

Training Opportunities for Estonian Elite Athletes in the COVID-19 situation

PARM Ü.¹, TOMINGAS T.¹, and TAMM A-L.^{1,*}

¹ Physiotherapy and Environmental Health Department, Tartu Health Care College, 50411 Tartu, Estonia; nooruse@nooruse.ee

*corresponding author:

e-mail: annaliisatamm@nooruse.ee

Abstract

COVID-19 pandemic influences different aspects of society, especially sports. The aim of research was to assess the changes in training conditions and aspects of training of Estonian elite athletes in the COVID-19 situation and get feedback of athletes' assessment about pandemic impact of the on Estonian sports. 102 Estonian athletes (\bar{x} = 58; 24.68 ± 8.55y) filled in the electronic self-rate questionnaire. The training of Estonian elite athletes in the COVID-19 situation continued but changed. Athletes were mostly disturbed by the cancellation of competitions (70.6%) and change in training conditions (62.1%). Instead of usual training places, forests, gardens, city streets, homes, as well as public bathing places (rivers, lakes) were used. The strongest negative impact of the pandemic according to athletes' opinions was on their economic situation. The majority of respondents (90.8%) were positive and thought that (1) the pandemic has little effect or (2) who were able to adapt to a new situation and stay motivated still come out of the situation even stronger. Governments and sport organizations should consider financial support for affected athletes in current situation, and also initiate prevention strategies for the future.

Keywords: COVID-19, elite athletes, training conditions

1. Introduction

SARS-CoV-2-virus 2019 (COVID-19) is a highly contagious and fatal respiratory pandemic that influence many different aspects of society, especially sports (Mehrsafar et al. 2020). In spring 2020, several national and international competitions (including the Olympic and Paralympic Games) were postponed or cancelled in an attempt to limit the virus spread by attending crowds.

The quarantine, social distancing, season's suspension and competition cancellation has negative effect on athletes' mental health (Parm et al. 2021, Torales et al. 2020), sleep quality, training possibilities (Mon-Lopez et al. 2020) and also the source on income (Toresdahl & Asif 2020).

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2. Materials ja methods

The Committee of Ethics of the University of Tartu approved the study (protocol no. 313/T-2, 30 April–4 May 2020). Estonian Olympic Committee sent the electronic questionnaire (electronic system connect.ee) on training conditions, factors that promote / limit training and COVID-19 influence to elite Estonian athletes (n=600) in May 2020. The self-rate questionnaire was composed by the authors of the article, and were tested using a representative sample including Estonian athletes (n=5).

For statistics the software program Sigma Plot for Windows version 11.0 (GmbH Formation, Germany) was used. Results are presented as means with standard deviation (SD), or percentages.

Results

90.2% of participants (n=102; \bar{x} = 58; 24.68 ± 8.55y) were elite athletes going in for individual sport; 30.4% had won a place in the top six in international title competitions. More than 20 different sport areas were represented; frequent were: track and field 22.6%, aquatics 18.6%, and skiing 13.8%. At the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak 70.6% prepared for international championships, including for Olympic Games (Parm et al. 2021); 10.8% trained in some foreign sports camps; 26.5% arrived from abroad from competitions or sports camp and were forced to stay in quarantine for two weeks.

The COVID-19 pandemic was pleasant for 24.5% athletes and for 45.1 unpleasant; while the introduction of pandemic restrictions was assessed by 53.9% as correct, with 18.6% believing that the restrictions were unreasonably harsh: "Measures would not have been necessary, only people at risk should have been quarantined". Nevertheless, 21.6% athletes admitted that the pandemic is more or less tiring; and 35.3% of respondents admitted minor non-compliance with the restrictions.

Athletes were most disturbed by the cancellation of competitions during the COVID-19 period. It was brought out by 70.6% of athletes. This was followed by a change in training conditions (62.1%), abandonment of training with training companions (48.3%) and ignorance of the future (24.1%). Athletes could not visit different healthcare specialists and this was unpleasant for 64.7% of them (Parm et al. 2021). The open-ended question highlighted, for example: “An important MRI scan was missed” (n=3); “Inflammation of the musculoskeletal system was not diagnosed in time and recovery from it was very long, because it was not possible to visit physiotherapist on a daily basis”.

Elite athletes were granted exemptions in the COVID-19 pandemic situation and were partially allowed to train in conventional gyms. However, there were complaints about the closure of swimming pools, ice halls and gyms; and symptoms of common cold during outdoor trainings in Estonian cold climate. The training possibilities prior and during the COVID-19 situation are presented in Figure 1. Instead of the usual training places, forests (“We set up a camp with a coach in the woods so that we could make the most of this time to improve my fitness”), gardens, city streets, homes, as well as public bathing places (rivers, lakes) were used for training.

According to 13 respondents (9.2%), the impact of the pandemic on Estonian sports is devastating. Fortunately, however, the majority of respondents (90.8%) is positive and thinks that the pandemic has little effect or that those who are able to adapt to a new situation (new training conditions; less direct contact with a coach; “Only those who are mentally weak and those who cannot force themselves to train without coaching will end their careers”) and stay motivated come out of the situation look even stronger (“The right athletes come out of the situation stronger than ever before”). It was pointed out that the pandemic situation and the partial closure of the gyms provide an opportunity to deal with one's own weaknesses, including the opportunity to recover from injuries. Socio-economic differences compared to economically better-off countries are also highlighted: “Richer countries have more opportunities, Estonia also has no mountains and thus training cannot be conducted at the required altitudes”. Still, athletes hope to be in shape as soon as the first competitions take place (70.6%).

According to the elite Estonian athletes opinions, the strongest negative impact of the pandemic is probably on the economic situation (finding / losing sponsors; decreased support of clubs and sports organizations; lack of prize money); 40.2% of athletes paid attention to it; 9.8% had already lost a sponsor; 11.8% had income cut (including prize money, the support from national sports federation; Parm et al. 2021). Athletes point out: “I am afraid that many athletes will have to do extra work to succeed financially. However, this can affect the training schedule and thus the results of the competition”; “It is more difficult to reach the top, because it is difficult to find supporters and competitions with good prize money”.

3. Discussion

COVID-19 affects society as a whole (Chakrabortya and Maity 2020), but changes in training conditions and the cancellation of competitions can be the basis for ending an athlete's career (Garcia-Garcia et al. 2020). The results of the survey showed that although there are those who think that the impact of the pandemic on Estonian sports is devastating, most athletes were still positive and tried to take advantage of the situation. Athletes' attention was paid to so-called weaknesses and the focus was also on recovery from injuries. When recovering from training and injuries, there was still a lack of close cooperation with a physiotherapist. Jukic et al. (2020) has also recommended using the COVID-19 situation for psychological and mental restart. Impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of elite athletes have been repeatedly highlighted by researchers (Facer-Childs et al. 2021, Håkansson et al. 2020).

During COVID-19 pandemic traditional training places were replaced by forests, gardens and public bathing areas. For example, at the end of April, the temperature in Estonian waters is still cool (the average temperature in inland waters is 4-10 degrees; <https://bit.ly/3au9miv>); so it can be said that athletes really did a lot to not to lose physical fitness. Many athletes also paid attention to freezing on an outdoor trainer. However, there are also sports where training outdoors does not give the desired result (eg rhythmic gymnasts need a floor of a certain size and flat surface).

It is to be hoped that the COVID-19 virus would not affect our lives forever, but at the moment the virus is not yet showing any signs of regression (<https://bit.ly/3eoFhSQ>). There are several safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines (AstraZeneca/Oxford vaccine, Johnson and Johnson, Moderna, Pfizer/BionTech) that prevent us from getting seriously ill or die. World Health Organization suggests to vaccinate as soon as possible and not wait (<https://bit.ly/3tHKCec>). Athlete training conditions (opening of gyms, training with training partners, visiting a physiotherapist, etc.) might be improved by vaccinating elite athletes. Especially in view of the upcoming Olympic Games, where many athletes from different countries will inadvertently come across. It is hoped that the time for vaccination will soon reach the members of the Estonian Olympic team. According to International Olympic Committee's President Thomas Bach a significant number of Olympic teams had already been vaccinated (<https://bit.ly/3tHJM00>), which gives confidence that the Olympics will run without serious consequences.

4. Conclusion

The training of Estonian elite athletes in the COVID-19 situation continued, partly under different conditions. Our results confirm the idea of Mehrsafari et al. (2020), who proposes the governments and sport organizations to consider financial support for affected athletes in current

situation, and also initiate prevention strategies for the future.

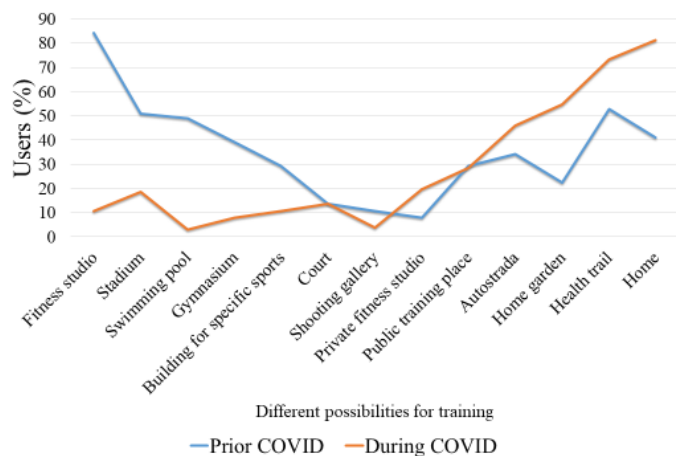


Figure 1. Training opportunities prior and during the COVID-19 situation

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