Medalling to Matter!
An Exploratory Study on Post-Olympic Transitions of Jamaican Track and Field Athletes

This qualitative study explored the post-Olympic transitions of nine Jamaican track and field Olympians (six women and three men) who competed between 1972 and Tokyo 2020. It examined how personal, family and national expectations shaped their experiences, particularly when they returned without medals. Semi-structured interviews were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis with NVivo. Thirteen themes were identified, including Olympic goals, sources of inspiration, public reception, changes after returning home and support for future competition. Participants described a culture in which recognition often depended on winning a medal and, for medalists, on the colour of the medal. Several reported inadequate financial and psychological support, especially following non-medal performances. Some described emotional distress, although depression was not clinically assessed. Participants also discussed the importance of education, career preparation and sustained support between Olympic Games. Recommendations for future Olympians and national sporting authorities came directly from the nine participants and are distinguished from the researcher's interpretation. The findings highlight the need to understand athletes' post-Olympic lives beyond medal outcomes, while recognizing that experiences from this small qualitative sample cannot be generalized to all Jamaican Olympians.

Keywords: *post-Olympic transition; Jamaica; track and field; culture of winning; athlete mental health*

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Introduction

Some Jamaican athletes experience mental challenges as they prepare for, compete in and live with the outcomes of the Olympic Games. This research was conducted to understand how the met or unmet expectations of family and country affect Olympians, especially those who do not win a medal. Jamaica's sporting culture places high expectations on winning, and athletes are aware of these expectations when they represent the country in black, green and gold. While such expectations may help to motivate successful performances, some athletes who do not meet them may face a harsh and unpleasant reality upon returning home.

The aim of this research is to understand the post-Olympic transitions of Jamaican track and field Olympians and to provide insights on the best practices that can be used to provide the necessary support needed for Jamaican Olympians upon their return from an Olympics and as they prepare for upcoming ones. The scope of the study was limited to Olympians, that is, athletes who faced the starter at an Olympic Games, and it included two categories of Olympians: immediate past and past. The Immediate Past Olympians were those

athletes who represented Jamaica in the Tokyo 2020 Olympics. Past Olympians were those athletes who represented Jamaica in any past Olympics, as early as the 1972 Olympic Games.

The research was based on the following research questions:

- To what extent did Olympians receive support if they returned without a medal?
- To what extent did Olympians receive support if they returned with a medal?
- To what extent does the culture help to prepare Olympians for embrace or abandonment pending the outcome of their performance?
- What role does the culture play in the expectations Olympians have of themselves?
- How did personal goal attainment versus that of the country impact how Jamaican athletes experienced the Olympics?
- To what extent should support policies exist to help national athletes?
- What is the psychological, emotional or financial distress experienced by Jamaican Olympians if they return without a medal?
- What did these Jamaican Olympians recommend as ideal tangible and intangible forms of appreciation when they returned home with or without a medal?

This paper begins with an introduction to the research problem, aims and questions. It then reviews the literature on life after the Olympics and Jamaica's culture of winning, describes the methodology, presents and discusses the findings, and concludes by distinguishing the study findings from the recommendations made directly by the nine participants.

Literature Review

The Insulated World of Sports can Hamper the Adjustment of Athletes in the Real World

In times gone by, most Olympic athletes were amateurs and unless they were independently wealthy or had saved up enough to sustain their training for a period of years, they had to have a day job while also finding the time for their sports (Autenrieth, 2021). This concept has changed significantly. Although there are still athletes who have jobs outside the sports world, many of them train for a living in an environment where they can focus on their performance goals, and this sets them up for a rude awakening (Autenrieth, 2021). This is important to understand, as skillsets and sometimes resources outside of their sport world are minimal; therefore, all attention is focused on achieving the coveted medal or winning their event. When this does not happen, all the time and energy put into such preparation can significantly alter the world of an athlete as they seek alternatives or decide to try again. Hence, criticisms and remarks by fans and the

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public about them when they do not win are often inconsiderate and lacking in empathy.

The demanding and highly structured routine of preparing for the Olympics provides elite athletes with a sense of direction, purpose and identity. However, when their sporting careers end, the sudden loss of this familiar structure can leave them struggling to adjust to life beyond competitive sport. There is a tight schedule, with mornings, afternoons and evenings geared towards specific regimens to perfect their performance (Fan, 2020). When life after sports hits the athlete, some might experience enormous feelings of loss while struggling to define themselves in other non-sporting dimensions.

Adjusting to post-Olympic life and life after sports can be difficult and akin to those faced by regular professionals going through unemployment or a career change (Autenrieth, 2021). Life in the real world is less regimented, with less goal clarity and immediate feedback, in comparison to the tight schedule for each day's training, food intake regulation, rest and recovery time. Adjusting from this kind of rigid structure is not as liberating as many would imagine and can result in athletes feeling lost and uncertain, and is sometimes accompanied by a loss of identity, going from being well recognized and praised by the public to being unnoticed or barely acknowledged (Autenrieth, 2021).

The academic literature on athletes' career transitions supports these observations. In a systematic review of 126 studies, Park, Lavallee and Tod (2013) found that factors such as athletic identity and the resources available to athletes, including social support, were linked to the quality of their adjustment when leaving sport, and they recommended that athletes be given proactive support. The International Society of Sport Psychology position stand on career development and transitions also views athletes as whole persons, whose athletic, psychological, psychosocial, academic, vocational and financial lives change together, and it calls for support that is sensitive to the culture in which the athlete lives (Stambulova, Ryba, Henriksen, 2021). Since the experiences of Jamaican Olympians cannot be fully understood outside of the culture to which they return. More recently, Brockett et al. (2024) surveyed 102 retired Australian Olympic and Paralympic athletes and interviewed 11 of them, and found that building an identity outside of sport, planning for retirement and using adaptive coping strategies were associated with better retirement experiences, while an abrupt loss of athletic identity and feeling behind in a life stage were associated with poorer ones.

Depression

Media accounts have described an emotional drop after the Olympic Games (Solms, 2022). In its most acute form, the emotional drop after leaving an Olympics is referred to as post-Olympic depression, according to Dr. Scott Goldman, Sports Psychologist and Director of the Performance Psychology Center at the University of Michigan (Florio, Shapiro, 2016). According to Goldman, the emotional drop that athletes often experience post-Olympics is similar to what other persons experience after they have accomplished major milestones, such as getting

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married or giving birth, and in some of these cases, many find themselves at a loss, which can even lead to depression (Florio, Shapiro, 2016). More broadly, a systematic review and meta-analysis of mental health in elite athletes found that symptoms of anxiety and depression were reported by 34% of current and 26% of former elite athletes (Gouttebarge et al., 2019).

Howells and Lucassen (2018) studied four British athletes after the Rio 2016 Olympics and found that the highs of the Games were followed by lows upon returning home, with their experiences moving through the Olympic experience, the homecoming and moving forward. The celebrity the athletes enjoyed rose and then diminished, and this had a negative impact on their mental wellbeing. The authors considered the negative emotions and behaviours to be a normal response to the homecoming and recommended that support be provided before and after the Games (Howells, Lucassen, 2018).

Depression Experienced by Medallists and Successful Olympians

Contrary to popular belief, success maintenance can elicit depression when not handled properly. South African swimming star Tatjana Schoenmaker, who won gold in the 200m breaststroke at the Tokyo 2020 Olympics while breaking the world record at the same time, fully endorses this assertion. While she did not admit to being depressed, she did mention that you do go down and that you have a dip (Solms, 2022). In her own words, "somehow I caught myself being less motivated and it was a challenge, something I didn't think I would experience" (Solms, 2022). Since the recent outcry of Simone Biles, who withdrew from the US women's team gymnastics final at the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, there has been greater attention on the mental health of elite athletes while they prepare for the Olympics. However, this concern should extend beyond preparation to post-Olympic performances.

"We're taught we can push through anything ... and we're always told to not ask for help," said Allison Schmitt, USA swimmer, cited in Florio and Shapiro (2016) Despite her success of winning five medals and setting a world record at the London 2012 Olympics, she went into a deep hole she could not emerge from. Surprisingly, this was inexplicable given her success, but she knew she needed help, especially since depression is still a dirty word in the locker room (Florio, Shapiro, 2016). While this research did not examine the post-Olympic blues of medallists, which is also a critical area worthy of study, it explored depressive symptoms of athletes who returned from the Olympics without a medal.

A Culture of Winning

Support is more than essential in a culture such as Jamaica's that prides itself on winning. In today's Jamaica, the culture of winning is still being perpetuated (Rose, 2020). It is this simultaneously supportive yet pressuring cultural background of sports in Jamaica which accounts for the medal count of such a tiny nation being among those of nations several times its size (Rose, 2020). The

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'culture of winning' in sport in Jamaica is also rooted in an intense commitment to a culture of individualism, etched in resistance to the slightest form of external control and pressure. As such, many Jamaicans are also deeply sensitive to any forms of disrespect or shame because of their history of having to resist systematic efforts to control its people (Dawes, 2014, p. 148, as cited in Rose, 2020). It seems that the colours of the flag, when worn on the international stage, send subconscious messages to those who wear them. They offer the opportunity to do two things: not to bring shame on your supporters at home (Rose, 2020), and to defy the embarrassment borne by their predecessors who were enslaved, by bringing glory to self and to the nation on a very visible platform.

Merlene Ottey was our winner in the 1990s, the era of the bronze queen. In that time with few medalists from Jamaica, her winning bronze could easily have been considered a gold. However, as the times changed, Asafa Powell and Usain Bolt drastically moved the goal post from bronze to not just gold medals but world records. This then meant that winning only meant a gold medal and or a world record, especially in athletics. Such unrealistic expectations perpetuate the strong winning culture of sports in Jamaica and further intensify the pressure on Jamaican athletes to excel.

Support Needed by Olympians

The post-Olympic period can be a complex and distressing experience for many Olympians (Bradshaw, Howells, Lucassen, 2022). The need to help athletes to cope with post-Olympic transitions has been recognized by the World Olympians Association (WOA), which in 2017 launched a joint mentorship program with the International Olympic Committee's (IOC) Athletes' Commission (World Olympians Association, 2017). The initiative pairs Olympians who have successfully transitioned to new careers with those who are yet to do so. A six-month pilot was set up in three countries: New Zealand, Slovenia and Uganda. (World Olympians Association, 2017).

Bradshaw, Howells and Lucassen (2022) researched fourteen Olympic athletes from the United Kingdom. From their findings, it is important to note that irrespective of whether they had previously competed in an Olympic Games, the Olympians expressed a desire for support in preparing for the post-Olympic experience. They emphatically expressed that this should be delivered primarily after the Olympic Games, with several athletes highlighting the value of an awareness-raising session beforehand. Athletes proposed a shift away from expert sport psychology delivery of interventions in favour of a programme which was pragmatic in terms of content and delivered by former Olympians (Bradshaw et al., 2022). However, while this recommendation was made directly by Olympians, caution must be applied when taking this advice, as I suggest not one or the other but a hybrid approach, including both past Olympians and sports psychologists as the core designers and implementors of such programs. Structured psychological support of this kind has shown promise elsewhere. In Japan, Oulevey et al. (2024) designed a three-part workshop for 24 retired female Olympians, covering career transitions, adjustment problems after retirement

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and ways of coping, and found that participants' knowledge of career transition support and their willingness to seek help both increased significantly.

What is missing from this body of work is the voice of Olympians from small, high-performing sporting nations such as Jamaica, where the culture of winning shapes how athletes are received when they return home. Sports research by our own people about Jamaican athletes is still relatively novel, and it is this gap which the present study seeks to address.

Methodology

A qualitative research design was used to explore the lived experiences and perspectives of Jamaican track and field Olympians. The research was conducted over a 10-month period. Participants were recruited purposively through contacts in the sporting community, with additional potential participants identified through referrals from other participants. Eligibility required having competed at an Olympic Games by facing the starter; qualifying for the Games without competing did not meet the inclusion criterion. The sample included Olympians from Games held between 1972 and Tokyo 2020. Initial informed consent was obtained before the interviews, and participants were briefed on the nature of the research. Ethical approval had been obtained for the study.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine Olympians over a six-month period and transcribed for analysis. The researcher used Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach, supported by NVivo software, to organize the accounts into initial codes, sub-themes and major themes. A codebook and project maps were generated during analysis. Thirteen main themes were subsequently presented in a thematic table. A summary of the findings was emailed to participants, and the findings were presented to relevant stakeholders. The researcher's professional background as a psychologist and her position within the Jamaican sporting context were considered in reflecting on recruitment challenges and the emotionally sensitive nature of some interviews. This account does not imply that clinical assessment was undertaken.

Some Personal Observations

Prior to and during the data collection period of this research, I experienced some expected challenges. These included difficulty in getting participants to share their experiences, especially non-medalists. Some Olympians who had just returned from the 2020 Tokyo Olympics initially agreed, then, when it was time to conduct the interview, said they were no longer interested in being a part of this research. I learned informally that one of these Olympians was not even showing up at training and the other simply did not want to talk about what they termed a 'bad' year. I respected those decisions.

I would be fortunate, as one Olympian had explicitly stated, if at the end of this research I got 10 Olympians to interview. I was not so fortunate, but lucky enough to interview nine, for which I am extremely grateful. When I enquired

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why such a small number of participants would be *'lucky',* given the vast number of Olympians from Jamaica, I was told that many of them were still too hurt to speak and the rest had been frustrated with the sports administration of the country, which had now made many of them even bitter. The rest were cynical about the research and felt that the recommendations would not be taken seriously.

I must finally mention that research of this nature did inadvertently elicit the recollection of traumatic experiences and, in some instances, I had to stop the recording and allow the person to compose themselves before continuing, letting them know that they could stop at any time.

After the data were analyzed, thirteen main themes were organized in the thematic table, with their initial codes presented in Table 1. Accounts of depressive symptoms and trauma are discussed separately without implying a clinical diagnosis.

Table 1. *Main Themes and Initial Codes Emerging from the Thematic Analysis*

Theme	Initial Codes
Personal goals before the Olympics	Ambition to win a gold medal; 'just see how good I am'; make an Olympic team; make the finals; no major goal
Thoughts and feelings at the time of qualification	Better prepared this time; big achievement; big, exciting opportunity; competing amongst the best in the world; didn't know much about the Olympics; ultimate goal; want a medal; ecstatic; excited; happy
Status of personal Olympic goals	Could not achieve goal because of an injury; no; World Championships suit me more; yes
Source of inspiration for personal Olympic goals	Felt competitive; influenced by an immediate circle (coach and supporters); motivation from being a Jamaican athlete; no, they were my own goals; yes, influenced by previous Jamaican Olympians
Cultural climate towards Olympians who return with a medal	Return confidently; being known, praised and celebrated; proud moment for country; more opportunities; welcoming reception; variation in reception based on type of medal
Cultural climate towards Olympians who return without a medal	Expected to be applauded for reaching thus far; simply being an Olympian is an honor; personally felt they disappointed Jamaica; not performed well; not treated well; train harder; understanding only towards junior athletes
Personal interpretation of the title 'Olympian'	Honour; huge pressure; humbling experience; the Olympics is not a big deal
Life changes after returning to Jamaica as an Olympian	First time shamed for not winning a medal; adjusting to a different reception as a senior athlete; careful about media and social media; keeping a close circle; media attention; more responsibilities; name recognition; no monetary benefit; no real change; offered professional

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Theme	Initial Codes
	contracts; celebrity status; special treatment; improved spiritual life
Transition from being unknown to known	Adapt but be yourself; motivation; natural progression from junior to senior athlete; not a major issue; social life changes
Formal or informal training is important	Better self-presentation; balance and time management; managing the media; maximizing opportunities
Support for the next Olympics	Basic support; emotional and financial support; lack of funding for non-medalists; lack of financial support
Recommendations for future Olympians	Demand basic coaching and medical support; be humble and patient; do your best; do not be defined by past performance; focus on your goals; get an education; develop non-sport skills; make mental health a priority; seek financial advice; seek mentors; know when to move on
Suggested government support	Be proactive; holistic development; train coaches and support staff; financial and psychological programs; inclusive incentives; retirement program for Olympians

Source: Author's thematic analysis of interview data (NVivo).

Findings and Discussion

Demographics of Participants

Participants provided details regarding the year they participated in the Olympics, the type of event they competed in, and the type of medal won. The participants of this research participated in the Olympics from 1972 to the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, held in 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The majority of the sample were female: six participants (67%) were females and three (33%) were males.

The participants of this research were recipients of all categories of medals, with gold being the very highest medal to be achieved, followed by silver and bronze respectively. Some participants won medals in more than one category, and there were also those who did not win a medal at a particular Games. The majority of the medals won by this sample were silver: overall, 17% of the medals won were bronze, 50% silver and 33% gold.

Table 2 shows the different categories of events in which the participants competed. The 4 x 100m relay was the event in which the majority of the participants competed.

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Table 2. *Events in which Participants Competed*

Name of Event	Number of Athletes Competed	Percentage of Total (n = 9)
100m	7	78%
200m	5	56%
4 x 100m Relays	8	89%
4 x 400m Relays	2	22%
400m Hurdles	2	22%
Discus	1	11%

Source: Author's interview data.

Personal Goals Before the Olympics

One of the main themes from the data analysis included the personal goals of participants before the Olympics. Some of these goals were certainly contrary to what most Jamaicans would have expected of them but were their goals, nonetheless. These included, but were not limited to, winning a gold medal, winning a medal, identifying where they were in their event in comparison to other competitors (achieving a personal performance goal), simply making the Olympic team, and or reaching the finals. However, one participant mentioned that she did not have any major goals.

Goals varied from participant to participant, but it is important to note the extremes, from wanting to win a gold medal to simply using the Olympics as a measurement to identify where they ranked in comparison to others. Participant 1 was clear: "*It was more ambition, for me, I'm never going into the competition hoping for anything less than a gold medal."* For another participant, the only real goal was to have an idea of where she ranked in comparison to the best in the world: *"I just went with the intention of seeing how well I could do"* (P7). A goal of this nature emphasizes personal performance rather than a medal, and it is one which, if it was ever explicitly mentioned in this manner, may offend and even upset some Jamaicans. The reason for this is our strong culture of winning in sports, especially in track events at the Olympics (Rose, 2020).

Participants 2 and 3 mentioned that they wanted to make an Olympic team and the finals respectively. It is important to note that Participant 3 mentioned that he definitely had a working goal, a goal that kept moving as he progressed through the heats and semi-finals. As he put it, once you are there *"you realize that making the finals alone, a nuh it."*

Having moderately challenging and progressive goals help in the overall attainment of the ultimate goal and is usually recommended for events such as these. Contrary to all other participants interviewed, Participant 7 concluded the discussion by saying that there was no major goal behind her participation in the Olympics: *"No major goal per se, well maybe you could say I wanted to lower my time and see how fast I could go."* This does not indicate, however, that she left the Olympics without a medal. Some athletes are superstitious about having goals prior to events, and this is understandable given the critical role *'luck'*

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plays. It simply meant that at the time, she did not have a specific goal or target, and the reason could be multifold.

Thoughts and Feelings at the Time of Qualification

Another recurring theme included participants' thoughts and feelings at the time of their qualification for the Olympics. Participant 6 explained that she was better prepared, having started to train at a high level only in 1980 and having focused from 1983 on making the standards for the 1984 Olympics.

Participant 3 mentioned that the 2000 Olympics was a big achievement for him because he was sick and did not make the 1996 Olympics, and he felt good about being able to represent the country. Participant 1 also responded similarly by viewing his qualification as a big thing and an exciting opportunity, because he had just come out of high school. Another participant mentioned that his thoughts at the time were about being able to compete among the best in the world:

> *"It's an awesome feeling. It was just the feeling of being among the greats of the sport. When you're on the level of the Olympics, you meet the greats of the different sports, basketball, and football. It was just that feeling of accomplishment that you are actually among the best in the world."* (P2)

This goes to show that it is important to provide support that aids in the development and preparation for the second Olympics, as sometimes goals and feelings towards preparation might not be achieved at the first Olympics. Participant 7 mentioned that she did not feel prepared, even though she was the top sprinter in Jamaica in her time. She noted that there was much ignorance on her part about what it really meant to be an Olympian: *"I did not know that much about the Olympics at that stage, but I was the top sprinter in Jamaica and I figured that was the next step."* For most participants, however, the Olympics was the highest level of competition and the ultimate goal. Being an Olympian is where the dream ends for many; however, Participant 6 mentioned that this was only a sub-goal, as she wanted to leave the competition with a medal: *"my focus wasn't I want to be an Olympian, my focus was I wanted to medal."*

No athlete mentioned feelings of sadness or doom and gloom after qualifying to represent their country at the Olympics. The feelings before the Olympics were described as ecstatic, excited and happy. However, some participants mentioned feeling overwhelmed before the Olympics, which could be interpreted as positive stress or a response to the expectations they had of themselves and that others had of them. Participant 5 expressed that she was extremely excited as a young athlete, and Participant 3 also expressed his happiness, especially when he qualified for his first Olympics: "The first Olympics is just me going, this is the Olympics I'm so happy to be there and I just want to be at the Olympics."

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Status of Personal Olympic Goals: Achieved or Not Achieved

An emerging theme was the status of participants' personal Olympic goals. One participant explained that he could not achieve his personal Olympic goal of being ranked at the top in his event because he had an injury. The same participant also believed that he was more of a World Championships athlete than an Olympic athlete. In the two Olympics in which he competed, he said he had freak accidents that took him out of medal contention completely, which resulted in him failing to achieve his Olympic goal:

> *"I've come to the realization that I'm more a World Champs person and not an Olympics person. For both Olympics, I've had freak accidents that took me out of the medal contention completely."* (P1)

He also expressed that he doubted his preparation when it came to the Olympics. This was, however, not the reality for the other Olympians. Some participants mentioned that they achieved their personal goals, and one in particular, Participant 5, mentioned that she *"achieved all three with a bonus"* because she won a medal.

Source of Inspiration for Personal Olympic Goals

Another main theme revealed from this research was the source of inspiration behind the personal Olympic goals set by the participants. Participant 2 mentioned that the source of his inspiration was hard to place but noted that being a Jamaican Olympian was not something as spectacular as others thought it is, due to the fact that several Jamaicans qualify for the Olympics every four years. He believed that his goal was mostly fuelled by his own competitive drive:

> *"To be honest, I didn't feel pressured. It's a very rare accomplishment. A lot of Jamaicans qualify for the Olympics, but being able to compete at a high level, not just being at the Olympics, but being very competitive at the Olympics was the utmost feeling for me. I couldn't feel pressured because most Jamaicans had never reached as far as I did."* (P2)

This is interesting to note, as many persons from other parts of the world, especially those who do not have a lot of athletes representing their country at the Olympics, would not dream of being so nonchalant or even humble about what is deemed such a major accomplishment elsewhere. However, in Jamaica, and certainly to this athlete, qualifying for the Olympics was not a big deal. His comment that he did not feel pressured because most Jamaicans did not reach as far as he did, contradicts his previous utterance and suggests a distinction between his own competitive standards and the expectations of the public.

Not all goals are set based on an internal drive. Participant 1 stated that the source of his inspiration in setting Olympic goals was mostly influenced by his immediate circle, which included the coach and supporters:

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> *"You have a set amount of people that you do this for. You do it for coach, you do this for die hearted supporters that know the struggles, you can't really do this for your country because the country doesn't know what you are going through."* (P1)

Participant 5 attributed her motivation and inspiration simply to being exposed to the culture and people of Jamaica, in short, to being a Jamaican. The participant was influenced by the historical performances of past Jamaican track and field Olympians and noted that she also used past comments on social media to motivate her to do better.

Participant 7 revealed that her inspiration was from her own goals and had nothing to do with previous Jamaican Olympians. In the end, Participant 8 mentioned that yes, her goals were inspired by past Jamaican Olympians and internally. She mentioned that none of the women had got a medal in the Olympics before her time, so looking for that kind of motivation where it did not exist made no sense. However, there were men who had medaled, such as Donald Quarrie, and that was her motivation, as they wanted to be *"the first set of women to get a medal."*

Cultural Climate Towards Olympians who Return with a Medal

One of the most glorious moments for any athlete who competed at an Olympics is returning to their home country with a medal. Returning to Jamaica with a medal was noted by Participant 3 as a confident moment where he could be his true self: *"I can be myself and show people who I am."* He further commented that returning home with a medal brought pride and joy to the people of Jamaica as they welcomed and celebrated his accomplishment. Athletes noted that returning home to Jamaica with a medal changed every single aspect of their lives: financially, socially, spiritually and in any way you could imagine. As Participant 4 put it, *"once you get a medal, you attract more sponsors, more endorsements and all of that."*

Participant 4 noted that when you win a medal, you become known, and more of the Jamaican people are praying for you, which she strongly believed helped her performances and her life: *"as a country, we are a praying nation and we give God thanks for everything."*

Participant 2 felt better off when he returned home with medals, resulting from sponsorships and different international deals which afforded him financial stability and more opportunities. As he stated:

> *"It meant so much to me. For me, it meant a lot of opportunities were going to come my way... and I'm going to have to keep up because that medal puts you on a pedestal that you're supposed to maintain... I'm using that medal to humble myself, push forward, and be better than the person I was the year before."* (P2)

Personally, and to an extent culturally, Participant 5 noted that she was aware that once she won a medal there would be pressure from all angles, the Jamaican people and their expectations were not excluded. Pressure to maintain being a success can sometimes cause an athlete to fail and or succeed, based on

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how being on such a pedestal is handled. No guidance was received after returning home on how to handle this new norm. Participant 2 felt he was received in a way that made his family and the larger population proud: *"it was a very proud moment for me, representing myself, my family and my country at a high level."* In a culture that strives to do and be anything to avoid shame and embarrassment, certainly returning home with a medal allowed the Jamaican people to feel a sense of pride, knowing that you represented them well and, in a manner, where they could hold their heads high and have bragging rights for at least the next four years, pending your performance in the competitions leading up to the next Olympics.

It is important to note that not all athletes received the same welcoming and warm reception when they returned to Jamaica with a medal. The quality and type of celebration largely depended on whether the Olympian was returning home with a gold versus a silver or bronze medal. While gold medalists are culturally received in a very extravagant way and publicly promised additional prizes for making Jamaicans so proud, those who receive silver or bronze are not usually celebrated in such a manner, or at all. As one Olympian noted, a hurriedly planned lunch at a hotel in Jamaica was all she received after being placed in the top three in the world, for herself and her country, at the Olympics. In her words, *"there was clearly a lack of wanting to celebrate what I had actually done for the country."*

Cultural Climate Towards Athletes who Return to Jamaica without a Medal

This theme represents the perceptions and actual experiences of Jamaican Olympians when they returned to Jamaica without a medal. Participant 6 mentioned that the world recognizes such efforts and Olympians are applauded for reaching so far. Kindly note that this is the perception of what she believed would happen in Jamaica now. Unfortunately, and contrary to this Olympian's perception, the reality is not so, and it is not customary for Olympians who did not medal to receive applause or praise for reaching the pinnacle of their career, especially when they returned without a medal. This same participant expressed that if they had returned home in the current environment, she believed there would have been *"a recognition of effort even though we would not have gotten the medal"* (P6).

Some participants believed it is a significant accomplishment to be an Olympian, so even without a medal, that title alone is one which all Jamaicans should celebrate. However, the reality is that, while culturally Jamaica acknowledges the work it takes to achieve such a milestone, there is an explicit expectation that that title or achievement is not enough. Another participant, having failed to live up to this cultural expectation (that is, having returned to Jamaica without a medal), expressed feelings of disappointment, even though it should be noted that he was instantly encouraged by those around him:

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> *"I disappointed Jamaica, and that was a low hand for me. Even when we were doing the parade, I was sitting at the back of the truck, and it's like I'm happy but I'm not. My mind kept going back, and a lot of people were saying to me, 'Yow XYZ, you never get it this time but we with you', so I knew it mean a lot to them."* (P3)

Olympians interviewed were also hard on themselves for not meeting the cultural expectation of returning with a medal and noted that if their performance did not result in one of the coveted three medals, they needed to work harder and find new ways of achieving goals. Participant 7 explained that coming home without a medal was often interpreted as a failure to achieve goals and as underperformance, and as such, you were not received or treated well: *"The Jamaican public felt if you didn't win a medal you didn't do anything. That's how we felt like a team."* Participant 8 put it even more bluntly: *"You did not perform as great as expected, so pick up your own bag and find your own way."* In cases like these, Participant 1 urged Olympians to encourage themselves and noted that this was something he too had to do, and to train even harder.

Contrary to the general harsh and unwelcoming reception meted out to Olympians when they return without a medal, one Olympian noted that the Jamaican people were more understanding of junior athletes when they returned home without a medal. The unconditional reception that junior athletes received was lacking when these same athletes became Olympians and returned without a medal. Feelings of unworthiness can sometimes be the result of such harsh cultural isolation and lack of recognition. The athlete expressed an understanding of the conditional culture of Jamaica in relation to what to expect when returning empty-handed:

> *"In junior days it didn't matter if you came back with a medal, you have persons at the airport surrounding you, shaking your hand, wanting to take pictures with you, but when you reach the senior level, to see that you're an Olympian, you made the finals and people are only looking at the medalists it takes a toll on you. You say to yourself, 'wow, for Jamaica to really recognize me, I have to have a medal.' Making the finals is not good enough for Jamaica, it's good enough for you."* (P5)

Kindly note that this kind of culture is not unique to Jamaica. There are several cultures in the world that embody what I refer to as a conditional reception, in terms of how athletes are received when they return from competitions without a win, a medal, or the cup. However, the fact that these cultures exist does not make them ideal for emulation or even perpetuation. In contemporary Jamaica, more effort should be placed on receiving our athletes in a way that encourages performance improvement when they return without a prize, and not in one that breaks them even further, isolates them, or shuns them for not having achieved their goals or the goals you had for them.

The harsh, unwelcoming and even shameful environment that some athletes who do not medal at the Olympics have to return to has been, and continues to be, perpetuated by the media. Participant 8 mentioned that in her time, when an Olympian did not return with a medal, there was a Gleaner cartoon with a very humiliating caption. Today, over 40 years later, this culture remains, and it

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recently caused one national athlete to close her social media account after being bombarded with disparaging remarks about her performance. Suggestions were, however, given as to how improvements can be made to make the culture of receiving non-medalists more welcoming:

> *"I have not been around too much to know if it continues, but sometimes the criticisms are just too harsh. I remember when Donald [referring to Donald Quarrie] got beaten and there was a cartoon in the newspaper at the time that said 'searching for a medal', those things are discouraging. You can reach out and say 'well, you didn't win, but we appreciate the fact that you're representing Jamaica and you did the best that you could', I just feel like reaching out would really make a difference."* (P8)

Personal Interpretation of the Title 'Olympian'

This theme revealed how participants interpreted what it meant to be an Olympian. Participant 1 mentioned that he considered it an honor: "*It was truly an honor to be an Olympian for Jamaica."* Participant 5 interpreted the title as being synonymous with huge pressure: *"as a young athlete coming up, I think I was 21 going 22 (years old) I had a lot of pressure on myself.*" On the total flip side of this was Participant 2, who did not see the title of Olympian as a big deal or anything spectacular, *"For me, going to the Olympics is like going to any regular games. I don't see it as any major thing*", until returning home with a medal, when he felt humbled based on the reception received, the new expectations and how he suddenly transitioned from being unknown to known.

The interpretation of being an Olympian is important to capture, because it sets the tone in understanding some of the expectations that his or her home country might have of such an individual. It also highlights the expectations these athletes may in turn have of their country. When there is no clear understanding of what this title means, expectations may inadvertently go unmet, and fallout may occur in various ways.

Life Changes after Returning to Jamaica as an Olympian

The next main theme emerging from the data was life changes after returning to Jamaica from an Olympics. The life changes mentioned upon their return were mostly positive; things became difficult or challenging mainly when they returned without a medal or when they did not achieve their Olympic goals.

Participant 1 experienced the shock of his life as a senior athlete when he did not return to Jamaica with a medal after competing in the Olympics. He was publicly criticized, and some persons used various media to let him know that they should not have sent him: *"This was the first time I got bashed, people were saying that they shouldn't have sent the young man because he was not ready for the big man stage."* This was a novel experience for him, as he had never encountered this as a junior athlete. Participant 1 also highlighted the importance of being more cautious in his approach to social media: *"I have to be careful of the things I do now."* However, for a now famous athlete, social media has to be

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approached more responsibly after their Olympic performance, simply because upon returning home, many of them gained more followers, thus creating a larger platform for greater visibility, marketing and also more criticism.

With the newfound popularity, a change that many Olympians mentioned was the increased effort that they now had to employ in keeping their circle small: *"Everyone wants to be my friend, but I understand that its because I have a name. I keep my circle really small*" (P1). The increased attention from the media was another change that some participants mentioned. Another life change that was mentioned by Participant 9 was increased social responsibility, as the younger athletes and the general public now considered her a role model: "I think I have more responsibilities as young ones look up to me as a role model."

Before competing in the Olympics, it was possible that not many even knew their names. Participants 2 and 3 stated that they became more popular and were treated like celebrities, especially whenever they went to the clubs: *"If I pass through the club, they put me on VIP"* (P3). Participant 7 mentioned the instant name recognition she received in her time, which was worth highlighting, especially as she was homegrown and had been *"winning at Champs since I was in Class 3."*

Participant 7 also stated that she did not receive monetary support following her return from the Olympics, although she mentioned endorsement deals which helped significantly. These forms of support should be distinguished. Participant 2 mentioned that after returning from the Olympics, many opportunities opened for him, and he was able to receive professional contracts and compete on the professional circuit. He further declared it a huge accomplishment, whereby he was able to make significant changes to better take care of himself financially as a result of the contracts he received after his Olympic performance, but he was quick to add that *"athletes who were able to make it to the Olympics were not afforded the same chance."*

Perceptions Towards the Transition from Being Unknown to Known

Another theme was how participants managed the transition from being unknown to famous. Participant 2 did not mention any major difficulty in transitioning from being unknown to known and further mentioned that it is about adapting over time and making the necessary adjustments by understanding the benefits and responsibilities of being famous, as "*you basically have a responsibility to represent yourself in a professional way."*

Participant 9 highlighted that there is a need in this process to be yourself and to be humble: *"Just be yourself.* The only way sometimes you can make it is if you are humble... Humility is a big thing. *"Maybe I was too humble."* Participant 3 adjusted well from being unknown to known and considered it a source of motivation, whereas Participant 5 considered it a natural progression from being a junior to a senior athlete. However, with all the transitions experienced after becoming an Olympian, Participant 5 noted that what she had to spend more time adjusting to was the shocking lack of support from the

ONLY FOR REVIEW

people: *"I didn't get support from Jamaica."* Participant 7 did not find the transition a major issue, but Participant 4 considered it a major change when she returned to Jamaica and almost everyone wanted an interview: *"When you come back to Jamaica, every media house they want to interview you."*

Formal or Informal Training is Important

Formal education or training of some sort, in any area, was deemed important in helping Olympians to have alternative avenues to support themselves after competing in the Olympics. Based on the analysis of the data, formal or informal training provides cues on how to conduct yourself, how to create balance and manage time, how to plan for retirement, how to manage the media and how to maximize the influence and fame of being an Olympian.

Participant 1 stated that there were athletes who had completed first degrees in various areas of study, which helped them with self-presentation: *"We are degreed athletes, the majority of people I know in terms of speaking to them, they are very cognizant of what they need to do in terms of how they need to carry themselves."* According to Participant 1, having an educational background provides experience and training in creating balance and time management, as well as *"something to fall back on and help beyond sports."* Participant 4 mentioned that having tertiary education provided a training ground for her to create balance in life: *"How do you manage going to training early at 5:30 am and then to go to class, to be studying? It takes so much work and if you are able to do that, it helps with managing running at the highest level."*

Having a solid educational background or training also helps in media management. Participant 1 noted that some athletes do not want to come into the media and speak, *"but the thing is they don't understand that the more you speak on TV the more people know about you, which enhances your brand."*

Support for the Next Olympics

There is a four-year period of preparation following an Olympics, which makes support essential. Participant 2 suggested the provision of basic support to compete as being essential to prepare Olympians for the next four years.:

> *"If you have an athlete like most countries do, they provide the basic necessities for them to be able to compete. You may have to help them with their coaching fee because you have to have a professional coach, medical and nutrition. Those are very key elements in order to get an athlete ready for an Olympics and major games."* (P2)

Participant 9 mentioned that the government should support the athletes:

> *"Well you make sure they get help because they're going to continue competing. Follow up on them and help them, even if it's a stipend per month for the next four years or until they retire."* (P9)

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Participant 2 clearly stated that if an Olympian did not medal, there was little or no financial support, unless they were fortunate enough to receive endorsement deals, as he did from a shoe company, which significantly helped him to achieve his goal. The cost of preparing at this level is high:

> *"I would have stopped track and field if I had not gotten that contract... When you look at it, between nutrition and coaching, medicals, it runs close to, in terms of Jamaicans, 1 million to 1.5 million a year, not a year, a month. It's a thing where you have to invest in yourself close to 10, 12 million dollars a year if you want to do it on a professional level to be competitive amongst the best in the world."* (P2)

Recommendations for Future Olympians by Olympians of this Study

The Olympians of this research suggested that it is important to collectively demand basic coaching, nutrition and medical support from the government as they prepare for the next four years. Future Olympians were urged to remain humble and continue doing their best. As Participant 4 advised, "Be humble and patient. As the saying goes, *'today fi mi, tomorrow fi yuh'. Track and field can be an unforgiving sport."* In the event of poor performances or performances that did not result in a medal, athletes were encouraged not to be defined by their past, to keep moving forward and to focus on achieving their goals: "The past is the past, don't let it define you just keep pushing for more" (P1).

All participants unapologetically and emphatically stressed the importance of holistic development. Two ways they believed this could be achieved were to invest in education or in training for a non-sport-related career option, so that "just in case track doesn't work for you, you have something to fall back on" (P8).

Making mental health a priority, seeking sound financial advice and mentors, and knowing when to retire were highly recommended as key guidelines that can tremendously help future Olympians. Participant 2 noted, "mental of course and that is one of the problems with us Jamaican, we don't feel like we need mental support but we actually do." On financial advice, Participant 4 shared that *"we are all from humble beginnings"* and are not used to making so much money, *"so we need persons in the field that can help us manage our money."* On mentorship, Participant 7 was equally direct: "You need mentors... It's all about living after the Olympics."

Suggested Government Support

The final theme captured the support the Olympians expected from the government of Jamaica. Six areas were suggested: be proactive in support provision; provide support geared towards holistic development; train coaches and support staff to deal with the various demands and challenges of Olympians; design financial and psychological programs to aid in the preparation of Olympians; design inclusive forms of incentives for the various categories of Olympians; and establish a retirement program specifically for Olympians. Of great importance is ensuring that support is received in a timely manner and not

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when it is too late. Participant 4 urged the government to provide support early and to draw from the competent pool of local resources:

> *"Don't wait until they make the Olympics... We have so many capable and competent persons here in different areas who are trained and can help our athletes, do it early.*" (P4)

The Olympians of this study believed the country should ensure that the support provided is geared towards the holistic development of the athlete and not just focused on the insulated world of sports. They also advised the government and other key stakeholders to implement training programs focused on preparing coaches and support staff to handle the various emotional states that these athletes will experience before and after the Olympics, because "so many people [are] involved in making an athlete, everybody needs help" (P4).

The Olympians interviewed were keen on well-designed programs to cater to the financial and psychological needs of athletes, with financial support to help with transportation, medical expenses and nutrition:

> *"If I was the Minister of Sports, I would definitely put in place greater financial support for the Olympians it doesn't matter if you made the finals or if you medaled... every one of them should have financial support because it is very difficult with or without a shoe contract. As well as assign a psychologist so that there would be a centre, a number, email or place where you can go to speak to someone to help them develop and ensure their transition goes smoothly."* (P5)

These Olympians undoubtedly acknowledged that not all Olympians were created equal, and by no means suggested that those who have achieved medals should not be distinctly recognized for their accomplishments. They noted, however, that the government should extend financial support to the lower-ranked Olympians (non-medalists), as this type of assistance might help to move them up the medal rankings: *"We need to stop focusing on just the medals alone. There needs to be wider support in terms of making Olympic semi-finals or an Olympic final because it's not easy to be a medalist"* (P7). They also strongly believed that the celebrations for Olympians when they return to Jamaica should be more inclusive and that a special committee should be tasked with ensuring that non-medalists and medalists are properly celebrated and acknowledged, even through the government offices in the areas from which they come (P6).

A critical suggestion, which even highlighted the shortcomings of some Olympians, was to design retirement programs that will aid in equipping them with the necessary skillsets needed to successfully transition after their Olympic career. Such a program should offer about four skills that Olympians could develop, but should not be mandatory, so the onus would be on the Olympian to make the most of the opportunity (P9).

UNDER PEER REVIEW

Depressive Symptoms and Trauma

While the study did not specifically explore or measure depression after Olympic performance, a few depressive symptoms were mentioned, mostly by the non-medalists. Participants described experiences including withdrawal, prolonged feelings of worthlessness, guilt and fatigue. These accounts were not assessed using a diagnostic instrument and should not be interpreted as clinical diagnoses. One athlete mentioned having to see a psychologist because of the negative reception received and comments that were harsh and demeaning. Another noted receiving blame for an administrative decision which resulted in a poor performance by the relay team. Two participants reported experiencing trauma at an Olympics: one had a freak accident, and the other had their safety violated when Israeli athletes were taken hostage by Palestinian militants at the Munich Olympics of 1972. This was vividly recalled even nearly 50 years later. These findings are consistent with the post-Olympic lows described by Howells and Lucassen (2018) and Bradshaw et al. (2022), but in the Jamaican context they appear to be intensified by a culture of winning which offers a conditional reception to those who return without a medal.

Conclusions

Conclusions: Findings of the Study

The study of nine Jamaican track and field Olympians who competed between 1972 and Tokyo 2020 revealed how personal expectations, Olympic outcomes and the Jamaican culture of winning shaped athletes' experiences upon returning home. Participants described contrasting receptions depending on whether they returned with a medal and, among medalists, on the colour of the medal. Some experienced public recognition, sponsorship opportunities and increased social standing, while others described criticism, diminished recognition and insufficient support, particularly when they did not medal. The interviews also revealed differences between athletes' own performance goals and the expectations they perceived from the Jamaican public.

The findings further showed that the transition from Olympic participation could involve changes in identity, social relationships, public visibility, financial circumstances and psychological wellbeing. Participants described the importance of education, preparation for life beyond sport and continuing support between Olympic Games. Some accounts included distressing experiences and symptoms associated with emotional difficulty, but depression was not clinically assessed in this study. These findings describe the experiences of the nine participants and should not be generalized to all Jamaican Olympians.

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Conclusions: Recommendations Made Directly by the Nine Participants

The recommendations reported in this study came directly from the nine Olympians interviewed. They are the participants' own proposals, expressed during the interviews and represented in the thematic analysis; they are not recommendations invented by the researcher to fit a predetermined theoretical argument or the original purpose of the study. Some recommendations extend beyond the immediate research questions, and they have been retained because they reflect what participants themselves considered important.

For future Olympians, participants recommended humility and perseverance; education and non-sport career development; access to coaching, medical and nutritional support; attention to psychological wellbeing; financial guidance and mentorship; and preparation for eventual retirement. For government and sporting authorities, their proposals included earlier and more sustained support, inclusive recognition of medalists and non-medalists, financial assistance during the four-year Olympic cycle, preparation of coaches and support staff to respond to athletes' wider needs, psychological support and structured retirement programmes. These recommendations should be understood as the views expressed across the nine interviews, not as a claim that each participant independently endorsed every proposal.

Taken together, the participant recommendations call for a more holistic and sustained approach to the lives of Jamaican Olympians. In discussing their implications, the researcher additionally advocates a hybrid model involving Olympians, coaches, sport psychologists and relevant government and non-government bodies. This hybrid implementation proposal is the researcher's synthesis of the evidence and is distinguished from the recommendations directly expressed by participants.

This study had some limitations. The sample was small, as many Olympians who were approached were not willing to participate, and those who were still hurt to speak, or who were frustrated with the sports administration, may have had experiences that are not captured here. The study did not specifically measure depression, and the experiences of participants who competed decades ago relied on recollection. Future research should examine the post-Olympic blues of medalists, which is also a critical area worthy of study, and should include Olympians from sports other than track and field.

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