guide consisted of four main sections: (a) demographic background; (b) experiences with journalists and media reporting (e.g., how do you perceive the media; how would you describe the athlete-journalist relationship); (c) the media coverage of the RWC (e.g., what did the media focus on in their questions); and (d), the general experience of participation in a RCW in Norway/Austria (e.g., did you experience any extra pressure because it was in Norway/Austria). Follow-up questions were used in order to elicit in-depth responses from the participants. In the Austrian sample, we were impressed by the length of the

responses and the time they must have spent on the task. Due to this high number of respondents, we feel that we have comparable data sets from Norway and Austria. Table 1 provides brief details of the profile of the interviewees.

[***Table 1 near here***]

3.4 Data analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and the Norwegian and Austrian extracts were carefully translated into English. Both the oral interviews and the written responses were analysed for meaning units according to media stressors, and associated sub-categories were found (perceived home advantage pressure, weeks leading up to the championship, the interview situation, type of questions etc.), and placed into higher order themes using deductive content analysis procedures (Kondracki et al., 2002). Next, the interviews were cross-case analyzed (Patton, 2002). The two first authors coded the raw material and, at the first coding, the authors had about 70% agreement; the remaining cases were discussed and agreed upon before the final coding. We allowed concepts to continue to emerge until we had a clear sense of the developing relationships among categories which were then discussed with the third author . We developed statements of findings only if we corroborated a given finding across multiple informants (to mitigate the possibility of problems associated with retrospective accounts). Data collected from both the Norwegian and Austrian athletes were very consistent. The quotes in Table 2 represent only corroborated findings. In addition and in accord with the transactional perspective (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), in-depth quotes were included in the presentation and interpretation of the data the inclusion of which, according to Lazarus (1999) adds knowledge and depth of understanding.

3.5 Validation

The use of multiple sources of data together with the investigation of the same challenge in two different groups. provided us with a clear picture of the extent to which home location may increase the perception of media stress. In the research group, we discussed emerging findings (investigator triangulation; Patton, 2002). Finally, rigor was reinforced by use of member reflection in order to generate additional data and insight (Schinke et al., 2013) and in order to refine the findings (B. Smith & McGannon, 2017). Two additional interviews with coaches/leaders of the athletes were undertaken and preliminary findings were discussed. Some of their comments were also integrated in the final draft. Furthermore, discussions with the journalists was a practical opportunity to provide additional confirm of our overall analyses of the data..

4 Results

The similarities and differences between the Norwegian and Austrian athletes are highlighted in relation to the different event phases in Table 2. Below athletes' experiences are compared to comments from team leaders and media personnel.

[***Table 2 near here***]

4.1 Inexperienced athletes, media attention and home location

The professional cyclists are used to media pressure: 'we are used to the TdF [Tour de France] and the constant media access every day, but of course it was more in Bergen than last year in Doha (laughter)' [where far fewer spectators and journalists were present]. The professionals also explained that the media interest is, generally, lower during a RCW due to each nation focusing on their major stars, while in TdF they also have to interact with the international media:

I did not perceive the media as a stressor here, TdF is worse... However, I think the juniors had a different experience, for they are not used to daily questioning – and that might easily add stress to a major competition like this. (Norwegian Professional cyclist)

He acknowledged that responding to questions is ‘part of the job, even doping questions, you just have to answer and keep training and do your best’, but accepted that this is likely to be a novel situation for juniors.

The junior cyclists confirmed in interviews that media attention before during and after the event was a new experience. In particular, it was tough meeting the media after the road race when their performance had disappointed the home crowd. The juniors were not ready for the media ‘storm’ and the intense debate of their performance:

I felt that everybody made a big deal out of my disappointment, hugged me etc, but I was just extremely tired just after the race. In all the interviews, I focused on the fact that I did my best, but it was not enough... however, they kept writing that I was disappointed – and that made me wonder if they were more disappointed than me? I was done with the race, but the media would not let it go, and they changed my way of thinking back on it. (Norwegian junior cyclist)

Naturally, negative publicity affected the younger athletes, as one Austrian cyclist expressed: ‘the questioning made me more self-critical and insecure about the plan being the right call’. In retrospect one coach added that it is important to remember, ‘they had some good result that were hardly noticed, and they worked as a team’. However, because the media focused on the disappointing results it influenced the public evaluation of the performance.

Cycling is a team-sport, a fact often forgotten when celebrating the winners, and if your captain fails, the team want

to make sure that he is protected as well – even though he might just have lost a medal there, which was tough for all of us ... We will never get back the opportunity to succeed in a major championship in Norway. (Norwegian junior cyclist)

For the team having to answer questions about team-members' performance was expressed as a new challenge. Hence, many of the younger athletes reported that they had learned a lot during the week – also that, in dealing with the media, 'it is all about the wording in the response'. This strengthens the argument for better media training to help young athletes find the best ways to discuss all types of results so their statements will not 'backfire'. This is generally a skill possessed by the professional riders who are more likely to experience the interviews as positive (see Table 2).

4.2 Gender, nationality and home advantage

The Norwegian junior men had a different media reception at their home event than the junior men in Austria and the women riders from both countries due to a successful season and the popularity of the sport in Norway. In the weeks before the RWC in Bergen, the Norwegian junior men were given the 'professional treatment' by the media due to winning three medals including one gold in the European championship six weeks prior to the RCW. The juniors confirmed in interviews, that they in the end found the attention 'rather stressful' and that it was 'more than I expected... and I also think it is wrong when they [the media] expect more of you than you expect of yourselves'. The pressure increased as the media began to refer to the junior team as the world's best. They experienced this as 'surreal'. For example, one mentioned that he had had an accident during practice that involved horse manure and he had shared the incident among friends on social media, which generated considerable interest and ended up on the front page of one of the tabloid newspapers. As he reflected weeks later:

It was funny when my friend sent a text about this training accident to my coach, who told someone at school – and then it ended up with a journalist. However, it was not funny to read about it in the media; then it became a stressor. (Norwegian junior cyclist)

For the first time this rider experienced how a story can change from something innocuous and funny into a national media story without the *fun* component. For the young athlete it became too much, and he reflected, ‘it might be that they [i.e., the coach and the media] forget that I am only *18-years-old*’, and should be spared that type of journalism. The coach did not fully realise the consequences of what he was doing, which implicitly reveals a lack of media awareness among athletes' support personnel. This story may serve as an example of the lack of preparation for the media attention and scrutiny following a major championship. This was confirmed by one of the coaches, who said: ‘We have never had any media training, and all the attention caught us a little off-guard. There is a lot we should have done differently’.

In contrast, the Austrian riders did not report any particular media attention with one exception – the Tyrolean athletes perceived more interest before the event. Though several mentioned that cycling does not usually receive much media attention in Austria, there was increased attention on the sport, but not on the actual riders.

Cycling was much better covered in the Austrian media in the weeks leading up the event, having an event in the home country is always something special. To make sure to be part of this happening, I changed from off-road to road cycling in order to compete in Innsbruck. (Austrian junior cyclist)

However, the Austrian athletes also emphasized that many of the journalists showed little knowledge of the sport which frequently led to the interview situation being considered a stressor as the outcome of the interview often resulted in a ‘negative portrayal of their chances’ (Austrian junior athlete). From the insights from the juniors, it appears that in order to feel a home advantage (and not a *home pressure*) they should aim to navigate through the RCW rather unnoticed in order that the media will just stay

focused on the professionals.

The women riders in both countries were more enthusiastic when discussing media attention and being interviewed during the event as they normally do not receive much media coverage. One professional Austrian women cyclist commented that both she and her friends perceived 'a lack of coverage of the women's events' while the Norwegian women juniors felt that they were an 'afterthought', secondary to the main deal, which were the men:

It was only the boys who had TV2 following their every step. Well, sometimes you can see us in the background as we were with them during some of the filming. We mostly talked to local journalists and Procycling.no [i.e. Norwegian cycling website that covers Norwegian and international cycling]. The national media (NRK and TV2) contacted us the day before the events and then we did the same type of interviews as the boys. (Norwegian women junior cyclist)

They felt that 'the boys were favourites; we were simply afterthoughts; not very interesting'. Nevertheless, the women riders also experienced a more sustained interaction with journalists than they were used to, and the Norwegian women riders revealed that they had had a group discussion concerning the type of questions that they might be asked - and how to respond to them and that this had helped them in the interview situation. They were told by coaches and family members to be positive when interacting with journalists! This actually stressed one women cyclist, 'because I started to think a lot about what I said and if any of it could be interpreted negatively - I was terrified'. With this vague advice, no wonder it was stressful when being asked questions such as 'Who is the strongest rider on the team? ... Then you panic, because you don't want to undermine the others on the team by saying that *you* are... because the others may interpret this the wrong way'. When summing up, the women cyclists expressed that some of

the questions asked were simply boring – and that the journalists were not very interested in their sport experience. However, the Austrian women emphasized that Austrian TV did not even broadcast the women’s 2017 Bergen event, underlining the lack of interest in road cycling in Austria especially when women are competing.

4.3 Stakeholder interests and home location

The potential home advantage gained from the support of spectators and fans also includes closeness to local sponsors. While interacting with sponsors is an accepted part of the job for experienced professional cyclists it is easy to forget that this is not the case for all cyclists. In particular, the Norwegian junior men were recipients of intense interest from different stakeholders wanting them to promote products and participate in extra-curricular activities with other sports celebrities or appear on TV shows. One athlete shared that

it was fun to make sushi on TV [due to LAKS (salmon) being the major sponsor of the championship], but I should probably not have done it. While each event itself was fun, all together, it was too much (Norwegian junior cyclist)

Journalists were at the riders’ hotel at all times and the young athletes were easily tempted into extra activities. It was clear from the data that those athletes unsure how to cope found that media attention easily became media pressure. As one sighed: ‘People kept telling us that we were the best juniors in the world; they said it so many times that I almost did not believe in myself in the end’ (Norwegian junior cyclist). In retrospect, this was also admitted by one coach after the event who explained that they had not seen the intense stakeholder interest coming and that they would be better prepared next time.

Interestingly, the Austrian cyclists perceived stakeholder interests differently, as their competition performance was almost secondary in comparison to the main aim which was to promote the Tyrol as a tourist destination. Austrian athletes also acknowledged the value the event had for marketing the destination during the event. From the athletes' point of view, the late summer days and corresponding TV images really showed how beautiful the region was. They recognized the tourist marketing potential of the event and that they were not expected to win a gold medal, which reduced the pressure to excel.

Summing up, in both countries, the smaller junior entourage made the events more accessible for the journalists and extra-curricular activities. In Norway, the close ties between TV2 and the cyclists ended up being a little overwhelming in terms of the *amount* of coverage – a result of ‘home location’ despite the claim from journalists that they ‘go easy on them [i.e., junior cyclist] compared to many other sports where we can be more critical...’ The TV2 journalist added:

When interviewing young performers, we do consider that they do not have the same media training as the professionals and that they might be more nervous about doing an interview. For them to cope with the situation, we start by explaining the topics and how we plan to do the interview. Naturally, we are not as tough on them if they are not as successful; I guess we are more critical with the professional athletes. (TV2 journalist)

The Norwegian juniors emphasized that the pressure did not come from the federation’s concern with gold medals as the national coach had tried his best to take the pressure off their shoulders and repeatedly told them to ‘relax and downplayed the importance of the championship. You have to believe him – right?’ However, the media kept asking about medals and results which resulted in ‘a focus on winning and how to do it, instead of getting time for yourself before the race. The questioning changed my focus a little and

I thought more about results' (Norwegian junior cyclist). In retrospect, one of the coaches admitted that 'it is hard to distinguish between the perceived performance pressures the athletes felt and what the media added to it...'

5 Discussion and conclusions

To participate in an Olympic Games or World Championship in your home country is often seen as an ultimate experience among elite athletes. Considering the first research question of this study, results reveal that young athletes participating in the two RWCs experienced their home location both positively and negatively as both advantageous and as a source of stress. The concept of home advantage is well documented (Pollard & Pollard, 2005a), however in the four factor crowd support model (Courneya & Carron, 1992) complex stakeholder management is not included. On the one hand, both Norwegian and Austrian cyclist medalled in their respective countries and for them the event may have given them a home advantage. The extra media attention was not problematic for experienced professional cyclists (Neil et al., 2011; Nicholls & Polman, 2007) as they underlined that the cheering from home spectators was unforgettable and a memory they would cherish the rest of their lives. On the other hand Norwegians juniors were expected to win medals. Home location was not perceived as an advantage due to the stress arising from increased expectation of success promoted by the national media. This finding adds weight to the argument that media stress should be considered as a distinct category of stress rather than as a subcategory of organizational stress as argued by Fletcher et al. (2006). Not only is media stress of increasing significance at major sports events, but it also cuts across organizationa, competitive and personal stressors (Kristiansen et a., 2011). In Austria in contrast the expectation of medal success was low and stress on young athletes was further reduced due to the primary concern with tourism promotion.

Regarding the second research question, comparing potential difference depending on gender and nationality it might be argued the women benefitted from some extra attention, or at least it was not perceived as pressure or a stressor as was the case for young male cyclists. However, women continue to be marginalised in the sport (Hargreaves, 1994; Messner, 2002) and, in this study, they commented on being the accessory to the juniors' 'story' and they reflected upon the lack of interesting questions. Furthermore, as they were not required to undertake extra activities to please sponsors or other stakeholders they were made acutely aware of their relatively marginal status. With regard to national differences the Norwegians were more aware than the Austrians of the expectation that they would convert home location into home advantage. The differences were mainly caused by expectations prior to the event and the fact that the RCW was promoted by different stakeholders in the respective countries. The RCW in Norway was driven by the national cycling federation and its desire to promote competitive road cycling while the RCW in Innsbruck was driven by the municipalities' concern to promote tourism. The focus in Bergen was more on the athletes and the competition, while the focus in Innsbruck was more on the generation of marketable images of the landscape and the promotion of the message to visit the Tyrol region not only for skiing, but also in summer for biking. This finding underlines the importance of understanding the role of the event within the strategies of the most relevant stakeholders (Schnitzer, Schlemmer & Kristiansen, 2017) – and the link this has to the athletes' perception of home location as an advantage or a stressor.

Finally, coming to the third research question, the study revealed that home location was not always an advantage. Results revealed that the younger athletes lacked media training and strategies to cope with the sudden increases in national media interest. They were challenged by an imbalance between their media training resources

and the novel competitive situation with considerable media interest (McGrath, 1970). The situation that young Norwegian athletes in particular found themselves in was the outcome of the conflicting interests of the event stakeholders – both the host region/municipality and team/federation sponsors want to use the extra attention on the athletes for their sectional benefit. In retrospect leaders admitted that the pressure on junior athletes could have been reduced by protecting them from pre-event interviews, limiting extra-curricular commitments – and encouraging athletes (and coaches) to reduce their traffic and postings on social websites. This shows that, even though considered as key stakeholders in major sports events, athletes may be seen, depending on the expected benefits from other stakeholders (e.g. federations, urban regimes, media, sponsors), as the vicarious agents of other stakeholders' interests. Young athletes who are not prepared for such an endeavour may suffer from such an experience and therefore need to be supported by those in their immediate environment, such as coaches, family, friends and psychologists (Peters & Schnitzer, 2015).

5.1 Contribution and implications

For the host, successful events can deliver substantial economic benefits, especially from sport tourism and athletes' interaction with stakeholders is an important element in securing those benefits. However, there was little evidence that balancing the various needs of young athletes (competitive and promotional for example) was a significant part of event planning by coaches and the federations. Specialist sports media such as TV2 in Norway had an interest in developing a long term trust-based relationship with athletes (Kristiansen et al., 2011) and were less likely to be a source of stress. However, journalists with little knowledge of cycling often adopted an approach that was perceived as a stressor by the less experienced cyclists. This study also found that social

media (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat) was for some an additional source of stress (Nesi et al., 2018). When the demands of the federation and sponsors are added to those of the various media overload and stress can easily result and affect the performance of young athletes. For the young and inexperienced athletes competing at home, lack of effective stakeholder management often resulted in media stress.

5.2 Limitations and future directions

The qualitative methods used in this exploratory investigation were designed to yield information and provide a descriptive basis for understanding how young and inexperienced athletes cope with stressors in major competitive events. As with all research the present investigation has some limitations. It is always problematic to get access to elite athletes for research purposes during major championships when they tend to be more closely protected. Access depends on developing relationships with key gatekeepers who will determine the degree of access to be allowed. While face to face access was granted in Norway we had to rely on written communication with athletes. Although the quality of Austrian written responses (n=12) matched the quality of the Norwegian responses (n=5) and vividly illustrated the complex relationship between home location and media stress the lack of direct equivalence of data collection methods was considered a limitation. We would also have preferred to have interviewed a wider range of event stakeholders although the data from the interviews that were conducted were confirmed by the series of less formal discussions with stakeholders. An important direction for future research would be to gather data systematically from a wider range of stakeholders including news editors, federation staff and sponsors' marketing staff. A strength of our research was to hear the voice of the young athletes close to the time of their participation in the RWC. Further, the investigation provided access to a very

select group of young elite athletes, which continue to be an understudied group (Kristiansen & Stensrud, 2020; Nicholls et al., 2005). An additional direction for future research would be an in-depth analysis of the organising committees and of the strategic objectives of the local municipal and sports policy makers to better understand the motives for hosting the RWC – motives that might affect the athletes and their perception of the significance of home location. Of particular importance is the need to comprehend more clearly the stressors that young athletes face especially when there are expectations of ‘home advantage’.

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Tables 1-2

Table 1. Information regarding the athlete’s gender, nationality and age (N=17)

NATIONALITY	WOMEN (n=5)		MEN (n=12)	
	Junior/U23	Professional	Junior/U23	Professional
Norway	1	0	3	1
Austria	2	2	8	0

Table 2. Overview of the athlete perceptions of athlete-journalist interaction and media coverage where the event-phases represent the general dimensions, and higher order themes are based on the quotes from Norwegian and Austrian cyclist.

Event phases	Higher order themes	Norway	Austria
Before	Media coverage do not always focus on athletic achievements	‘A fun text sent to a friend ended up on the front pages. It was not fun to read about it in the media; then it became a stressor’ (junior, man) ‘The narrow focus: only on results and goals’ (junior, women) ‘Questions about doping is <i>part of the job</i> ’ (professional, man)	‘I was asked about my favourite desert’ (junior, man) ‘Austrian media attention in sport is limited to skiing and soccer’ (junior, male) ‘Cycling is almost only mentioned in relation to doping’ (junior, man)
	Media pressure before the event	‘It was an increased interest for us because of the good results in the European Championship’ (junior, man) ‘Our qualification was so late – so no time to feel any pressure’ (junior, women)	‘As long as there are not ‘negative headlines’, cycling is hardly mentioned’ (professional, woman) ‘I am better known in Italy than in Austria – so no extra pressure’ (professional, woman)
	Pressure because participating at home	‘The boys were favourites, we were simply afterthoughts’ (junior, women) ‘It was more than I expected, the journalists	‘Because I am Tyrolean I received huge media attention’ (U 23, man) ‘No, not necessarily more pressure, but more

		<p>were at our hotel at all times’</p> <p>‘Both coaches and family told me to be positive in interviews! That stressed me out as I started to think a lot about what I said and if any of it could be interpreted negatively – I was terrified’ (junior, women)</p>	<p>motivation and excitement’ (U23, man)</p> <p>‘No, I felt no pressure. I am a mountain biker and started the competition without expectation. No one expected anything of me!’(junior, woman)</p>
Championship week	Media attention depends on gender and level	<p>‘The media interest decreases due to each nation focusing on their major stars, while in TdF we also interact with the international media’ (professional, man)</p> <p>‘It was only the boys that had the TV crew following them around’ (junior women)</p> <p>‘... maybe, I was more affected by the surroundings and pressure than I thought I would be...’ (junior, man)</p>	<p>‘The coverage of the cycling world championship was equal among the genders, there is no great interest in either men or women’s races’ (U 23, man)</p> <p>‘Many of my friends complained about the lack of coverage of the women’s events’ (professional, woman)</p> <p>‘During the championship the sport gained meaning for a short time frame’ (U 23, man)</p>
	Perception of journalists	<p>‘Some of the journalists from TV2 are almost like friends’ (professional, man)</p> <p>‘It is harder to be interviewed by local journalists with less knowledge of the sport’ (junior, man)</p> <p>‘I could not say that they did not do a good enough job, I simply said I missed them during the race. It is all about the wording’ (junior women)</p>	<p>‘It is difficult to conduct an interview if the media representative does not really know the sport. Therefore, I expect that a certain preparation time is spent before the conversation’ (U 23 man)</p> <p>‘A cyclist expert portrayed the Austrian juniors negatively’.(junior, man)</p> <p>‘The journalists reported our chances at the WC to be equal to zero’ (junior, man)</p> <p>‘Journalists were really kind. In the end, they are just doing their job, and being in the media is part of the job of a sportsmen/woman’ (junior,</p>

			woman)
After	Extra media-sponsor activities	‘It was fun to make sushi on TV’ (junior, man)	‘Event of Tyrol advertising’ (U 23, man)
	Media interaction after race	‘The journalist kept writing that I was disappointed – and that made me wonder if they were more disappointed than me?’ (junior, man) ‘I could not say that they [i.e. the teammates] did not do a good enough job’ (junior, woman)	I won as an underdog. For me the following media attention was simply a positive experience (junior, women) ‘Directly afterwards I find them annoying and intrusive, first I want to let the event pass by and relax’ (U23, man)
		‘We all agree that we should have been better protected’ (junior man)	’It is hard if the race did not go as expected. But even then, it’s part of it. Friendliness should still be at the top priority – annoyance or disappointment are not part of any interview’ (junior, woman)
