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Chapter 24. Sport management during COVID-19 in the Norwegian context

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Norway closed down March 12, 2020, together with the rest of the world, but Norway remained closed for a longer period and with some of the toughest restrictions in Europe. This policy resulted in the cancelation of sport competitions to be hosted in Norway due to entry rules, including long quarantines for international athletes traveling to the country, and the regulations affected Norwegian athletes who were returning home after training camps and international events. For example, the Norwegian football players were much affected by the long quarantines, as they had to play their national team qualifying games at a stadium abroad (mostly Spain), which became their 'home venue'. Another setback was that Norway, together with Denmark, was supposed to cohost the women's World Handball Championship in 2020. Just two weeks before the start of the championship, Norway had to give up its part of the hosting-responsibilities to Denmark, where entry regulations were less strict. In the press release after this decision, the Norwegian Handball Federation emphasized that it had turned every stone and had been in close contact with the Ministry of Culture, the government, and the health authorities both locally and nationally (Kvam, 2020) but to no avail. Sport was not exempt from COVID-19 regulations, and the national handball federation was unable to fulfill its co-hosting commitment (Dille & Kristiansen, 2022).

When COVID-19 was classified as an international pandemic, questions arose over whether the Tokyo Summer Olympics in 2020 should be hosted as planned or postponed due to the uncertainties around health risks (Lundqvist et al., 2021; Taku & Arai, 2020). Together with Australia and Canada, Norway was one of the first countries to declare its withdrawal from the Tokyo Games due to the health risks (Wedervang & Krogsæter Aarre, 2020). A few days later, the Olympics were postponed for a year following a joint decision between International Olympic Committee (IOC) President Thomas Bach and Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo. The main reason for the postponement decision was that the pandemic affected how athletes prepared for the Tokyo Olympics (Tokyo 2020, 2020). However, by the time the Olympic flame was lit, Japan was in its fourth COVID-19 wave and the third state of emergency with over 3,000 cases reported daily (Dalton & Taylor, 2021). Extreme measures were taken, and participating athletes became used to competing in so-called ‘bubbles’ (i.e., isolated sets of accommodations and venues in which athletes can reside and compete in small cohorts and without spectators).

This chapter investigates how Olympic athletes preparing for Tokyo 2020 perceived leadership and management issues during COVID-19 in Norway, and how regulations and restrictions affected their opportunity to train and compete as planned for the Olympics and Olympic qualification events. Participating in the Olympic Games during an ongoing pandemic was new for everyone involved – including sport organizations and politicians, who had the final say about what athletes, coaches, and support staff could or could not do. Procedures and how to support athletes needed to be rethought, and also how to compete while at the same time taking into account infection control (Löllgen et al., 2020). This new situation affected athletes’ motivation, stress, and mental health (Haan et al., 2021; Lundqvist et al., 2021). The crisis led to insecurity, difficulties with decision making, and a constant changing of rules. Regional rules

especially challenged elite athletes who depend on three- to four-year plans for successful performances.

COVID-19 in Norway

In Norway, the Norwegian Olympic and Paralympic Committee and Confederation of Sports (NIF) is an umbrella organization for sport and elite sport. Two million of the country's over five million residents are members of a sports club and therefore members in NIF. There are 54 national sport federations for different sports in the country, and the Olympic Top Sport Program [hereafter *Olympiatoppen*] is responsible for the development of elite athletes and the organization of Olympic preparations. NIF was also in charge of the communication of regulations from authorities to federations and athletes; the same COVID-19 regulations applied to all sports. Whether they were contact sports or outdoor sports – all sports facilities closed. This was even true for sports where social distancing was very well possible (e.g., tennis, golf, rowing, cross-country skiing, athletics). These federations argued against the close-down, but without success.

One of the major sports federations, The Norwegian Football Association (NFF) initially laid off almost 60% of its workforce as it became clear that a long-term shutdown would have catastrophic financial consequences for Norwegian football. Furthermore, the NFF quickly understood that it was necessary to prepare a strategy for crisis communication (Kristiansen et al., 2020), and this football organization took a proactive role towards the government as the NFF had the resources and competence to do so. How football communicated externally (authorities) and internally (the football family – all levels of football in Norway; Kristiansen et al., 2020) can offer insight into how Norwegian sport in general reacted to the pandemic.

Football considered the dialogue with governments to be split into five different phases, until omicron hit the scene in December of 2021.

During *Phase 1* (March 12, 2020 – May, 2020) Norway was officially shut down; and anyone arriving in Norway needed to go into a 14-day quarantine (Regjeringen.no, 2020). All leagues were suspended in this period. From a crisis communication perspective, the first phase consisted of four sub-stages: 1) Establishing what was happening; 2) Developing a government relation strategy to advocate for sports at all levels; 3) Implementing the strategy; and 4) Intensifying media pressure (Kristiansen et al., 2020). Sport was (and still is) *not* prioritized in Norway during the pandemic, but the pressure from the NFF kept it on the political agenda.

During *Phase 2* (May 2020 – November 2020), sport slowly turned back to normal again. Leagues at different levels started up. However, when the second wave hit Norway, in *Phase 3* (November 2020-January 2021), football had an ‘media explosion’ when several of the players on the men’s national football team tested positive before leaving the country to play in Romania. Even worse, the media knew about the positive tests very early on, before most involved, which led to controversy, and eventually the Minister of Health called the game off at the last minute (Kristiansen et al., 2022). While the federation was familiar with the rules, in dialogue with the municipal doctor, and anchoring all decisions in dialogue with the authorities, the media were focused on what the federation perceived as imaginary flaws in how they handled issues. Additionally, there was an ongoing debate in Norway about whether athletes should have *any advantages*, and people targeted football stakeholders as they were leaders in questioning the restrictions. The entire men’s national team was sent in quarantine at a hotel, and an “emergency team” was sent to represent Norway instead. The media created a sense that athletes were prioritized and had a different set of rules than the rest of the population, which

was far from the truth as the athletes were very often controlled and checked – at least by the media.

As the pandemic and numbers at hospital increased drastically during Christmas in 2021, in *Phase 4* (January 2021-April 2021), Norway shut down again. For Norwegian sport this meant that competitions were again put on hold, and the different regions of Norway, even different teams, had different sets of rules, depending on the infection rate. The decisions were based on geography rather than on a particular sport or sport activity. The unity among and within sports that had been present in the first phase of COVID-19 was lost. All this created frustration, and the regulations were hard to understand as zero incidents of infection had resulted from football games. The athletes adhered to their ‘bubbles’ and lived under stricter regulations than the ‘ordinary’ population.

During *Phase 5* (April 2021- December 2021) there was talk about a gradual reopening and normalization, though without a timeframe. The hope for normalization led to renewed energy and events were allowed with limited spectators. The NFF communicated that there was a constant *double communication* by being proactive towards the authorities and at the same time keeping an open line to the clubs so that they did not get frustrated (Kristiansen et al., 2022). As the country took a winter break, the government again put extra restrictions in place, allowing only the top division in team sports to continue. Whether teams from lower division are allowed to start training and competing again remained uncertain.

One lesson learned in Norway from the pandemic is that sport is not a high (enough) priority among politicians. As a result, the strict pandemic policy may have slowed down or put on hold athletes’ development. It has also led to decreased international credibility as Norway did not host events. The lack of differentiation between the sports was also criticized. Differing

from the general population with more moderate regulations was unacceptable in egalitarian Norway.

COVID-19 as an Extra Stressor for Elite Athletes

The pandemic became a major extra *stressor* for elite athletes training for the Olympics. Stressors are environmental demands or external events encountered by an individual (Fletcher et al., 2006), and they are often categorized into three categories: *personal* (personal life events); *competitive* (related to performance); and *organizational* (coach, team contracts, events, etc.). COVID-19 affected athletes across all three categories: At the social level, most elite athletes stayed in bubbles (sport cohorts) for most of the time and were deprived of the support from family and friends; at the competitive level, all events were cancelled; and at the organizational level, management and support became inconsistent, unreliable, and constantly changing.

Elite athletes are surrounded by national and club level stakeholders (Freeman, 1984), and these stakeholders often have competing and, at times, conflicting, aims. While stakeholders have “similar interests, claims, or rights” (Clarkson, 1995, p. 106), the pandemic, in the context of Norway, put the athletes in the midst of cross-fire between national governments, sport organizations, clubs, and sponsors. Balancing the different stakeholders needs is beneficial for the elite athlete preparations and their ability *to cope* with stressors, i.e., the development and execution of learned responses that successfully lower arousal by neutralizing or minimizing the importance of a threatening condition (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Athletes at Olympic levels tend to have a greater range of coping strategies than younger and more inexperienced athletes (Reeves et al., 2009), and they often have strong social support systems. However, adding COVID-19 to this mix, which resulted in the postponement of the Olympics, led to innumerable challenges while sports organizations and support staff were lacking expertise on how to support

the athletes (Lundqvist et al., 2021; Schinke et al., 2020; Stambulova et al., 2020). The pandemic imposed a unique and unforeseen situation where the change of daily training routines and short and long-term goals had physical, social, and mental impacts on elite athletes (Taku & Arai, 2020).

Interviews with Elite Athletes

A purposeful sampling procedure (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was conducted according to gender, sport, and having qualified in 2019 or not. Next, six athletes, three of each gender from individual sports were interviewed via the online platform Microsoft Teams because of pandemic restrictions and because of logistics with many of the athletes' being abroad on different training or competition sites. The interviews were conducted in Norwegian and translated into English. The semi-structured interviews started with 1) general questions about the athlete's background and general experiences under the pandemic; 2) challenges regarding training and competing in the year prior to this study; and 3) coping with challenges and her or his support persons during this period. The data were analyzed according to the steps outlined for thematic analysis by Braun and Clark (2006). Several measures have been taken to protect the confidentiality of elite athletes, which also restrict what can be reported in regard results, sports, etc.

Norwegian Elite Athletes and 2020 Tokyo Olympics

Norway has an egalitarian culture, and this is also true for elite sport (Kristiansen, 2017). Elite athletes were not exempt from restrictions, and they had to wait until their age group were vaccinated. There was no special treatment for even the elite athletes. This meant that young people were only fully vaccinated in the late fall of 2021. All Olympics athletes needed to be vaccinated, and Norwegian Olympic athletes and their support personnel welcomed doses of both Pfizer and BioNTech that the IOC had acquired and donated (IOC, 2021). These doses were

additional doses, so it was not at the expense of groups in need. The IOC had ensured Japan that everyone coming to the Olympics would be fully vaccinated. In addition, IOC President Bach emphasized that “By taking the vaccine, they can send a powerful message that vaccination is not only about personal health, but also about solidarity and consideration of the wellbeing of others in their communities” (IOC, 2021, para. 5).

One of the major stressors for athletes before being vaccinated was the fear of a positive test and what it would mean for training and preparations. As one of the interviewed athletes expressed:

Olympic athletes are some of the healthiest people when it comes to infection control, however, they are also the ones who suffer the most if they become infected. We are quite dependent on our lungs, in particular elite athletes in endurance sports... One of my biggest international competitors got corona in November 2020, and he has now withdrawn from the Olympics.

So before being vaccinated, athletes worried about getting sick in addition to qualifying and preparing for the Olympics. Norway’s neighbor country, Sweden, chose quite a different approach with less restrictions, which made preparation easier for the athletes. The athletes were aware of the different circumstances ahead of the Games, and the interviewees agreed: There are extra challenges with Norway having “Europe’s toughest restrictions”.

The data indicate that it was an advantage to qualify in 2019, as it became extra stressful to peak with additional restrictions in place: "I have been lucky to have qualified," noted one interviewed athlete, “so my whole focus has been to train as best I can so that I can be the best I can in Tokyo." Those who had quarantine rules, who had to home quarantine, and be subject to testing and ever-changing restrictions that led to training breaks for several weeks, had a tough

time to qualify, and none of the interviewed Norwegian athletes who tried to qualify in 2021 succeeded.

Experience was vital for coping with the situation and to quickly adapt to new guidelines according to the interviewees. The female athletes suggested, a little cautiously, that it may be easier to be a man and find a supporting spouse as woman athletes, as stated by one interviewee, “might prioritize boyfriends and the wishes of others instead of their own career”. Thus, in all six stories there was an emphasis on the support received during the pandemic. Below the stories of the qualified athletes from 2019 are discussed before turning to the ones who aimed to qualify in 2021.

The Athletes who Qualified for the Olympics in 2019

In general, athletes who had qualified in 2019 for the Olympic Games felt extremely fortunate that they did so before the pandemic, and communication and support were emphasized as important when preparing under these stressful environments. One major stressor, nevertheless, was that *communications lines*, from the top and down to the athletes, were unclear and missing, and that this must be improved *before* the next pandemic. One athlete from a minor federation argued that it was a clear disadvantage not to belong to a big federation such as football and ski:

Communication between the Olympiatoppen and the different national federations has been poor ... I heard from a journalist that Norway would boycott the Olympics initially, no information had come directly to us qualified athletes. Some of the major federations [i.e., football, handball, and the national ski sports] had better contact with the Ministry of Culture, which made one of the minor sport federations, such as mine, in limbo without knowledge and lots of paperwork [i.e., to do to get anything]. The smaller

federations have fewer resources and people! It has been useless to contact the Department of Culture or to get municipal exemptions ... you know, this is my job! ... The lack of system is scary. I am an outdoor athlete, I can train with several meters distance to others, it makes no sense in my head why I could not train in the first lockdown. *That was an overreaction of dimensions* ... March and April in Norway were insane, there must be a follow-up on that so it never happens again. Because there will be another pandemic. And next time, we must have rules and restrictions adapted to the different sports – and these need to be communicated directly to athletes.

This Olympian further stressed that he was grateful for the fact that he had qualified in 2019 and he felt it would have been “complete chaos” to try to qualify in 2020 because the government “did not prioritize Olympic athletes or support personnel”. As he reflected:

After one of the major competitions in the spring of 2021, we had to take a 10-days quarantine at home before getting back to training. That was the rule in Norway whenever going abroad, and I got very upset and made some tough comments about this issue when being interviewed by a journalist from a major newspaper. I had to withdraw the interview, but thankfully, things changed, and we could check out [i.e., with a negative test] of the quarantine after five days. I used my position to improve our situation, which I think is important that we do.

For athletes, this is energy draining and maybe something that should be handled at the top management level. Italy was mentioned as an example of a country that really struggled in the first phase of the pandemic, but later managed to prioritize sport by flying in athletes from all over the world because “sport matters” – while at the same time taking infection management control and maintaining strict security. As one interviewee for this chapter stated, “Even the

minor sports matter. In Norway, sports do not have a similar status, the pandemic revealed that clearly”. This athlete would like to have more support, also in form of communication, from the ones making the decision on what you can do, especially when uncertainty and different messages color your everyday life.

One Norwegian women athlete who qualified in 2019, chose, early on, to move outside the country after the first months of the pandemic. She needed access to a special type of venue and be able to train with others at the same level. As Norway closed sport venues for the second wave, she stayed abroad for almost a year before coming back again to avoid quarantine regulations. Her coach would come and visit for weeks, but she had to rely on her own mental strength to keep going. As she voiced when discussing these months alone, “You get more mentally equipped by an experience like this and I have had time to focus on my own physique, but I have not had time to focus on technique and tactics”. As an athlete of a tactical sport, it is a clear disadvantage not to train regularly with a group when preparing for the Olympics; the cohorts restrict this. However, she did not dwell on what she could not change, and she accepted the need to train in the assigned cohort and make the best of a difficult situation. After all, in Norway she would not even have had a venue. She received some funding to pay for the extra expenses, but otherwise, she did not receive much support:

You must take the initiative, too often think that you have control and do well, until you don't. Then it would have been nice if someone had caught the issue and stopped me before a lot of work was wasted. I find it hard to take initiative and ask for help with the little things ... But I have become better at it by trying and failing.

Experience and expertise are important when coping with a new situation, in particular support for planning and preparations. However, the athletes had different experiences with support

systems. Another athlete who qualified for the Olympics, also depending on a special venue in his sport, chose to stay in Norway and received massive support from Olympiatoppen for alternative training:

Luckily, I was qualified, so my whole focus in this period has been to train as best I can to succeed in Tokyo. When the venue closed in March 2020, I was cocky about it and told everyone that I would be the best to cope with lockdown. I would excel anyway. We did extremely good with alternative training during the three-month period when the venue was closed, we had a very structured and well-thought-through program. We discussed and found good solutions and got everything documented and logged, it became a research project on how much better athlete you can become with alternative training ... Well, the answer is you cannot. Alternative training can only supplement more specialist training in your sport, and it took me three months to get back in shape when the venues opened for training in June 2020. That was the toughest period for me.

When the athletes were allowed to train again, many experienced an even worse period than during lockdown. It was described by one of the interviewed athletes as “banging your head against the wall”. The one who excelled in this period was the athlete who had taken a long break in the first phase of the lockdown when the Olympics were postponed. When the others struggled to get back after alternative training, he came back with energy and did not have the same lapse in motivation.

When international competition started up, the strict regulations when re-entering Norway was a hot topic among the interviewees. As one of the interviewees said, “The only break I have had is the 10-days of quarantine after the European Championships in the autumn of 2020”. Many of the Norwegian federations limited their participation at competitions once

returning to Norway required a lengthy quarantine. This period without regular training would limit the effect of the hard work done prior to the competition. All interviewed athletes mentioned the Norwegian regulations as a stressor and disadvantage, but it was not something they dwelled on; they realized that they were not in position to change the regulations. However, they wished for similar opportunities as their international colleagues to prepare for the Olympics:

Sports are always unfair, you never have the same prerequisites or opportunities, but maybe that we have had some extra challenges ... maybe the upcoming Olympics will not be totally fair, but I'm not very bitter, we have had done a lot of good work...

Maybe this was even worse for the athletes trying to qualify in 2021. The athletes understood that authorities were confused in the beginning, but later in the pandemic a lack of communication was seen as unacceptable. It was seen as lack of sports leadership that the regulations were not modified to give athletes similar opportunities as their international colleagues.

The Athletes who Tried to Qualify in 2021

Of the athletes interviewed for this chapter, three tried to qualify for the Olympics in the spring of 2021, but none of them succeeded. There were many and different reasons for their not qualifying. For tactical sports, requiring sparring, closed borders meant reduced opportunities. When the capital closed down, one male tactical athlete packed a suitcase and drove west:

When all trainings facilities closed in Oslo, I realized that it would be better to go home and train there. I moved in with my coach and his family, we cleared the garage and that was my venue from March 2020 on for three months. Physical training was great, but it was not sufficient for progress. Then the news about postponement came, and I just had

to take a break. I felt empty. When I got back and started train again, I had an injury, so the first six months were not optimal for me.

With support he got back on track, and the national team moved in together in small cohorts until they could start travelling again. Because of, as the athlete noted, “the strictest entry rules in all of Europe, we decided to travel for two long trips”. The athletes knew the risks, but it was necessary to train with the best to have a chance to qualify. It is easier to train alone in an endurance sport than in a more technical/tactical sport where you need someone to spar with. The fear was a total stagnation, so the national team knew the risks if they went abroad. On the second training camp, half the team tested positive for COVID-19 just before leaving for the first qualification meet. Instead of competing, the entire team had to quarantine, before another one when re-entry to Norway. The following quoted interviewee was one of the sick athletes:

I did not get very sick; it was a little up and down. But I was so tired, and it was also very mentally draining ... It was awful not being able to compete for a ticket to the Olympics and instead watch the competition on TV. I tried to stay positive as it was only six weeks to the final chance to qualify, but we all knew it would be to get back in shape after this setback. In the end, none of us manage to qualify, I think at least one of us would have succeeded to do so without these regulations.

However, the pandemic also gave some athletes the opportunity to train systematically for a longer period and excel. Some almost managed to qualify because they got an extra year of training:

As soon as we realized that there would be no competitions because of corona, our coach stated that we should train so we were always six weeks away from peaking. So, we agreed on doing basic training until we had a competition date. But we were never given

any date, instead we continued with the basic training for months ... we surprised everyone when we finally got the opportunity to compete again.

The athlete quoted above did not qualify, but the progress the basic training resulted in was amazing and noticeable. Another positive outcome of the lockdown emphasized by the non-qualifiers, was the fact that their national team group worked on rapport in this period:

We have spent a lot of time together, and we have only spent time with each other ... and we had meetings and learned how to communicate, so we have a much better cohesion in the team than before COVID-19.

Isolation was one strategy chosen by many athletes to avoid getting sick, in Norway this was also a necessity as the non-qualified athletes were vaccinated for the first time after the summer of 2021. Smaller training groups became vital as there were clear restrictions on who athletes could meet outside sport.

Discussion and Conclusion

The life of an elite athlete is built on routines, structure, and predictability. The COVID-19 pandemic created an unpredictable training and competition environment, hence, for athletes to be able to rely on leaders and management to provide a supportive environment for them to do their “job” was vital. Several extra stressors were created by the pandemic (Fletcher et al., 2006), some of which were national, others regional. One national sentiment was the revelation and perception that sport is of little priority to authorities. This worried the interviewed athletes, interviewed before both Delta and Omnicom variants dominated, as they saw the ongoing pandemic as “insignificant”, and they worried about what would happen with (the lack of) sport management when a more serious virus became a global threat.

If being an athlete is to be considered a profession, then better management measures must be taken so the athletes get the needed support. With support this means *emotional* (i.e., support from friends, family and coach/support personnel so you feel loved and cared about), *informational* (i.e., support in form of feedback and information), and *tangible* (i.e., support from different stakeholders such as direct aid through funding, sponsor support and logistics) as there were equally important due to the extraordinary situation (Schaefer et al., 1982). A supportive coach–athlete relationship was mentioned first by all six athletes when asked how they coped, and this is in line with previous research (Kristiansen & Roberts, 2010).

The constant dialogues with stakeholders such as authorities, national and regional health organizations, clubs, and federations made it clear that the stakeholders surrounding Olympic sports did not have the same interest (Clarkson, 1995). The sport organizations argued that the health perspective could be balanced with elite sport but arguing for the importance of sport did not come across as empathetic while people were dying. There were conflicting aims among stakeholders involved in the public debate in the media, and those arguing for sport were seen as spoiled and insensitive. Most athletes kept quiet and most sport management stakeholders did, unfortunately, the same. The athletes expressed disappointment over the authorities' and their own sport organizations' crisis management. For them is it not just about an Olympic medal – it is their work and what they do. With this in mind, it is impressive how good elite athletes adapt to new situations and how they tend to find silver linings.

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