

# Evaluation and emotional consequences of the decision to postpone the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games in Polish Elite Athletes

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## Summary

In March 2020, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the International Olympic Committee decided to cancel the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games and postpone it to 2021. This decision caused a lot of emotions among elite athletes and disrupted their preparation cycle for the most important quadrennial athletic competition. The aim of the study was to investigate how Polish elite athletes regard this decision and what emotions they feel about it. The current training situation of athletes was also monitored during the study. 478 Polish elite athletes took part in the survey. The results showed that the athletes feel stronger sadness and uncertainty compared to the beginning of the year. Athletes with Olympic qualification consider the decision to cancel the Olympic Games to be much more negative, but – what is interesting – is that they rate the current training options higher and declare feeling less concern about their sports form next year. Two independent clusters show that some athletes experience an increase in negative emotions, while others do not experience major changes (compared to the beginning of the year). Using factor analysis, two factors were also distinguished – emotional and sports. Both exhibited statistically significant correlations with opinions about the current training situation. The results obtained allow for the development of valuable recommendations regarding support for athletes. Strengthening the ability to regulate emotions, working with the structure of properly formulated goals and building awareness of maintaining a good attitude and approach will be particularly important.

## INTRODUCTION

For each athlete, the Olympic Games are one of, if not the, the most difficult and prestigious competitions in their entire sports career (Pensgaard & Duda, 2002). Preparations to participate in the most important athletic event of the four-year period take many years, and players are willing to make immense sacrifices to fulfill their dream of an Olympic medal. The uniqueness of these competitions is largely associated with the assembly of athletes from around the world representing various sports disciplines, the presence of thousands of fans, and huge interest from the media (Birrner, 2012). The importance of the Games is even greater because of simple scarcity – the opportunity to compete appears only once every four years (Gould, Maynard, 2009). Winning these most valuable medals requires the player to demonstrate physical, technical, tactical, and mental skills. In a situation where the athletes' level of sport-

skill is even, particular psychological factors may determine success. To participate in the Games and compete with the best athletes in the world, players and their coaches face many psychological and psychosocial challenges (Wylleman, 2012).

Acquiring Olympic qualifications and preparing for participation in the Games requires not only time, but also financial, social (separation from family and friends), and emotional investments (coping with pressure and stress, resistance to failure, tolerance of uncertainty). The Olympic Games are a sporting event that evokes strong emotions not only among participants, but also in fans, media, and observers from around the world. The sense of atmosphere prevalent in the Olympic village and the opportunity to participate in these competitions are often the biggest sports dream of many players. The emotions associated with the Games also accompany the preparation process and may be present in the athlete's life for many months.

According to the latest approach to emotions in the athlete, it is worth paying attention to all three phases, which are “pre-Games phase”, „during-Games phase”, and „post-Games phase”. It is worth noticing that the first, pre-Games phase, which begins with the decision to participate in Games (and in consequence gaining qualifications), is comprised of sub-phases: the early phase of two or three years of preparation before the Games and the late phase, which includes intensive preparation a year before the Games (additional resources, tailored support, performance under high pressure, participation in more demanding competitions)(Stambulova, Ryba et al. 2020). Moreover, we are aware that the early preparation phase will look completely different for athletes moving into this phase after previous participation in the Games (in terms of recovery and physical and psychological problems, e.g. emotional exhaustion) than for athletes who have not yet been to the Games, and for whom this phase is a continuation of their normal training and sports development. All of the above-mentioned challenges affect the mental and emotional health of athletes (Van Slingerland, 2019). It is widely known that the experience of the Olympic/Paralympic event will depend largely on whether or not athletes are first-timers, medal hopefuls, and successful. Expected results can further develop the athletes and contribute to key steps in their careers and future emotions and behaviours. Athletes can strongly develop their ability to perform under pressure (Fletcher and Sarkar 2012).

Emotions are an inseparable element of sport competition. They are defined as quick and complex responses of the body to a real or imagined stimulus that leads to changes on three levels: physiological, cognitive and behavioral (Hanin, 2000). Emotions are the internal response to something that matters to us – we are not indifferent. They perform 4 basic functions – informational, adaptive, motivational, and social. Thanks to the informational function of our emotions, we can know that something is important to us. Our cognitive interpretation of a given situation will determine the tone of the emotions we feel (positive vs negative). These, in turn, will appear when we give the subject of our cognitive assessment a specific meaning. The adaptive function of emotions is to prepare our body for action. Thanks to this we can mobilize and have enough energy to complete the task, or disengage if necessary. The relationship between motivation and emotions is two-way. On the one hand, motivation - and therefore – goal-oriented willingness to act generates emotions. On the other hand, motivational behaviors trigger an emotional response because of the effect they cause. The social function of emotions is to be a message about the state of our mind and to express what is happening internally. Emotions also play an important role in regulating interpersonal relationships.

A sports feat causes a wave of emotions in players and encourages them to launch regulation processes so that emotions support achievement of the result and do not constitute an obstacle (McCarthy, 2011). In studies

on the impact of emotions on athletic performance, the role of pre-competition emotions, the relationship between success- failure attribution and post-competition emotions – or emotional flashbacks related to the best or worst performances of all time – were investigated (Krane and Williams, 2006).

Research confirms that pre-start and start emotions have a significant impact on the final result of the competition (Neil, Hanton et al. 2011). They are related to maintaining concentration, a sense of confidence, and effectiveness of action during take-off. Competition emotions such as joy, contentment, and excitement can support the quality of technical and tactical assumptions. Emotions of a different tone, such as sadness, fear, anxiety, and anger can significantly reduce previously trained physical and technical skills and disrupt the use of the athlete’s full potential during the start.

The preparation process is based on detailed periodization and appropriately targeted specialized training. Depending on the time remaining until the main start, the competitors are subjected to controlled pressure in the form of tests and control competitions. This is not only to verify sport level, but also to build start-readiness in the psychological sphere. The emotional state of the player will also be key to the effectiveness of preparations. Many athletes admit that this is often dependent on training conditions and the affordability of modern technologies and solutions. Appropriate sports infrastructure and access to the best training conditions and tools are the foundation of sport progress in professional sports. Competitors who have secured the organization of training in terms of content, both technical and financial, can focus entirely on the qualitative training and commitment to the elements important from the point of view of the final start. Securing the training process, a well-known, controllable and predictable preparation plan, as well as a clearly defined and timed goal are very important aspects determining the player’s emotional balance (Nosál, 2011, Kowalska, 2011). Preparation cycle disorders, including sudden modification of training and the inability to use specialized equipment are factors that affect the appearance of negative emotions and feelings such as fear, anxiety, uncertainty, decrease in motivation and commitment, a sense of lack of control, and a decrease in confidence in one’s own skills.

Athletes, like all of us, face challenges and experience difficulties, both in everyday life and related to professional sports. They relate to financial problems, relationships and communication with the trainer and team members, and health, including injuries. Training and competitions can be a space in which a crisis occurs. This is usually accompanied by a high sense of discomfort and intensity of negative emotions. As they confront such situations, athletes acquire and strengthen their ability to cope with unpleasant feelings and develop adaptation methods that will reduce psychological costs. In literature, we can find numerous references to the issue of coping in athletes, which is a conscious and control-

lable process. The frequency at which athletes use coping strategies, both task-oriented and emotional, is influenced by the way they perceive their tension (Eubank, Collins, 2000).

If a difficult situation is treated as a challenge, then athletes are more likely to run task-based coping strategies. On the other hand, perceiving the situation in terms of threat causes the use of emotion-based coping techniques. As confirmed by numerous studies, professional athletes are characterized by the use of task-based coping strategies (Hanin, 2016; Hagan, 2017; Richard, 2019, Mitic, 2020). Because this property is related to the cognitive sphere, it will have a secondary impact on the athlete's attitude and assessment of his or her difficulties and limitations. It will therefore be important to perceive the current training conditions as challenges and to foster the construction and maintenance of sports-form.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a situation the world of sport could not have foreseen. Despite signals that the global health situation is deteriorating, the International Olympic Committee had long maintained its decision to keep the date of the Games. Until mid-March, many athletes implemented preparation plans for Olympic qualifications and their performance at the Games. The decision to change the date of the Tokyo 2020 Games is an unprecedented situation in the history of Olympism. The Games have been canceled 5 times so far, but their dates have never been changed. So, athletes faced the challenge of adapting to new circumstances. This challenge was associated with a change in training conditions, the need to isolate and stay in quarantine, and modification of the preparation cycle for qualifications and participation in the Olympic Games. A large role in this process is played by the psychological factor associated with the assessment of the decision to change the dates of the most important sporting event. The perception and interpretation of this decision and the situation related to the broadly understood changes, are factors generating emotions and affecting motivation to act and the cognitive sphere – that is, anticipating the preparation of the optimal sports form and maintaining opportunities for Olympic success.

The purpose of this study is to deduce how Polish elite athletes assess the decision to change the date of the Olympic Games and what emotions they feel about it. A subject of interest is also the perception of training possibilities in the era of the coronavirus pandemic and beliefs related to maintaining a high sport form and achieving the desired results during next year's Games.

## Aim of the Study

The objective of the study was to examine the opinions of Polish elite athletes on the decision regarding the cancellation of the Olympic Games in Tokyo and their feelings related to the situation in which they are currently found (including training situation assessments).

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

The study uses a survey created by the authors of the article. The questions in the survey concerned the: evaluation of the decision to cancel the Olympic Games, subjective perception of the observed changes relative to the beginning of the year (in terms of perceived emotions, sports form, and physical and mental well-being), and assessment of training conditions (including felt discomfort associated with the need to limit or modify training).

The survey was distributed in COMS – Polish elite athletes received an invitation to take part in the survey by mail or SMS. The survey was conducted between 26 March and 1 April 2020.

## Context

WHO recognized COVID-19 as a global pandemic on 11 March 2020 (the first case of viral infection in Poland occurred on March 4, 2020).

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) announced on 24 March 2020 that the date of the summer Olympic Games had been changed. The reason was – of course – the occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Tokyo Games are slated to take place in 2021.

Changing the date of the Olympic Games to the next year is an event that caused a lot of excitement among elite athletes, especially those who already have the Olympic qualification. Changing the date of the Games forced athletes to change their preparation cycles and increased feelings of anxiety and uncertainty – every few days new information about cancellations of subsequent international sports events was being announced. The COVID-19 epidemic makes training more difficult, which negatively affects the sports- and mental shape of athletes. The evaluation of their feelings after the decision to cancel the Olympic Games in Tokyo passed is designed not only to examine the subjective emotions of athletes, but also to develop psychological help that will assist them in the situation they presently find themselves in.

## Statistical Analysis

SPSS software (version: 26) was used. Pearson's or Spearman's rho correlation was used to study the relationship between variables (depending on data). For inter-group comparisons, chi-square analysis with the Benjamin-Hochberg correction was used, and in the intra-group scheme (repeated measurement) analysis of variance with the Sidak correction was used. Clusters were analyzed using the k-means method to group athletes, while logistic regression analysis was used to build the cluster classification model. Factor analysis by the principal components method with Oblimin rotation was

used to examine the internal structure of the subjective assessment of the changes in the athlete's feelings. In all cases, the significance level was set at  $p < 0.05$ .

## RESULTS

The study involved 478 athletes aged 17 to 65 ( $M = 26.39$ ;  $SD = 6.13$ ); in terms of gender, equal groups were observed. The average period of competitive sports involvement ranged from 2 to 43 years ( $M = 12.54$ ;  $SD = 5.40$ ). Almost every fourth player practices every day (23%). About 26% have already participated at least once in the Olympic Games; 21.3% of athletes have Olympic qualifications for next year's Games. All athletes belong to the senior team; most athletes (77.4%) have been present at COMS for the past 8 months. 25.5% of the athletes surveyed were in quarantine due to the outbreak of coronavirus.

### Perception of changing the date of the Olympic Games and subjective assessment of training conditions

Athletes positively assess the decision to change the date of the Olympic Games to the next year ( $M = 4.15$ ;  $SD = 1.08$ ). Only 7.5% of respondents declared negative opinion.

Tested athletes rate current training possibilities quite low ( $M = 2.24$ ;  $SD = 1.10$ ). Only 13.3% of respondents believe that they are satisfied with their current training. In addition, we found that the tested athletes experience much less discomfort associated with the change in the preparation cycle than with the change in training conditions ( $M = 3.87$ ;  $SD = 1.19$ ). Athletes also do not know how a change in training will affect their sports form ( $M = 2.81$ ;  $SD = 1.03$ ). About 43.3% of athletes do not know how change and modification in training will affect their form.

### The subjective assessment of the change in the athlete's feelings

Compared to the beginning of the year, the surveyed athletes felt a negative change in most of the emotions analyzed. The t-test analysis for one sample showed that only in the categories of engagement and motivation were there no significant differences observed compared to the beginning of the year, while the other categories saw significant differences of at least  $p < 0.001$  (see Figure 1).

In addition, analysis of variance in the intra-group schema showed the existence of differences in the perception of individual states ( $F(11.430) = 11.00$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ;  $\eta^2 = 0.220$ ). Thorough post hoc analysis with the Sidak correction showed that the subjects felt the biggest negative changes in sadness and uncertainty – these changes were reported by far the most negative.

### Relationship between results and experience associated with presence at the Olympic Games in previous years

Table 2 presents the results of the chi-square test (with the Benjamin-Hochberg correction applied) comparing the results of athletes who have experience related to the presence at the Olympic Games to athletes who do not have such an experience. It has been observed that athletes who have participated at least once in the Olympic Games feel greater uncertainty compared to athletes who have never participated in the IO.

### Relationship between results and Olympic qualification

Significant differences in responses were also found between athletes with or without Olympic qualification. It turned out that people with qualifications assessed the decision to cancel Olympic Games much more neg-

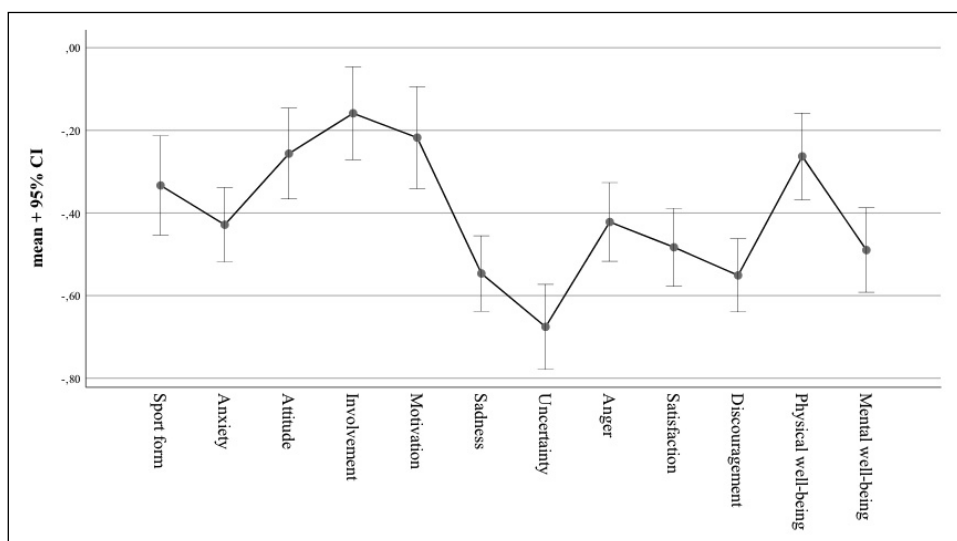


Figure 1. Assessment of felt emotions compared to the state at the beginning of the year

**Table 2.** The relationship between the experience associated with the presence of previous IO experience and the analyzed indicators\*

	Elite athlete did NOT participate in the Olympic Games previously		Elite athlete did participate in the Olympic Games previously	
	M	SD	M	SD
How would you rate the decision to change the IO date?	4,21a	1,02	4,00a	1,21
How would you rate the possibility of training at the moment?	2,28a	1,1	2,13a	1,09
Sport form	-,35a	1,27	-,24a	1,33
Anxiety	-,39a	0,95	-,53a	0,98
Attitude	-,21a	1,16	-,38a	1,22
Involvement	-,12a	1,19	-,23a	1,24
Motivation	-,18a	1,31	-,29a	1,33
Sadness	-,51a	0,98	-,64a	1
Uncertainty	-,61a	1,11	-,85b	1,1
Anger	-,40a	1,02	-,52a	0,99
Satisfaction	-,47a	1,05	-,51a	0,91
Discouragement	-,55a	0,96	-,56a	0,9
Physical well-being	-,28a	1,15	-,22a	1,06
Mental well-being	-,45a	1,12	-,62a	1
How do you assess the discomfort associated with the change in training conditions due to the current epidemiological situation?	3,87a	1,2	3,87a	1,17
How much break / modification of training in your opinion will affect your sport form?	2,75a	1,07	2,97a	0,89

\* Tests are corrected for all pair-wise comparisons using the Benjamin-Hochberg correction.

**Table 3.** Relationship between having Olympic qualifications and the analyzed indicators\*

	the athlete is not yet qualified for the Olympic Games		the athlete is qualified for the Olympic Games	
	M	SD	M	SD
How would you rate the decision to change the IO date?	4,24a	1,00	3,85b	1,26
How would you rate the possibility of training at the moment?	2,19a	1,08	2,44b	1,14
Sport form	-,39a	1,28	-,06b	1,27
Anxiety	-,42a	0,96	-,45a	0,97
Attitude	-,24a	1,19	-,27a	1,16
Involvement	-,18a	1,21	,00a	1,13
Motivation	-,26a	1,31	-,02a	1,33
Sadness	-,53a	0,98	-,63a	1,01
Uncertainty	-,66a	1,13	-,71a	1,06
Anger	-,39a	0,99	-,58a	1,08
Satisfaction	-,47a	1,04	-,54a	0,94
Discouragement	-,55a	0,97	-,55a	0,87
Physical well-being	-,30a	1,12	-,12a	1,13
Mental well-being	-,49a	1,11	-,51a	1,06
How do you assess the discomfort associated with the change in training conditions due to the current epidemiological situation?	3,93a	1,15	3,68a	1,28
How much break / modification of training in your opinion will affect your sport form?	2,76a	1,05	2,97a	0,93

\* Tests are corrected for all pair-wise comparisons using the Benjamin-Hochberg correction.

**Table 4.** Relationship between quarantine due to coronavirus epidemic and analyzed indicators\*

	no quarantine		quarantine	
	M	SD	M	SD
How would you rate the decision to change the IO date?	4,17a	1,06	4,12a	1,13
How would you rate the possibility of training at the moment?	2,26a	1,09	2,18a	1,12
Sport form	-,33a	1,26	-,30a	1,36
Anxiety	-,39a	0,97	-,53a	0,93
Attitude	-,22a	1,17	-,33a	1,21
Involvement	-,09a	1,21	-,30a	1,17
Motivation	-,14a	1,33	-,42b	1,27
Sadness	-,57a	0,95	-,47a	1,08
Uncertainty	-,65a	1,09	-,71a	1,17
Anger	-,40a	0,98	-,49a	1,10
Satisfaction	-,47a	1,03	-,52a	0,99
Discouragement	-,53a	0,94	-,61a	0,98
Physical well-being	-,25a	1,11	-,29a	1,17
Mental well-being	-,47a	1,08	-,55a	1,13
How do you assess the discomfort associated with the change in training conditions due to the current epidemiological situation?	3,82a	1,2	4,02a	1,16
How much break / modification of training in your opinion will affect your sport form?	2,77a	1,01	2,92a	1,07

\* Tests are corrected for all pair-wise comparisons using the Benjamin-Hochberg correction.

atively, but, interestingly, they rate training options at the moment to be worse compared to the group without qualifications. In addition, a group of athletes who are confident in participating in next year's Olympic Games report fewer problems related to their decline in sports form. The exact results are shown in the table below.

#### **Relationship between results and quarantine in relation to the coronavirus epidemic**

Significant differences were also observed between athletes in vs out of quarantine due to the coronavirus epidemic. We observed that (with a Benjamin-Hochberg correction) athletes who were in quarantine experienced a stronger decrease in motivation compared to athletes who were not in quarantine (see Table 4).

#### **The relationship between the subjective assessment of the change in the athlete's feelings**

Using a series of Spearman rho correlations, we examined whether the ratings of individual emotions are significantly interrelated. The analysis confirmed the existence of a positive correlation between all areas assessed ( $p < 0.001$ ). The strongest correlations were observed between attitude, commitment, and motivation; the weakest – between sadness, commitment, and physical well-being.

#### **The relationship between the subjective assessment of the change in the athlete's feelings and opinion on the cancellation of the Olympic Games**

Opinion on the cancellation of the Olympic Games significantly correlates only with the assessment of the sports form (current compared to the state at the beginning of the year) – we observed that along with the athletes' observation of their decline in form, athletes more positively assessed the change in the IO date related to the current epidemiological situation ( $\rho = -0.125$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ).

#### **The relationship between the subjective assessment of the change in the athlete's feelings and opinions on training options**

We confirmed that the assessment of individual areas (current state compared to the beginning of the year) statistically significantly correlates with the assessment of training possibilities. The analysis of Spearman's rho correlation showed that along with observing a decrease in particular areas (relative to the beginning of the year), fewer training possibilities were observed at the moment, greater discomfort associated with the change in training conditions was felt, and a break in training was thought to negatively affect their sports form ( $p < 0.001$ ).

## Cluster analysis results

In a cluster analysis using the k-means method, we examined whether based on the assessment of individual areas (current situation compared to the state at the beginning of the year) it would be possible to group the examined athletes into at least two independent groups. Analysis with the Silhouette measure indicated that it would be possible to create an optimal two-step solution. We observed that all surveyed variables allow for statistically significant classification of subjects into created groups ( $p < 0.001$ ). A total of 37 athletes were excluded from the analysis due to the inability to classify them clearly into the created clusters. The clusters' characteristics are as follows:

- Cluster 1: describes players who, compared to the beginning of the year, have observed a negative change in all areas analyzed. 235 players were included in the group.
- Cluster 2: describes players who, compared to the beginning of the year, observed no change or improvement in the analyzed areas. 206 players were included in the group.

The chi-square analysis in the cross tables showed that there is a relationship between cluster classification and gender ( $\chi^2(1) = 7.01$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ). We observed that more women than men were included in cluster 1; in the case of cluster 2, an inverse relationship was observed.

Classification for clusters did not significantly depend on having Olympic qualifications ( $\chi^2(1) = 2.83$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ), participation in IO ( $\chi^2(1) = 0.55$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ), nor quarantine in connection with the coronavirus epidemic ( $\chi^2(1) = 2.02$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ).

## Factor structure of the subjective assessment of the change in the athlete's feelings

Using the Velicer MAP analysis, we determined that the optimal factor to create is two. This was confirmed by the KMO and Bartlett test results ( $KMO = 0.914$ ;  $\chi^2(66) = 3298.24$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). Factor analysis performed by method of main components with Oblimin rotation showed that the factors created account for a total of 59.3% of the analyzed construct, of which the first factor explains 48.5% of variance. Analysis of factor load values showed that two variables should be excluded from further analysis: mental satisfaction and well-being due to high correlation with both components. The first factor concerns the change in the area strongly associated with sport; the second factor represents changes in the emotional area. In addition, Figure 2 graphically depicts the obtained solution.

Both factors are positively correlated ( $r = 0.54$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). In addition, t-test analysis for dependent trials confirmed that in the group of athletes tested, larger negative changes were observed for factor 2.

The created factors turned out to be significantly correlated with the assessment of the training situation (see Table 6). We observed that, together with the improvement in the assessment of the training situation and the opinion that the break in training will positively affect the sports form, the subjects obtained higher scores on the factor 1 and 2 metric; it is worth noting that stronger correlations were obtained for factor 1. We also observed that as the discomfort associated with the change in training conditions increased, the athletes reported more negative changes compared to the beginning of the year. In addition, none of the created factors

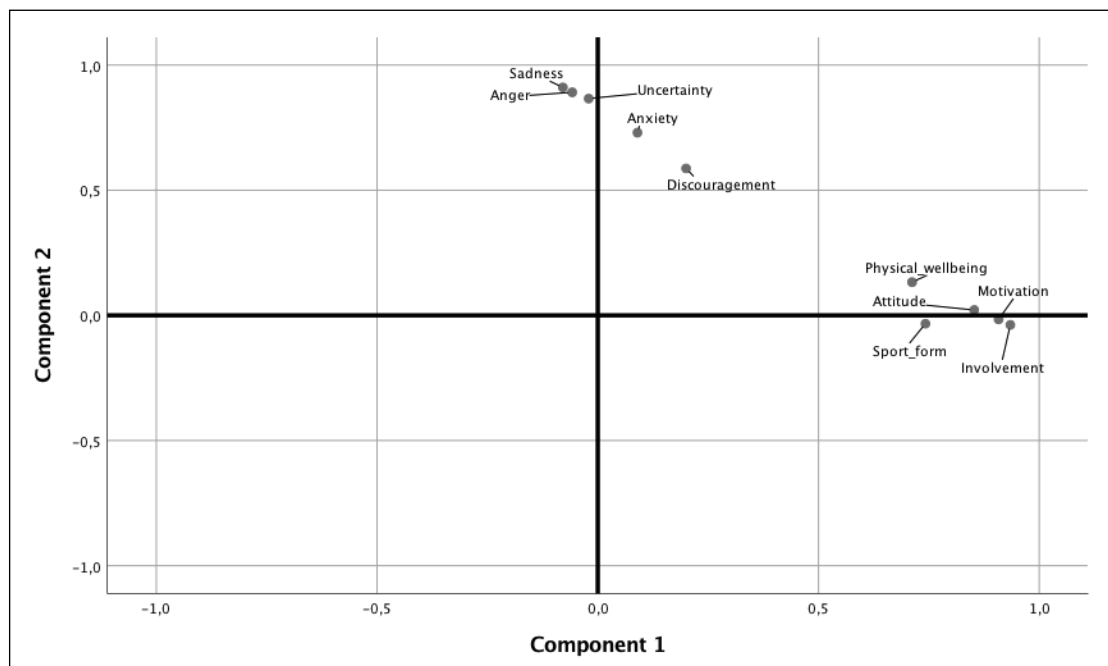


Figure 2. Graph of factors in rotated factor solution.

**Table 6.** Relationship between factors and information about the training situation - the value of Spearman's rho correlation coefficient.

	Factor 1 – sport	Factor 2 – emotions
How would you rate the decision to change the IO date?	-0,046	- 0,010
How would you rate the possibility of training at the moment?	.314**	.171**
How do you assess the discomfort associated with the change in training conditions due to the current epidemiological situation?	-.232**	-.250**
How much break / modification of training in your opinion will affect your sport form?	.302**	.173**
** Significant correlation at 0.01 (two-tailed).		

significantly correlates with the opinions regarding the cancellation of the Olympic Games.

A series of t-test analyses for independent trials did not confirm the existence of a relationship between the results gathered and the obtaining of Olympic qualification, prior participation in the Olympic Games, or quarantine due to the coronavirus epidemic. Significant differences were obtained only for gender – females obtained significantly lower results on both factors ( $p < 0.001$ ).

## Discussion

This study has high practical value because it concerned athletes belonging to the Polish Olympic and Paralympic Teams. It was carried out in the first week after the announcement of the change of the date of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games to the next year. The short time between the decision to postpone the Olympic Games to surveying the athletes allowed the collection of data in a situation of direct cognitive and emotional response of these elite athletes.

The study confirmed the relationship between the subjective assessment of the change in the athletes' sensation and their perception of the change in training conditions resulting from the outbreak of the coronavirus. The results obtained are summarized below and in context of the collected literature, as well as experience from psychological practice working with athletes.

Most of the surveyed athletes positively assess the decision to change the date of the Olympic Games to 2021. Playing the Olympic Games in the face of an escalating coronavirus pandemic was associated with high risk to the health of players, collaborators, and supporters. The gathering of athletes in the Olympic village, which could accommodate over 12,000 people, significantly increased the likelihood of contact with persons infected with coronavirus, including those infected with the COVID 19 disease in an asymptomatic manner. Logistics related to the Games were also a risk factor. Air transport of athletes and thousands of fans from around the world also pointed to the possibility of renewed contact with the SARS-CoV-2 pathogen. Another aspect justifying the positive opinion regarding

postponing the Olympic Games is the issue of Olympic qualifications. According to the International Olympic Committee (IOC, 2020), 57% of all qualifications have been completed so far. In the study, a very large proportion of those surveyed were athletes who did not yet have Olympic qualifications (81.9%), but still held the chance of obtaining it. In connection with the development of the coronavirus pandemic, the Olympic qualification system has been suspended since March 2020. Postponing the date of the Olympic Games meant that the deadline for submitting competitors, and thus the possibility of qualifying, were extended to 5 July 2021. Approximately 5,000 starting places still remain to be filled, and players competing for the right to participate in the Olympics are still in the game. Preparing athletes in order to attain optimal starting form for the highest-ranking competitions is a long-term process. The new deadline for the Olympic Games has lengthened the time for preparations, which were significantly disturbed by restrictions imposed in connection with activities aimed at slowing down and controlling the coronavirus pandemic. A longer time perspective is also an opportunity for players struggling with injury. The opportunity to undergo rehabilitation and return to preparations in full health will certainly be a significant factor in reducing the level of anxiety, maintaining a good attitude and motivation, and obtaining the best sporting form.

In relation to the subjective assessment of the change in the athlete's feelings, only in terms of motivation and commitment did athletes not declare significant changes compared to the state felt at the beginning of the year. The biggest negative changes were recorded for the emotions of sadness and uncertainty. Setting a new date for the start of the Olympics has left more hope in some for participation in the most important sporting event in the world and for winning the most valuable medals. For most players, the sporting goal remained unchanged, only the path to it was extended. A measurable and specific goal is one of the most important aspects affecting training motivation and commitment to undertaken activities (Blankert, Hamstra, 2017). On the other hand, the sports form developed this year and the psychological attitude to fight for the highest awards will not be able to be presented and tested in the originally



scheduled starting conditions. This, in turn, can create a sense of lost opportunities to achieve goals, and consequently generate emotions of sadness. The lack of specific messages and deadlines regarding the return to the standard preparation cycle and resumption of competition will certainly be a source of uncertainty for athletes (Williams, Brown, 2018.). This emotion may also be the consequence of cognitive analysis of the possibilities of developing and maintaining an optimal sport form and the perceived chance of obtaining satisfactory results in future competitions.

Most of the surveyed athletes negatively assess current training options and declare discomfort associated with changing training conditions. The obtained results are also associated with the fact that the national team athletes do not know how changes and modifications in the training cycle will affect their sports form. Inability to implement training goals will generate many questions among athletes due to the dynamic development of the pandemic situation. A controlled and full-scale training process builds a player's belief in the possibility of influencing the growth of his or her sports form and strengthens his or her sense of efficiency and confidence. In addition, most sports require specialized training with the use of appropriate sports equipment and the use of dedicated sports infrastructure. In the current situation, training on water (rowing, canoeing, swimming), in the field (throwing disciplines - hammer throw, javelin throw, discus throw, shot put, pole vault, high jump), and on the court (team sports - volleyball, handball) has been restricted. This fact can definitely contribute to the feeling of discomfort and uncertainty associated with developing sports form and continuing an athlete's career (fear of not being selected for the national team).

It has been observed that athletes who have already participated in the Olympics at least once experience greater uncertainty compared to competitors who have never participated in competitions of this magnitude. The first start in the Olympics is often treated by competitors as a chance to gain experience (Jensen, Christiansen, Hendriksen, 2014). Competitions of this status are governed by their own laws, and the unique motivation and atmosphere created by the Games mean that medals are not always won by favorites. There is a possibility that competitors who have a chance to start in the Olympics primarily focus on participation in them, and in their best possible form, but there are fewer assumptions when considering specific sports results. A second start in the highest rank competitions arouses in athletes the desire to repeat or improve results obtained previously, and this can stimulate a greater focus on achieving the desired result. Results-oriented goals, i.e. those directed at obtaining a specific place or winning a medal, generate emotions such as fear, anxiety, and uncertainty. They also contribute to the onset of stress (Unestahl, 2013). Competitors focused on the completion of tasks – both technical and tactical – are less cognitively concerned with the meaning and consequences of the obtained result, and thus show lesser intensities of emo-

tions such as fear, anxiety, or uncertainty than athletes exclusively focused on the results.

Qualified athletes view the decision to change the date of the Games much more negatively, but, interestingly, they rate the training options at the current moment as worse. In addition, the group of athletes who are confident in participating in next year's Olympic Games reported fewer problems related to their decline in sports form. Negative assessment of the change of the date of the games could have been made on the basis of several factors. The competitors who secured their participation in the Olympics already knew the exact date of their most important start. Their preparations have, for many months, been devoted to reaching their peak form on this particular day. It can be safely stated that training was, for them, also a form of ensuring that their startup readiness and attitude be at optimal disposal at a specific time. The shift of the most important sporting event in the world could also raise doubts in their ability to maintain high sport form until next year. Such dilemmas could particularly affect players who intended to end their careers after the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games. Despite the circumstances, having the Olympic qualification and the right to start is a factor that supports motivation for and during demanding training. A specific goal on the horizon helps build an attitude that increases the chance of its achievement. It also influences the perception of existing restrictions (e.g. training conditions) that do not have to be perceived by the athlete as distractions or obstacles. Positive beliefs and feelings about sporting form are also a factor in protecting against flagging motivation, and can be a beneficial mechanism in regulating negative emotions.

Significant differences were also found when taking into account whether the players were at home in quarantine in connection with the coronavirus epidemic. Athletes who were in quarantine experienced a stronger drop in motivation compared to athletes who were not forced to quarantine. Being quarantined meant that the player could not leave his or her place of residence, and mandated a total cessation of physical contact with other people for a period of 14 days. The sense of isolation, lack of contact with members of the training group, and – perhaps above all – the inability to perform targeted training could have significantly reduced the motivation to continue such levels of sporting activity. Training at home could only be used to maintain physical fitness, while minimizing – or even reversing – the improvement of technical skills, which may be crucial for success in sport. The absence of a trainer who could control the training process and directly provide guidance could also have raised doubts about the sense of involvement in training and, consequently, fomented a decrease in motivation to continue it.

The correlation analyses also showed that, along with observations of negative changes in the subjective assessment of the athletes' feelings, such as anxiety and sadness (compared to the beginning of the year), fewer training possibilities were seen to be available at the

moment, greater discomfort was felt associated with the change in training conditions, and the break in training was thought to negatively affect sports form. Experienced emotions and feelings are factors that affect the cognitive and behavioral sphere and determine the perception of training conditions in terms of deficits. Disorders in the preparation cycle and related doubts about the quality of alternative training can reduce motivation to continue preparations. This persistently depressed mood intensifies the feeling of discomfort. Subjectively perceived limitations can also help to exacerbate negative consequences for future sporting form.

The cluster analysis made it possible to create two groups of athletes: those experiencing a significant negative change in the subjective assessment of their feelings (cluster 1) and those reporting no significant change, or even a slight improvement, in the subjective feelings relative to the beginning of the year (cluster 2). Cluster 1 more often included women and athletes who negatively assessed current training options and the impact of training changes on their sports form. Attention should be paid to the greater propensity of women than men to pessimistic perception of a difficult situation, and to women's increased tendency to negatively forecast their achievements in the future (Harris, Jenkins, 2006). Another interesting result was that with increased age, the likelihood to be included in cluster 1 also increased. The experience gained through years of practicing sport competitively and participation in championship sporting events provides valuable insight to the athlete of just how great an effort is needed to develop and maintain an adequate, stable sports form, and how many independent factors can significantly affect sports success. With age and many years of intense physical effort, the body's physiological abilities decrease (Harridge, Lazarus, 2017). Keeping parameters such as strength, speed, endurance, and dynamics at a high level becomes increasingly difficult. The regeneration process is also much slower, which significantly affects the quality of training and the risk of overload. Among the athletes surveyed there were also those for whom this was to be the last start in the Olympics, as well as those who declared the end of their sports careers to be upon completion of the Tokyo 2020 Games.

### ***Practice implications and conclusions***

This study highlights many practical implications for working with athletes in terms of the mental component. The group of athletes surveyed is dominated by feelings of sadness and uncertainty, which is why strengthening the emotional-control skills of players is arguably justifiable. The use of the cognitive-behavioral model in the work allows us to show in a quantifiable way the relationship between athletes' assessment and interpretation of their circumstances (such as the changed date of the Olympics) and the emotions felt and behaviors presented. It will be very important to work within the struc-

ture of goal-orientation, understood as the ability to formulate and plan tasks that will constitute the preparation process for the start of next year's Games. Properly established, these goals help maintain motivation and commitment to training, allow the focus of attention on that which is important, and facilitate perseverance. While the sports goal has not changed, the road to it has been extended and modified. It will be helpful to use the "small steps" method based on the Kaizen philosophy, which prompts the achievement of discrete, controllable goals that incrementally bring the player closer to the main goal. This method will have a positive effect on maintaining long-term motivation for training, and will be effective in the event of motivational crises (Turcinovic, 2019). To minimize the fears associated with athletes' future sports form, it is worth applying concentration training, which will strengthen their ability to manage attention and direct it towards the achievement of task goals and maintenance of commitment to the elements over which they have control. Cognitive work with the players should contribute to building awareness about maintaining good attitude, which is essential to conducting quality training, and encouraging the physical and mental well-being of the athlete. In light of the obtained results, mindfulness training – which can be practiced in the form of meditation, mindful breathing, or even body scans – should also be used. It allows for the reduction psychophysical tension, regulation of negative emotions – including anxiety and uncertainty – and focus on elements that affect the improvement of sports form and effective performance during competition.

### ***Future directions***

Due to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic and the need to cancel sporting events in Poland and around the world, there is a low probability of starting in sports competitions in most disciplines in 2020. It seems important to monitor the mental health of athletes, especially those on the Olympic and Paralympic Teams. An assessment in terms of emotions felt and coping mechanisms employed in a situation new to athletes seems to be of particular importance. Currently, attempts are being made in Poland to return athletes to training in specially designed infrastructures. The opening of the Central Sports Centers to serve the needs of those elite athletes with the greatest predicted chances for an Olympic medal is designed to facilitate this. Competitors participating in such training camps will be subject to a strict sanitary regime, as much in-facility isolation as possible (training in groups of up to 5 people), and a total ban on leaving the Olympic preparation center and any contact with outsiders. Such extreme conditions maintained over a long period can cause high emotional tension, affect motivation levels, and impair general physical and mental well-being. Updated data on the mental function of these athletes creates an opportunity to provide

them with quick, effective support on the path to sporting successes. Therefore, we recommend continued research to enable the monitoring of the mental states of players, and members of training and medical staff.

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