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High Performance Judoka's Views on Their Athlete Journey and the Need for Athlete Education

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ABSTRACT

High-performance sport has been the subject of controversy and scandal, coming under heavy scrutiny within the broad issue of “Duty of Care” in terms of the welfare and holistic development of athletes. The United Kingdom has many different schemes and mechanisms that are available to athletes to support them in their development on their athlete journey. However, there is a lack of research exploring whether these schemes and mechanisms fulfill athlete needs and facilitate athlete development. Utilizing Charmaz’s constructivist grounded theory method, 12 full-time, high-performance judoka (judo athletes) were intensively interviewed, exploring the experience of their journey as an athlete. Three emergent categories of Development, Support, and Environment revealed distinct areas the athletes experienced on their journeys. The three categories interlink and have the topic of athlete education and athlete learning interwoven among them. A pertinent finding was the lack of structured education that athletes received on their own development. Further research is needed to clearly understand what athletes need in this area to ensure their wellbeing and welfare is at the forefront of athlete development and not just medal success.

Keywords: athlete development, athlete education, athlete learning, constructivist grounded theory, high-performance

The high-performance sport domain has undergone much scrutiny in the last five years, with emphasis on athlete welfare, mental health, and well-being. In 2017, the “Duty of Care in Sport Review” (Grey-Thompson, 2017) centered on whether the current balance between welfare and winning is acceptable. It is a challenging dichotomy to balance, maintaining the fundamental purpose of sport to push oneself to the limit (Henriksen et al., 2019), but also accepting sacrifices are made for sporting success (Cosh & Tully, 2014). Athletes are central to the sporting landscape, yet research often is conducted ‘on’ athletes rather than ‘with’ them as active participants. Weissensteiner (2015) suggests that it is important to hear the voice of the athlete, especially in relation to their experiences on their journey as an athlete (Pereira et al., 2016) in pursuit of sporting excellence. The shift of focus away from performance and medal success alone has put more emphasis on the holistic development of an athlete (Wylleman & Rosier, 2016) and a greater focus on the journey they undertake.

The United Kingdom (UK) is “admired around the world for sporting success and the system that exists beneath it” (Grey-Thompson, 2017, p. 4). This refers not only to the significant investment through public funding, but also specifically to the system that comprises many different schemes and mechanisms aimed to facilitate athletes’ development and educate them on topic areas surrounding their pursuit of sporting excellence. Predominant schemes or programs include the Talented Athlete Scholarship Scheme (TASS), Diploma in Sporting Excellence (DiSE), and Sports Aid. The various schemes are run by different agencies and can lack a coherent approach to the support and education offered (Trimble et al., 2010). There is little or no research on the support schemes and no central alignment to when they are offered to athletes. These agencies often are run with government funding, so questions surrounding the cost effectiveness of athlete support schemes, their alignment with athletes’ needs, and their purpose or benefit to the

athlete, need to be examined. Understanding which schemes the athlete has participated in and what education they received toward their sporting excellence will give valuable insight into how and when they are administered upon the athlete journey and how beneficial athletes feel they are. Athletes' experiences of and opinions on the schemes that have facilitated their development is vital in this process (Weissensteiner, 2015).

This study focuses on the sport of judo, and high-performance athletes known as judoka. Judo was selected due to the first author's background in the sport, initially as a high-performance athlete, then an international coach, and finally having worked on some of the athlete support schemes such as TASS and DiSE. Judo is an Olympic sport, regarded as the largest sport in the world in terms of the number of member nations in its international federation (International Judo Federation, n.d.). In the UK, judo receives funding from the government through agencies such as UK Sport and Sport England, managed by the National Governing Body (NGB) of judo, the British Judo Association (BJA). Athletes must be a member of the NGB and will then follow their performance pathway. The BJA have called theirs the 'Player Pathway Journey,' which has been "developed in conjunction with the Home Nations to map out the player journey from Club to the Olympic and Paralympic Podium program based at the British Judo Centre of Excellence" (British Judo, 2020). The aim of this study was to examine judo athlete journeys and investigate their experiences in their pursuit of excellence.

The Development of Athletes

It is crucial to clarify what is meant when the term athlete is being utilized. A review by Swann et al. (2015) identifies a variety of definitions that currently exist within the literature, resulting in the production of a model to classify expert samples in sport research. Using this classification, the current study relates to athletes in the top tier of the model, recognized as *world-class elite* or high-performance. The definition of 'athlete' used for inclusion in this research was based on three factors: whether the person was training full-time in their sport, if they were based at a center that offered full-time training, and if their main purpose was sporting excellence.

Athletes are recognized not only for their sporting success; they also now are viewed as role models and as products or commodities of sport (Guest & Cox, 2009). The development of athletes has become a dense research area, with popular models and theories recited on the transitions they go through, featuring an inclination toward physical development almost as if athletes are machines that need to be fine-tuned (Denison, 2010).

In a recent International Olympic Committee consensus statement on youth athletic development, researchers have suggested that athlete development "is far too complex to be distilled into a singular, universally accepted process, especially since this is greatly dependent on country, culture and context" (Bergeron et al., 2015, p. 6). If these recommendations are adhered to, athlete development should become more individualized, responding appropriately to the athlete's perspectives and needs. In contrast to this ideal, NGBs in the UK currently are expected to produce athlete performance pathway as standard practice in order to receive government funding (Bostock et al., 2018). These pathways often are heavily dictated to by age banded competitions and fixed transitional points, and are directed by government facilitated programs such as TASS or DiSE. For an athlete to be selected for these programs they must be nominated by their NGB against specific criteria. Athletes also may receive local council support, and more rarely, private sponsorship can be granted (Trimble, 2010).

Athletes also may receive support from sources including parents, siblings, friends, teammates, and coaching staff (Knight et al., 2018; Lundy et al., 2019; Scott et al., 2019). These areas have been examined in varied depths, with support offered by sporting parents as one of the fastest growing areas (Harwood & Knight, 2015). Support also can be offered through educational programs.

Athlete Education

Specific education to support the athletes on their journey mainly is received from three areas, two of which are specific programs, whilst the other is NGB led and largely unstructured. The athlete education program DiSE is underpinned by National Occupational Standards (NOS) in

Sporting Excellence (Skill Active, 2004). These NOS are split across nine areas of an athlete's development: physical, tactical, technical, psychological, health and safety, communication, nutrition, career, and lifestyle. Athletes who are nominated for this two-year program gain a Diploma qualification and credits that can be used to apply for a place at a UK university. The second specific athlete education program is delivered by the UK anti-doping agency, UKAD. Athletes must have taken part in these if they want to attend any major event such as an Olympic Games, so the educational program is compulsory to compete at the highest level. The overall education of athletes in sporting excellence is led by the NGB, often in the form of workshops delivered informally and inconsistently across different NGBs. The term 'athlete education' currently is utilized only in a handful of studies within specific areas such as nutrition (Philippou et al., 2017), strength and conditioning rehabilitation (Ross, 2007), and anti-doping (Patterson et al., 2019), rather than in the context of a broader view of education as necessary for the athlete to develop (Henry, 2013).

Athletes undertaking educational activities alongside their sporting endeavors, rather than specific education in the pursuit of sporting excellence, is referred to by the term 'dual career' (Cartigny et al., 2019). Dual career came about in the early 2000s due to a shift in focus to the rights of athletes and their opportunity to access education. The current discourse surrounding dual careers in sport reflects a European Commission top-down approach (Amara et al., 2004), with a clear definition as "a career with major foci on sport and studies or work" (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019, p. 74). The utilization of athlete education previously mentioned is specific to the education of athletes to enhance sporting excellence. The area most closely aligns with athlete learning.

Athlete Learning

Athlete learning has emerged as a growing body of research with scholars delving into learning theory, using athletes as their subjects and sport as the context (Hodkinson et al., 2008). With the athletes viewed as individual learners, their own history or disposition to learning has been examined, recognizing prior experiences that will impact the habits that they have (Barker-Ruchti et al., 2014). The wider view of athletes as a collective group and the power dynamics that occur in training environments is considered, and how communities of practice or particular cultures are formed (Barker-Ruchti et al., 2012). The view from athlete learning literature is that there needs to be greater understanding of the learning of athletes across their whole journey of development. More research is needed to understand where information comes from, who it comes from, what capacity educators have, and how much control can or should be taken over the learning of the athletes.

It is evident that the athletes' views and perceptions of their own journey, where, and whom they are receiving input from is integral to having a greater understanding into their learning and education. Thus, the aim of the present study was to examine high-performance judoka athlete journeys and capture the voice of the athlete to understand their experiences in their pursuit of excellence. To achieve this and to stay grounded in the data, the methodological tools of constructivist grounded theory were used.

Method

The term Grounded Theory (GT) refers to both the research product and the analytic method of producing it. This study used the analytical methods of constructivist grounded theory as part of a wider research project that addressed the overall research product, that is, the production of a theory (Charmaz, 2008). In line with recent research in sport development, employing constructivist grounded theory particularly is useful where there is an identified lack of detailed knowledge and relevant theory (Elliott et al., 2019). The methodological tools that align with constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) were chosen to capture the perceptions of athletes on their journey. This study is underpinned by a relativist ontology (i.e., there are multiple realities) and subjectivist epistemology (i.e., knower and respondent co-create understanding), leading to a constructivist paradigm.

Participants

Participants were initially purposefully sampled from athletes based at England Judo Performance Pathway centers, and as the study developed, theoretical sampling was utilized to provide perspectives of athletes at different stages of their career or development (Charmaz, 2006). Twelve high performance judo athletes based at one of the England Judo Performance Pathway centers, training full-time, were asked to participate in an intensive interview. The sample were competing internationally for their country and had a mean age of 25.8 years ($SD = 3.79$), with on average 6.5 years' ($SD = 4.44$) experience in a full-time training environment, generating a total of 78 years of full-time training among them. Eight female and four male athletes were interviewed, with key demographic information displayed in Table 1. Athlete numbers are used as identifiers during the data analysis to protect the identity of the participants.

Table 1

Athlete Demographic Data

Athlete Number	Full-time training length (years)	Age (years)	Male / Female	Interview length (minutes)
1	3	24	F	38
2	16	32	F	62
3	9	27	M	46
4	11	29	F	52
5	10	29	M	85
6	1.5	20	M	38
7	4	23	F	45
8	3.5	25	F	61
9	5	28	F	66
10	1	20	F	35
11	8	29	M	53
12	6	24	F	51

Procedure

Following University ethics approval, the interviews took place in a social space at the participant's training location and were conducted on a one-to-one basis by the first author. As part of intensive interviews (Charmaz, 2014), an interview guide was developed to help frame the discussion around the sensitized concepts, taking into account the first researcher's background in judo and thus their familiarity with many of the participants. To assist in building rapport, during the interview the athletes were asked to participate in a co-constructed drawing exercise. The participants were asked to draw their own athlete journey, which produced an elicited document (Charmaz, 2014), and the discussions continued around these diagrams (Konecki, 2011; Koekoek et al., 2016).

Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim, with coding undertaken line-by-line, followed by focused coding, then constructing concepts and finally categories. Analysis started after completion of the first interview, with constant comparison and memoing occurring throughout (Charmaz, 2006). In vivo codes are used to represent the descriptions for categories and concepts, to aid the reader to become immersed in the findings. Consistent with grounded theory methodology practice, the existing literature was not used as a theoretical background, but rather as data, with the concepts and categories being examined alongside relevant literature. This consultation with the literature during the analytical process helped to contextualize the findings and permitted an appreciation of recent recommendations, whilst remaining authentic to the co-

constructed data (Carmichael & Cunningham, 2017). Keeping a research journal and memo-style activity helped to engage in reflexivity and minimize pre-conceived ideas appearing in the data (Charmaz, 2014). This was important to undertake due to the lead researcher's background in judo and the athlete support programs they previously had worked upon. Charmaz suggests that researchers are "obligated to be reflexive about what we bring to the scene, what we see, and how we see it" (2014, p. 27). Reflexivity at its most basic is to have self-awareness, which both enhances and is enhanced by considering the rigor of the work (Engward & Davis, 2015).

Rigor

To address the concept of rigor in constructivist grounded theory, research must address credibility, originality, resonance, and usefulness (Charmaz, 2014). Credibility was achieved from the rich data that was co-constructed by the interviewees and the lead researcher, but also through the depth of experience offered by the participants. Originality is witnessed through the provisions of new insights into a multi-disciplinary area, applying an open methodology whereby the athlete's voice is clearly heard (Weissensteiner, 2015). The criterion of resonance is practiced by including how the categories emerged through the analysis and how generalizability will be applied. The usefulness of this research is two-fold: to promote the use of grounded theory methodology in the Sport and Exercise domain in general, and to hear the athlete's experiences of their development and then use this to inform policy and practice more specifically.

Generalizability

With usefulness in mind, generalizability also needs to be discussed, and specifically in terms of transferability, whereby the results can be transferred to other settings (Smith, 2018). Other athletes or NGBs may look at the data and gain valuable insights into the athletes' perceptions of their athlete journeys. This generalizability is "underpinned by the epistemological assumption that knowledge is constructed and subjective, reality is multiple, created and mind-dependent and methods cannot provide theory-free knowledge" (Smith, 2018, p. 140), consistent with the foundations of constructivist grounded theory.

Findings

From the analysis using the tools of constructivist grounded theory method, three broad theoretical categories emerged: *Development, Support, and Environment*. Within these categories a variety of key concepts are constructed and explained under the subheadings within each category. In vivo codes (quotes) are used to assist in the description of these categories and concepts, in the hope of bringing the reader closer to the original data.

Development

"Knowing how to get the best out of someone without breaking them" - Athlete 1

Development is a broad category with four concepts that make up its inception. The in vivo code above summarizes the *Development* category, in that it is about working with the four concepts: Education, Knowledge, Learning, and Injury/Mental health, to assist the athlete in their pursuit of excellence. The above quote also highlights the challenge of pushing the athlete to become their very best, whilst maintaining some sort of preservation to the athlete's wellbeing. The *Development* category encompasses all aspects the athletes discussed that occurred on their personal athlete development journey.

Education

The concept of Education arose in the discussions, not only on the importance of dual career options, but also in terms of the education they received that was there to impact their performance in some way. The athletes noted that this education always was delivered to the athletes through a

workshop style format, which was deemed as not being the best approach: “You can take what you can take from those,” said Athlete 1. The view that education was meant to inform performance was not seen positively, rather it was seen as an addition to their physical training and not one that they prioritized: “We had like workshops here about being an athlete and what they can do to improve here and stuff, but I don’t really... I just want to just train,” said Athlete 10. One of the most important areas to note from the Education concept was the negative experiences that occurred when there was a lack of education and how the absence of information can have a significant impact on the athlete’s career. Regarding anti-doping education, Athlete 12 recalled:

I knew nothing. I didn’t even know that you had to split it into two. Like I actually knew nothing. I just remember the physio being there and being like, you obviously had to tell them the drugs that you had taken and I was thinking that the only drugs I had taken were paracetamol and ibuprofen or whatever. So I would have been like 12/13 and she was like you have to tell them if you have been on the pill. And I was like I had never even kissed a boy... The lack of education into anti-doping procedure produced a negative experience that occurred very early on in this athlete’s development journey.

Learning

The concept of Learning builds upon the concept of Education, as the athletes experienced a focus that you learn as you go – a ‘trial and error’ approach to becoming an athlete. When discussing this concept with Athlete 3, they observed there was no clear process of how they learnt to become an athlete: “It’s something that you gradually, as you go through, you understand what it takes. I mean, I don’t think there’s sort of like ‘this is what I need to do.’” This athlete emphasized that learning should have more structure so athletes can get the information they need rather than learning it in an ad-hoc manner.

Knowledge

This concept adds to the Education and Learning concepts with the view that knowledge was seen as something the athletes lacked, rather than viewed as something that they had: “I wish I had the knowledge I have now when I was that age,” said Athlete 7. One distinct area was that of full-time training, not knowing what it would be like before actually undertaking it. Athlete 6 described: “It would be gunning it all the time, like no rest.” According to Athlete 11, when athletes did feel they had some knowledge, they felt that it was always acquired through friends or coaches. The other area discussed under the pretext of the athlete’s knowledge was the amount of judo knowledge “learnt in your fighting career” and how that knowledge was being lost at the point when people stopped competing and did not move into a coaching role, according to Athlete 5. But the point was expressed by Athlete 10 that they “don’t really still know what I want to do after judo, which is quite annoying because I don’t want to be left with nothing.” This insight is challenging to read, as it expresses the view that even with knowledge generated through a successful, medal-winning career, if you have nothing apart from judo, you ultimately will have nothing.

Mental Health/ Injury

This concept underpins the other three in this category in terms of the holistic development of athletes, including their welfare and well-being, with some distressing responses made by the athletes in relation to their mental health. The most powerful view that stands out and shared by all the athletes was the inevitability of getting injured. This may be due to the nature of a combat sport, but the acceptance of injury is not a positive vision for the sport of judo. Athlete 4 spoke of their injury and said: “It was as if my whole world had crumbled and like I had failed, I was a failure.” This quote speaks to the significance that an injury can have on an athlete, but also how important it is for the athlete to have the appropriate team and support surrounding them.

The mental health of the athletes was only discussed openly with three or four, with the athletes relating a sense of feeling lost, a lack of direction, and an ‘off the cuff’ comment on suicidal thoughts. “If I didn’t have judo, my family in my life, I’d probably jump off a bridge.”

remarked Athlete 5. Similarly, Athlete 1 commented: "I was suffering with massive anxiety attacks and stuff, just because I didn't feel that anything was going anywhere, I wasn't getting any better and I was like, [. . .] I didn't feel I was good enough." These quotes highlight distinct areas in the mental health domain, and each should reignite the question: Is the mental health of athletes being covered well enough by current policy and practices?

Support

"The people that I know that dedicate time, money, their lives that have come and gone, they didn't quit because of injury, they're just sick of living on nothing" - Athlete 5

Support builds upon the *Development* category as the scaffold element that athletes need on their journey. Support for an athlete along their journey of being an athlete comes from many different spheres and in different formats. The four concepts that underpin it are: Types of Help, Weight Management, Finance, and National Governing Body. When the support an athlete receives is good, it enables them to feel stable and be the best version of themselves: "It just made me believe that I was capable of doing it," voiced Athlete 9.

Types of Help

The basics of what the athletes want in terms of support was summarized by Athlete 8 as: "Actually having the stability, funding, and the program, and you know S&C support and actually have mat times daily and having competitions paid for." This list does not seem insurmountable for an Olympic-level funded sport. In terms of what that support and stability looks like is dependent on the athlete and their results, but also at what point they are at in their career.

There also was a discussion regarding any significant people the athletes could name along their journey, with nearly every athlete naming their coach and also one family member. When athletes discussed the times they did not feel supported and lacked stability, there were clear areas that emerged. These were finance, weight management, and medical.

The medical support links to earlier points raised that with the expectation of injury, the lack of medical backing could be catastrophic for careers: "Because at that point if you have not got medical support and you can't afford to take out private insurance, an injury could be career ending," said Athlete 8. Some athletes regarded themselves as lucky in that they are either funded by the NGB with an Athlete Performance Award (APA; UK Sport, 2015) or placed on a scheme such as TASS, but they all recognized a time when they did not have this 'luxury' and the reality was frightening.

Finance

The Finance concept mentioned comments about the 'bank of mum and dad,' including what Athlete 8 observed: "If your parents haven't got the money to send you to do that, then you just don't do it." The athletes also discussed other financial areas, more focused on them as individuals, including debt, loans, and overdrafts. "I stuck a few tournaments in 2013 on my overdraft," Athlete 5 mentioned, but "basically the debt started mounting up, so in 2014 I said I'm not going to fight, I'm going to get ready for the Olympic qualification period in 2015/2016 and try and clear some of the debt." Athlete 11 also voiced financial concerns, and debated whether they should get another loan so they could stay and train, or whether they should return home to earn some money.

Weight Management

With judo being a weight-classed sport, every athlete had a view on weight management and how they specifically controlled their weight, who supported them with their management, or learning what to do. Ultimately the situation most were left in was to learn how to manage their weight ad-hoc, including Athlete 5: "I feel like I educated myself enough. But looking back in hindsight, looking back – I did know a fair bit, but nowhere near as much as I should have done."

After many appalling stories heard from the athletes on how they used a trial and error learning approach to make weight, Athlete 9 said the most important lesson “was just go the weight you are.” This athlete also suggested that their constant making of weight took away from their performance, and once they controlled that they could focus on their judo. One of the worst stories was from Athlete 12, who failed their weight at a major tournament and felt a lack of support from the National Coaches: “Every time I stood up I thought I was going to pass out, and I felt like I had to eat something.” The impact that experience had on this athlete showed a clear lack of support and education in this area, with Athlete 12 saying it still affects their relationship with food: “Even now still I eat like I am not going to get another meal.”

National Governing Body

This was the broadest concept, as it interrelates with many points above and also can be broken down into the more focused codes of selection, system, and structure. The British Judo Association (BJA) controls the funding that is received, and therefore they decide which players are being supported and the criteria for this support. It is one of the NGB’s roles to select players to compete for the national team, so it is not surprising that every athlete commented on selections, both negatively and positively, with an undeniable focus on the need for transparency: “Basically I was getting selected for a lot of stuff, and I don’t think I was really that amazing,” remarked Athlete 11.

Building upon the focus code of selection was athletes predominantly needing to be based at the Centre of Excellence to achieve it. Many of the older athletes had clear opinions on the system and structure they feel needs to be put in place, with Athlete 3 sharing the dominant view as being that there is “no real system.” Athlete 5 went further to suggest: “The problem is, for me, if you’re centralized you’re not creating a system.” Athlete 4 agreed and said there needs to “be more of a structure to it.” Two more specific points were made by the athletes. The first was that while players need to go full-time to be able to continue their development as athletes, “there was no guidance from the Association,” according to Athlete 3. Secondly, Athlete 3 also added that “there’s no basis for, sort of mid-teenagers to actually learn how to train properly.” These two points are easily rectified if the NGB are made aware of them.

Environment

“Just like a sponge really, like you soak up everything” -Athlete 2

Environment was discussed by every athlete, emphasizing its importance and the impact it has on the athlete’s day-to-day function. This category comprises three concepts: Center, Role Models, and Sacrifice. The athletes discussed environment as an all-encompassing entity covering everything from the center to the other athletes and the coach. The above in vivo code signifies the importance of the environment, especially as the quote implies a lack of a filter utilized by the athlete, yet recognizing the importance of their day-to-day surroundings.

Center

During the discussions surrounding environment, the athletes specifically focused in on their own training center. One athlete spoke passionately as to why they felt their center was superior to other centers: “I think the one thing that Center B has got that no one else has got is honesty,” said Athlete 12. One of the most powerful quotes builds upon this idea of honesty and highlights the notion that within your environment and center, your training group becomes your family. Athlete 12 continued:

I think it is everyone’s, I think it’s the people’s attitude, I think it’s like, not an idiot as in intellectual wise but I think everyone knows that this judo isn’t it here. And like everyone has got other stuff going on in their lives and I think that like, yeah I think that here it is you are family, if you lose everyone is there for you, if you win everyone is there for you, if you decide to retire everyone is there for you. If people come back who were here 10 years ago, people don’t know you but it’s like an indescribable connection that everyone has. Like if you

met someone who was and they said they use to train at Center B years ago, it's like oh my god, like I train at Center B now. Like I don't think that other centers have got that.

Role Models

Within their centers, the athletes interviewed perceived their teammates as role models. How each athlete is selected to be the role model was not clear from the interviews, just that the training group is seen as a place where behaviors are absorbed: "I think you learn from people and you learn how much it means to people," said Athlete 12. The inexplicable truth that the athletes used the other athletes in their environments to learn from is apparent, whether those athletes were seen as role models is not always as clear-cut, but the fact that the athletes purposely watched or observed others in a way so that they could learn from them is indisputable. Athlete 5 reflects on their experience watching an older athlete:

Just the amount of things I learnt off Ed (pseudonym) just by watching his habits, and what he would eat and his training diary, how the same things he would do every session, the things that he would pay attention that other people wouldn't pay attention to. Or the things that he would discard, and other people spent a lot of time worrying about, that was massive. This statement highlights the importance of the other athletes in a training environment and the impact they can have on others without even realizing it, but what was unclear is what informs the athletes decision of what information to take onboard and what is informing their filter process. Trust reoccurs in several answers and often from more than one training center, meaning that trust is a solid foundation in their environment. It is an area that requires further research and for coaches to be aware.

Sacrifice

Throughout every interview there was an undercurrent, with specific use of language, which inferred the sacrifice that is accepted when one takes on the identity of being an athlete. It was an ingrained impression on every training center that these individuals are different to the general population, putting on hold what other people of their age take for granted: "It would be nice to start a family and have my own house, and that can happen in five years," Athlete 5 mentioned. The sacrifice is experienced in several ways, with two being more pronounced than others. The first being the negativity or consequence that can be experienced from the sacrifice, with the older athletes having a heightened awareness of what they were giving up to pursue their Olympic dream. But there also was a second sense of sacrifice that was seen in the form of camaraderie, through the shared sacrifice that brings teammates together: "I felt like that was a win for me, as I was like, you know I trained with you," said Athlete 12. Perhaps the main message surrounding the concept of environment is that although judo is categorized as an individual sport, it is not possible to train and compete in isolation. To develop as a judoka, you need support and a positive environment to help you to flourish.

Discussion

This study aimed to examine judoka athlete journeys and to investigate their experiences in their pursuit of excellence. By using the tools of constructivist grounded theory analysis, this study found that three categories emerged from the data: *Development*, *Support*, and *Environment*. These categories show a rich data set, strengthened by the utilization of in vivo codes. The athlete's voice is captured (Weissensteiner, 2015) and their experiences can be transferred by the reader (Smith, 2018).

The key category is that of *Development*, underpinned by four concepts. These have highlighted that the education, learning, and knowledge that an athlete requires on the athlete journey is ad-hoc in nature, with athlete learning literature clearly calling for wider research on what and where the education should be coming from to ensure quality of what is being received (Barker-Ruchti, 2019). There have been several studies examining athlete knowledge (Mazanov et al., 2014; Heikkilä et al., 2018) and athlete learning (Barker-Ruchti et al., 2014; Barker-Ruchti, et al., 2012; Hodgkinson, et al., 2008), but to date athlete education has not been examined as a

specific area of study. The lack of use of athlete education has resulted in the term only being utilized for specific topic areas such as anti-doping (Patterson et al., 2019), and when these are offered, traditionally they are done so in a workshop format. This format was not appreciated by the athletes in this study, nor does it look holistically at the athlete's development and recognize the areas where education would be beneficial.

The notion of dual career is considered favorably, with many of the sampled athletes recognizing its importance and with clarity on what the definition of dual career represents to them (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019). There is a move to increase athletes' knowledge, but this has been driven by such reports as the Duty of Care, with literacies being developed within the field of mental health (Gorzynski et al., 2020).

An area that is highly contemporary in today's sporting climate is that of the well-being of the athlete and specifically their mental health (Henriksen et al., 2019). Findings related to the mental health of the athletes in this study produced some very disturbing reading, reiterating the need for greater provision and education in this area. As one athlete spoke of their world crumbling, it is apparent athletes should be prepared for the acceptance and near inevitability of an injury, especially with the damaging mental health effects an injury can have on an athlete (Foskett & Longstaff, 2018).

With a focus on athletes' mental health in the media, it is not surprising that more research is being undertaken. In their consensus statement on improving the mental health of high-performance athletes, Henriksen et al. (2019) outline six propositions and recommendations, one of the key factors to note being "the importance of the person-environment fit" (p. 3). The consensus statement and the quotes from athletes in this study add to the growing evidence informing the support and education needed by athletes with regard to their mental health and well-being.

Support emerged as a category, being viewed as the scaffold that aids athletes on their development. Sarkar (2018) defines support in his research, suggesting that it "refers to enabling people to develop their personal qualities, and helps to promote learning and build trust" (p. 20). The underpinning principle of this category is that if the athletes felt supported then they could focus on their performance, enabling them to pursue excellence. This support ranged from money, products, a system, and person support, with significant others such as siblings and parents specifically highlighted. The literature reflecting parental involvement and influence has grown substantially in recent years (Harwood & Knight, 2015), and now the role of siblings has begun to be examined (Taylor et al., 2017).

In this category there were specific areas where athletes felt they needed greater support: finance, weight management, and medical. Many of these were discussed in that the athletes felt they needed greater, targeted education and support, not just the ad-hoc, unstructured, trial and error method. The experiences expressed under the weight management category were truly horrifying. Research into weight management in judo and combat sports has taken a very clinical, physiological view of athletes (Do Nascimento et al., 2020), though there is a move to enhance greater awareness and knowledge by improving nutrition education for athletes, coaches, and parents alike (Berkovich et al., 2019).

Poor practice also was found under the concept of finance, with athletes reporting how they put themselves into debt and took loans to pay for tournaments or to continue training. This is not a unique finding to this study, as Barker-Ruchti et al. (2012) also experienced this accepted view on debt whilst interviewing an Olympic athlete. If the athletes did not speak of these financial issues, they discussed their reliance of their parents to pay for them.

Judo is an Olympic sport, and in the UK, this means that it is heavily subsidized by government money, which is controlled by the BJA. The BJA did not fare well when discussed with the athletes, as they felt that it did not always support them in their pursuit of excellence. This critique does not come as a surprise, as one of the main purposes of the NGB is selection (Fletcher & Hanton, 2003). Yet, it also is important to note that there have been several substantial changes in the structure of the performance program, with centralization being one of the biggest. This was not experienced positively by the athletes, with the majority not wanting to move to the Centre of Excellence.

The category *Environment* was viewed as an all-encompassing entity, with the athletes discussing it as a place, the people within, and the impact it had on their day-to-day lives. Jones et

al. (2009) express the important view that people do not perform in a vacuum, and the environment that is created is just as important as those performing in it, with the performance environment often being overlooked or factored out. The environment and its role in sporting performance is complex, and although this area of research is in its infancy, evidence does indicate that organizational and environmental factors do have a significant impact in elite sport (Fletcher & Streeter, 2016). This was emphasized by the in vivo code from Athlete 2: "Just like a sponge really, like you soak up everything." The significance of this point is the importance of the environment to make sure that it positively affects the athletes within, especially as the quote implies the lack of filter utilized by the athlete if the environment is less than positive. Understanding how or what an athlete needs to know to build these filters is an area that needs greater examination.

One of the most powerful quotes, and one that is not seen traditionally in literature, builds upon the notion of honesty. Athlete 12 reflected on honesty within their environment and center, pronouncing that their training group is like family: "Like everyone has got other stuff going on in their lives and I think that like, yeah I think that here it is you are family, if you lose everyone is there for you, if you win everyone is there for you, if I you decide to retire everyone is there for you." The power in this quote is that it covers the importance of dual careers, peers, feeling supported, and being part of something bigger than yourself and the impact you have on others around you. The notion of role models was viewed very much from the perspective of being those within an athlete's own training group that they admire, observe, and learn from. Lund et al. (2014) found that elite athletes often use their teammates as learning resources, and this athlete-athlete relationship is discussed as part of a community of practice.

This could explain why much of the discussion surrounding the environment often was about the players within it rather than the structure of it. Athlete 11 shared "how important it is to have, not just one role model, but a set of role models when new people move into the group, in terms of like athlete learning." This finding was not isolated to this study, as it also was found by Fletcher and Streeter (2016), where they noted this under the theme of leadership and the role that each member of a training environment has a significant role to play.

As part of their view on their environment, athletes heavily discussed the sacrifice they make to be an athlete, with some very honest comments about what that means in terms of their reality, a view that also was reiterated by Pipe (2012). However, a second side to the use of the term sacrifice was mentioned, one that could be seen more positively as a way to bind the athletes and build camaraderie. Holt and Dunn (2004, p. 207) advocate a slightly different view that "athletes should be educated about the sacrifices that are required to play and train at the elite level." This view is echoed throughout each category with education required for athletes on a variety of aspects that make up what it means to be an athlete.

Overall, the study offers an insight into judoka athletes' journeys, highlighting areas where they feel they had great assistance, whilst identifying areas where they feel greater education is needed. The pertinent finding from the athletes was the lack of structured education that they receive on their own athlete development. Their learning in areas such as technical, tactical, and physical aspects specific to judo they felt were covered thoroughly, but areas such as nutrition, finance, and mental health were left to a trial-and-error approach and were very ad-hoc.

Conclusion

The findings from this study have permitted an insight into the judoka's perceptions of their own athlete journey. The three categories interlink and have the topic of athlete education and athlete learning interwoven among them all. The data has emphasized the importance of understanding how an athlete filters information, and what impact their environment and support has on this. The mechanisms offered to support judo athletes in the UK is vast, whereas the education needed to pursue sporting excellence is found as lacking. There are some incredibly compelling stories surrounding weight management, injury acceptance, finance, and mental health issues. These are areas that the NGB need to better understand in order to offer greater assistance and education for the athletes, to ensure that their wellbeing and welfare is at the forefront of athlete development and not just medal success.

Implications

A lack of understanding into athlete education and learning truly is astounding, especially with so much government money being utilized for athlete development. From a practical standpoint, structured education for athletes into areas that affect their performance and their pursuit of sporting excellence is needed, to be so bold as to say a form of curriculum or literacy.

Limitations

The limitations for this study sit with the data collection and analysis. The iterative process that underpins CGT was interrupted due to the availability of the athletes in a competitive period. This meant that a full analysis could not occur on each interview before the next interview was conducted. To combat this, memos were written after each interview to capture any concepts that needed to be examined in the following interview. It also should be noted that this study is part of a wider CGT project examining athlete education, whereby a grounded theory is produced, employing the categories from this study.

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