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Competition Bans After Positive Drug Samples

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The Experience of Competition Ban Following a Positive Doping Sample Of Elite Athletes

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World Anti-Doping Association (WADA) is responsible for doping-free sporting contests and is the only sporting body posing relevant competition sanctions. While doping relates to various controversial attitudes and beliefs proposed in the past, the confirmation of a competition ban following a doping violation has many negative connotations for the lives of the athletes. This can elicit multiple significant and far-reaching implications for them and their close ones. Aiming to better understand these implications in an athlete's life, 5 Greek male and female athletes having recently received a competition ban after a doping violation were interviewed. Qualitative analysis of the data showed that many important psychological, social, and financial implications follow such a sanction. Most importantly, these consequences may even contribute to indications of poor mental and physical health. Discussion of the results provides suggestions for the alleviation of the negative consequences following an involuntary sporting career pause or termination.

The purpose of World Anti-Doping Association (WADA) is to protect athletes' right to participate in doping-free sport and promote health, fairness, and equality for athletes worldwide, ensuring harmonized, coordinated, and effective antidoping programs at national and international levels (World Anti-Doping Code, 2015). Among the ways to fail a doping test is the presence of a prohibited substance or its metabolites, evading or tampering with the doping control sample collection, and/or refusing or failing without compelling justification to submit a sample for collection.

Doping has spurred many discussions leading to published opinions regarding its effects on human health and the need for equal means of achieving sporting excellence. Although doping phenomena have received quite a thorough theoretical analysis of motives and decisions (Operant Conditioning, Theory of Planned Behavior, Goal Orientation Theory, etc.), no related theoretical construct has received adequate research support (Lutz & Arent, 2008).

To date, being unable to find robust evidence on a proxy agent leading to doping phenomena seems to justify the consideration of newer theoretical notions to examine the drive toward illicit substance use. As elite athletes can easily form a distinct group through their lifestyles and everyday schedules, they seem to easily establish a personal reference separating themselves from others via common experiences and everyday contacts (i.e., belonging in a separate "ingroup"). Social Projection Theory could help explain the decision to remove any reservations against performance enhancing drugs (PEDs; Krueger & Massey, 2009; Robbins & Krueger, 2005). This theory posits that when one perceives oneself to be a member of a particular group,

this creates certain actions to appear acceptable to other members' "ingroup" choices. Tending to believe that improved performance is closely associated to PEDs, an athlete may yield and receive illicit substances for improving his/her own records through predicting his/her "ingroup" members' actions and choices. Although to the best of our knowledge this theory has not been tested yet in the doping literature, it may hold an increased explanatory potential regarding reasons leading to PED since similar complex behavioral choices have been successfully justified in-vitro conditions (Krueger, 2012).

Athletes' decision to dope is related to their need for ergogenic supplement doses that have the potential to positively influence their performance (Backhouse et al., 2011; Petróczi, Mazanov & Naughton, 2011); the need for increased self-confidence and motivation (Whitaker, Long, Petroczi, & Backhouse, 2012); the will to stay in the sport and be part of the team (Kirby, Moran & Guerin, 2011); a forthcoming career transition (Petróczi & Aidman, 2008); and a performance setback or a competitive failure (Lentillon-Kaestner & Carstairs, 2010). External factors pressuring athletes to engage in doping relate to a performance-enhancing culture that forces them to illicit substances as an act of solidarity among other athletes (Petróczi & Aidman, 2008), with the possible involvement of sports physician in the doping process (Waddington & Smith, 2009).

World class athletes are under continuous pressure for improved performance and consistency in winning through their participation in many international competitions. In particular, participating and becoming an award-winning athlete during the Olympic Games signifies an important goal for an athlete's life, representing the pinnacle of athletic achievement (Gould & Maynard, 2009), with the expectation to outperform other opponents creating a significant pressure from all the stakeholders, the fans, and the media (Millman & Ross, 2003). This situation contributes to significant psychological pressure having "a constraining influence on the mind" (p.39) of the competing athletes (Haberl, 2007). Based on the most recent contract of television rights for the Olympic Games that overtook \$2 billion (Baker, June 27, 2012), the cost of winning versus losing became even more significant and the well-known "Olympic spirit" seems to create a heavy load on the competitors' shoulders. As elite athletes, even in the so called "amateur sports," need to train for long hours each day making their sport involvement identical to a professional career, it is important to remember that there is no other profession that people are in such pressure to use potentially damaging drugs to continue a successful career. Moreover, elite athletes are expected to provide a urine sample all year round to continue their profession, and in the case of a positive drug test, the drug user carries a stigma that may lead to a probable career termination with little or no consequence to the suppliers of the banned substances (Sekulic, 2011).

Doping has been synonymous to cheating and ill-health activity (Moran, Guerin, & Kirby, 2008). Sporting bodies and WADA trying to eliminate the act of taking illegal drugs for performance improvement have posed stricter punishments for doping than for any other sport-related rule violation, leading the majority of sport fans to be in favor of tough measures against athletes involved in doping (Solberg, Hanstad & Thøring, 2010).

Even though many researchers have explored the motivators and the deterrents of doping, there are no published clues regarding the actual consequences of a competition ban following a positive doping sample. It is quite likely that the

inescapable consequences following a competition ban are forcing athletes to further sudden life changes. Such changes may signify major losses, coupled with important social consequences due to social exclusion, criticism, and isolation. In addition, the possibility of financial problems due to the lack of sponsorship and financial aids is great (D'Angelo & Tamburrini, 2010; Kayser, Mauron, & Miah, 2007).

On the other hand, a competition ban after a positive doping sample obliges athletes to a two-year sporting career interruption. Depending on the athletes' characteristics and the particular conditions they face during this period, a forced career diversion may lead to significant life decisions, such as a compulsory career change for the offending athlete. Involuntary career change or an obligatory sport retirement is a subjective experience occurring to a given person, at a certain time and for particular reasons. Sinclair and Orlick (1993) proposed 11 factors related to involuntary career change. Among others they indicated major social and relationship difficulties, loss of self-confidence, financial problems, loss of status, and lack of competence in other activities, with each athlete reacting differently according to his/her individual, social, and cultural characteristics.

Trying to theoretically analyze the reasons of taking PES and the psychological consequences of a doping sanction on athletes' lives, Piffaretti (2011) interviewed 11 athletes who already had received a competition sanction due to doping violation. Trying to sum up these reactions, he proposed three stages of emotional reactions: The acute stage, the realization stage, and the acceptance stage. During the realization stage that according to Piffaretti starts a few weeks to three months after the start of the sanction, athletes seem to experience the most negative emotion reactions. These reactions were so intense that most athletes were not able to overcome the discomfort, the sadness, the loss of self-esteem, and the social consequences even after the end of the 2-year sanction period. The third phase was related to a gradual decrease of the athletes' emotional reactions, a new formation of the athletic identity, and a starting point of a professional activity outside the sporting context. Nevertheless, some of the interviewed athletes reported an enduring bitterness and an inability to reorganize their personal and professional lives well after the period of the doping ban (Piffaretti, 2011).

Greece is the birthplace of the Olympic Games, and Greeks are always keen on reentering classic Hellenic values (such as tolerance, solidarity, sense of measure, human dignity, etc.) in modern Olympic Games (Karkatsoulis, Michalopoulos, & Moustakatou, 2005). Nevertheless, the sense of fairness, solidarity, and pride that was received as a national identity by large parts of the Greek society before the Athens 2004 Olympic Games (Karkatsoulis et al., 2005) has been wounded by sanctions over doping cases, with many athletes of the Greek National having been banned before their participation in the 2008 Olympic Games over a doping scandal that received worldwide interest (BBC Sport, 2008; Maltezou, 2008). Increased concern over doping and dietary supplements used by Greek athletes along with studies that have confirmed the need for education and proactive measures against the use of illicit PES (Barkoukis, Lazuras, Tsorbatzoudis, et al., 2011; Lazuras, Barkoukis, Rodafinos, et al., 2010), plus the fact that Greece has introduced the terms of fairness (“dikaion”), competition (“agon”), and emulation (“amilla”), create a unique environment for studying various aspects of doping related issues.

Psychological reactions that follow a doping ban have not received much attention until today. The current study aims to fill this gap: It aims to shed more light on the

psychological reactions and the social-financial consequences in the lives of Olympic-level Greek athletes facing a competition ban after a doping violation.

Method

Study Design

Due to the nature of the phenomenon under study, a qualitative methodology was chosen for collecting and analyzing the data. The qualitative approach is appropriate for understanding the experiences of a group of people and enables the in-depth study of complex phenomena such as emotions, cognitive processes, or mental states that are difficult to investigate through quantitative methods (Neimeyer & Hogan, 2001).

The present study used the hermeneutic phenomenological approach as outlined by Heidegger (1962), because it enables the understanding of the participants' subjective reality and of how people make sense of their personal and social world. The aim of hermeneutic phenomenological approach is to explore in detail the meaning attached to particular experiences, events, or states focusing on the personal account or perception of a particular experience (Smith & Osborn, 2008). In the current study, the phenomenon under study is the elite athlete's experience of competition ban following a doping rule violation.

Sample

Inclusion criteria for the sample were that the participants had to be elite athletes (having won titles in Olympic and European games) who were banned from competitive events due to their inability to successfully pass an antidoping test during the previous year of the actual period the interviews were scheduled. All athletes had to participate in individual sports to share an individualized type of achievement (i.e., individual scores) and the same sense of competitive accomplishment.

Athletes who met the above criteria were initially chosen by the first author on the basis of accessibility via mutual acquaintances, mostly colleagues or other athletes. The researcher explained to the contact persons the aims of the study and asked them to approach the chosen elite athletes and introduce the authors and the goals of the study. This preliminary step was considered necessary to address issues of trust and surpass the expected suspiciousness felt by the athletes who already had been exposed to negative publicity. At first, contact persons explained to the athletes the goals of the study and the identity of the researchers and asked for their permission to be contacted over the phone by the first author for further details. Giving their permission they were contacted via telephone by the first author. Following that the study purpose and procedure were explained, and issues of trust were successfully addressed. It was then that the athletes agreed to participate in an interview to describe their experience of the particular incident. The place that the interview took place relied on the athletes' preferences and it was either at their own home or at the researchers' office. All athletes were informed about the confidentiality of the procedure and gave their consent on tape-recording the interview.

Participants

Five highly successful world-level athletes in individual sports agreed to participate in the study. All athletes competed at an international level for more than ten years, having accomplished significant records or having won Olympic medals. Three of

these athletes were males and two females. All five athletes received a competition ban due to a failed antidoping test during the year before the interview. All athletes were interviewed 8–10 months after the competition ban. Their age ranged from 22–29 years.

Athletes of four different individual sports participated in the study (the name of the sport is not mentioned for confidentiality reasons). These athletes were sanctioned for taking two types of PEDs: Methyltrienolone (Metribolone) and Testosterone. None of the interviewed athletes admitted receiving the particular substance. Nevertheless, no athlete that has been sanctioned over a doping substance in Greece has ever admitted using doping substances in public.

Data Collection

Data were collected through interviews based on a semistructured protocol (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). The interview guide included four key questions posed to each participant by one of the authors (Table 1). Apart from the few preset questions, the interviewers' aim was to encourage respondents to talk freely about their unique experience. Follow-up open-ended questions inviting interviewees to further talk and elaborate on their experiences were also asked. Interviews lasted approximately 60–150 min. After the completion of each interview and stopping the tape recorder each participant was asked to give his/her feedback about the experience of the interview. All athletes provided positive feedback, reporting that it had been a highly emotional but meaningful experience. Some felt relieved for having shared their story and perspective; some hoped that their example would influence and teach young athletes while others reaffirmed their strengths and resources to cope. All of them were also interested in having feedback on the results after the completion of the study.

\insert table 1 here\

Data Analysis

Data analysis was a process that involved the following phases: (a) Verbatim transcription of the interviews, (b) Ordering of emerging themes. At first, through repetitive reading of the transcripts a free textual analysis was done in search of meaning units, themes, similarities, differences, insights etc. Each word or expression that described an aspect of their experience was isolated from the text, similar answers and emerging themes were listed and were further grouped into categories. Ordering of the emerging themes was followed by exploring possible connections between them. This process enabled the clustering of separate themes into wider categories or superordinate themes. At first, the above procedure was done separately for each interview in a vertical manner, coding themes according to the concepts they represented such as emotion, reaction, thought, behavior, etc. Coding was done manually. After all transcripts were separately coded, a similar horizontal comparative analysis among all interviews took place. The above stages of data analysis were completed separately and independently by the two authors who had experience in different areas of expertise (sport psychology and health psychology) to ensure independent evaluation and interpretation. Afterward, the two authors discussed their preliminary findings, allowing comparison and emergence of new categories or rearrangement of data through constant comparative analysis. Finally, (c) Conclusions drawing and narrative account structuring of emerging themes. Through comparative

analysis possible correlations between themes emerged which were verified through repetitive direct reference to the primary source material (the actual words of the participants) and conclusions were gradually drawn. Finally, the basic themes were integrated into a narrative account, supported and illustrated through verbatim quotes from the transcripts (Heidegger 1962; Smith & Osborn, 2008; Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Another measure to establish the validity of the results, apart from the triangulation of investigators described above, was to obtain feedback from the participants on the interpretation of the data after the completion of the study. All participants supported the interpretation of findings.

Results

Below there is a description of elite athletes' experiences following a positive doping sample. Their narratives included the following themes: a) initial shock, b) striving for an explanation, c) social impact of the experience, d) financial impact, and e) psychological impact of the experience. These themes will be described in detail in the following sections. A brief description of the main findings is displayed in Table 2.

\insert table 2 here\

The Initial Shock

Based on the transcription of the interviews, the news of a positive result in doping control was a huge shock for the athletes of the sample. Their initial reactions were typical of a person who suddenly becomes aware of a painful and devastating event. They said that they felt surprise, disbelief, panic, and confusion as they tried to understand what happened. According to one athlete: "I was in a panic, and everything seemed blurred; I wished that I would just vanish from the face of the earth. I felt like I do not really exist. I could not stand on my own feet; it felt like I was falling down. I could not believe it . . ." (Athlete A). Another athlete described: "I felt like falling from the clouds [a Greek expression meaning that I was not aware of the situation and I was really well and optimistic without knowing the particular situation] when I heard about it . . . I did not know what to do . . . I felt that all ended here, zero; [I felt] like my feet were amputated" (Athlete E).

Striving for an Explanation

All interviewed athletes stated that they did not take deliberately any banned substances. Nobody, however, was able to provide a clear explanation of the events that led to the competition ban. One athlete said: "Who is to blame and who is not, is a pretty complex thing" (Athlete E). Most athletes tried to provide several alternative interpretations on how the illegal drugs were received, and they wondered if the sport agents knew the actual ingredients of the vitamins they were regularly receiving. In the same way, they wondered if there was anyone who actually knew about the substances they were receiving, and who that person might be. In similar terms, some athletes had the suspicion that—regardless of who actually knew about the illegal drugs and who was unaware of the particular information—there was an intention to hurt them personally as individuals, or the intention to hurt the Greek national squad, in general. As an athlete said: "After 2004 Olympic Games [where a doping scandal with two Greek athletes took place], all Greek athletes became the target indiscriminately, due to the mistakes of some trainers, some athletes, or the Greek

state. I believe that we are under attack” (Athlete C). And another athlete said: “Maybe there were particular individuals who intentionally tried to harm me; one other possible explanation is that something [an illegal substance] was given to me, but the question remains regarding who actually knew about the truth. I mean that I don’t know for sure who actually knew and who did not . . . I have come to the conclusion that they relied on true facts [in order to prosecute me], but I was chased by ill intent” (Athlete A). Finally, another athlete said: “I rule out the possibility that my coach supplied the substance to me knowing it’s illegal . . . The possible scenarios are that either someone else put something in the water during my warm-up while I was in the stadium, or that someone from ESKAN [the Greek WADA] tried to incriminate me. Nevertheless, in my opinion the most likely scenario is that we did not know 100% about the ingredients of the vitamin formula” (Athlete E).

Another athlete accused his coach, as he believed that the coach knew about the illegal substances included in the vitamin formula he was receiving: “I believed in him. Normally, he [the coach] is a man who is like your father. And as my father [the coach] said so [that nothing illegal is included in the vitamins], it was so” (Athlete A). Finally, a female athlete wondered whether the positive result of a drug test was associated with certain biochemical abnormalities occurring in her own body.

Overall, the interviewed athletes felt that they were the victims of a situation that was out of their control. At the same time, they felt confused and helpless as they were unable to identify who was actually responsible for their competition ban. According to one athlete: “I did not know with whom and what to get angry about . . . I was confused” (Athlete A). Another said: “I do not know what sort of games people play. Or, if indeed everything is clean and we are responsible for our own actions, I do not really know” (Athlete B). Finally, a third athlete said: “The fish stinks from the head [which is a Greek popular expression]. The athlete is the scapegoat, and the one who has to pay; after much thought I think that something was wrong with the substances [that we were receiving] and that those who provided the vitamins to us did not know about it. At any case, I was the one who took the blame” (Athlete D).

Consequently, the feelings of injustice, anger, and bitterness toward the situation were intense and this was evidenced in all the interviewed athletes. However, irrespective of any initial thoughts of taking legal action against the competition ban, all of them finally gave up and stopped any attempts to defend themselves through legal actions. As they argued, they felt that they did not have the strength to fight against a system that they considered to be powerful and invincible. As one athlete said: “They told me not to mess with the tycoon. Because if you want to continue to compete, you must complete your sentence. After your punishment has ended you may continue competing undisturbed. The tycoon is the world federation. I asked to go to the sports court and the expenses were around €70,000; so I felt that it was better for me to leave this amount of money in my bank account” (Athlete C). Others did not feel they had the psychological strength to start a legal fight. As an athlete said, “If I did defend myself with a lawyer the legal procedures would carry on for more than a year and a half or even for two years. I feel that I do not have the psychological strength to keep on doing this thing” (Athlete B).

Social Impact

All athletes expressed their disappointment over the disruption of their sporting careers. As one athlete said: “It’s like you have built a skyscraper, and suddenly there

comes a day when everything goes down to wreck and ruin” (Athlete A). This sudden disruption of a hitherto successful athletic career brought a number of painful changes and losses at many different levels. As one athlete stated: “After stumbling on an obstacle, I had to face a situation larger than a mountain” (Athlete D).

The initial shock that athletes felt when they heard about the positive result of the antidoping test came almost simultaneously with the social impact of this news. They worried about the impact of this event on their relatives and their relatives’ reactions, particularly their parents and close family members. “The first thing that came in my mind was how I was going to inform my parents about the competition ban, what they might say, because I was afraid that I might lose [the support of] the people I have got around me” (Athlete C).

Moreover, failing an antidoping test deeply changed the way others perceived these athletes. It reversed the previous feelings of admiration and popularity, and turned it into suspiciousness, disapproval, and even contempt. Athletes, especially during the first days, experienced anxiety, agony, and distress about this public image change as it was really difficult for them to confront other people. They perceived the media and people around to criticize them in a harsh way. As an athlete said, “I was feeling miserable as I was expecting to hear the people saying: ‘You are all the same; you all take illegal substances’ [due to the way the media published his doping story]” (Athlete B). Another athlete said, “I was ashamed to confront other people and even now I feel ashamed when people ask me details about the particular incident. I do not know what to say” (Athlete A). Another athlete described how he felt, “The first time I went on the field [for training] I felt a little uncomfortable. I was ashamed, ashamed to go to the University exams; the most difficult part was finding a way to deal with the public” (Athlete D).

At the same time, the announcement of a positive doping sample through the mass media gave nationwide coverage and international publicity to this event. Such a negative exposure led athletes to feel a sense of injustice, anger, and helplessness. As they described, in many cases the media addressed this incident in a partial and biased manner, as they condemned the athletes without waiting for the court decision and without seeking a thorough explanation of the real causes of the phenomenon. As they reported in the interviews, “TV stations and the media make things worse” (Athlete E) and “The reporter in a broadcast is willing to distort and tear everything apart in order to sell his story” (Athlete D).

The way the particular incident was presented in the media aggravated the situation and left athletes feeling that all their previous efforts and hard work was pointless. As their names were slandered over the occasion of a disputed fact, they felt like their sporting career and all their past achievements were erased. “After that, I feel a bitterness. I can’t prove what I can achieve as an athlete . . . all the records, the previous performances, and sporting successes are at once annihilated in the eyes of the people” (Athlete E).

Moreover, athletes felt that there was an attitude of generalized contempt and disgrace in the way high achievements in sports were conceptualized by the public, since people were led to believe that outstanding performance is not the result of intense training but the result of doping use. As one athlete described: “Back in the old days, people used to feel happy when they were watching an Olympic Games winner. Now they just say, ‘Ok, there’s nothing special about it,’ which is not true and

it really bothers me. Because they don't realize how much effort one has to put on this, how hard the athlete has to struggle" (Athlete C).

Another loss experienced by the interviewed athletes was the loss of trust in people and institutions. They felt an overall disappointment with the world of sports: "I felt betrayed by all this and disappointed by my own country and the people who I once thought were protecting me. I thought I was protected when in fact I was not, and it was my choice to stay by myself and leave, because I did not trust these people any more. I would not trust them again" (Athlete A).

Most of the interviewed athletes in these difficult moments felt betrayed by the related sporting federation and the state, as they did not receive the support and protection they were expecting. Bitterly, they pointed out the highly differentiated position of the state before and after the positive sample in the doping control: "[At] good times and when you win medals, everybody is next to you trying to share photos and the rest. After that . . . this is not nice. I felt bitter over this; I did not expect it to be like this. They could have called me over the phone just to say, 'How are you doing, where are you?' I was very disappointed because of that" (Athlete E). Another athlete said, "When you realize [you went] from the point of being number one and everybody wanting to stand next to you to suddenly finding yourself at the bottom, with everyone turning their back on you and ditching you, these are the really hard times" (Athlete D).

Financial Impact

The result of the doping test triggered the loss of a monthly wage they were receiving from the national federation, the loss of their sponsors' support, as well as the loss of other privileges, such as the right to live in athletes' accommodation rooms for free. Therefore, most athletes experienced significant financial losses, which signified a major downgrading of their quality of life, their autonomy, and standard of living. As an athlete stated, "It changes your whole life to know that you are not independent anymore; it took all my independence away . . . it's embarrassing in my age to ask money from my father . . . my father has to pay my living now. I'll have to find a job and work full time if I want to support myself, but that will mean that I won't have time to practice if I wish to continue my career as an elite athlete" (Athlete B).

Another athlete reported, "It was very hard for me to change my way of life. That was the toughest part . . . I had my own money and I used to live more comfortably, carefree, even though I was quite young" (Athlete E). In addition, three athletes reported that they were asked to leave their place of residence, as highly successful athletes in Greece have their residence rented by their sporting federation.

Psychological Impact

Having lost their point of reference, these athletes felt that they had lost much of themselves and their personal identity, no longer being able to realize themselves or where they belong. Losing their sense of self is reflected in their own words: "I was left in the dark . . . I don't know where I belong" (Athlete B). "I was disappointed because it was my whole life" (Athlete D). Another athlete described the anxiety he experienced when he felt that he lost the most essential elements of his life: "The most difficult part is when you have spent your life in a sporting ground and suddenly within a few months your whole life, your hobbies, and your goals change. I was in agony, not knowing if I could cope with the new situation; how it will be; if I will be

able to start again; how I will get by. There was tension and anxiety” (Athlete E). The significant loss of self-image and the sense of disruption resulting from the loss of personal identity was also apparent in the words of another athlete: “I looked for new goals. I found a job at a fitness gym; it is not something I like doing, though. I have not learned to love anything else in my life, I do not know where else I'm good at; I do not know what I can do or if I'm good at anything else. It seems strange to me not being able to engage myself with what I know I'm good at” (Athlete B).

At the same time, these athletes seem to have lost the sense of long-term perspective and their orientation as they are not able to make plans for the future and to envision some form of continuity or recovery. They experienced a loss of dreams and goals which made things really difficult for them. As an athlete said, “I still cannot believe that I do not compete. I am away from my objectives; I am far from my goals, out of life. I'm somewhere else; I'm not an athlete anymore” (Athlete D). And another athlete said, “It changes all your plans. I felt very bad not only for what happened but also for not knowing what I should do afterwards” (Athlete E).

Most athletes were particularly concerned about the future and had great difficulty thinking about it: “The hardest thing is that if you ask me now ‘how do you see yourself 10 years from now?’ I cannot answer that at all; I have no idea. I was planning to train as an athlete until my thirties, but now I have no idea. I cannot say that I have a dream or a plan for what I want to do” (Athlete B). The same athlete added, “I have no idea relative to what I want for the future. A year ago, I had an answer. Now I have no idea; I do not know if I want to, if I have to, or if I can” (Athlete B). And another athlete said, “In the morning, I woke up just to find myself trembling with fear; not so much due to what I would deal with in sports, but with what I would face later in the future. What would I do from that point on? Back in the old days, it was different. I was certain that when I would stop competing there would be some open doors waiting. But after that [the positive doping sample], I only see closed doors everywhere” (Athlete A).

As athletes faced multiple losses, they showed signs of stress and depression. Among the symptoms they described were insomnia; appetite disorders; disorders of thought and memory; feelings of physical fatigue; phobias; anxiety; fear of the future; negative emotional state; low self-esteem; and withdrawal from social relationships and activities. As an athlete described, “I was so distressed, I did not want to go for training. I did not know if I wanted to continue; I started losing weight and I cried endlessly. For three months, there was not a day without tears. Waking up in the morning was very difficult for me, I fell asleep at five or six o'clock in the morning. Then I was continuously sweating, and it was very hard for me to talk about it. I felt that the others couldn't understand. I kept myself at a distance. At the beginning, it was very difficult. I was thinking of what I should do to be relieved from that burden I was feeling; it felt like I had 100 kilos right on my chest . . .” (Athlete B). And another athlete said, “Now, I feel like I've seen everything. What else is there to see in my life? The next worst thing would be death or an illness; there is nothing in between. Only a health problem could be worse compared to this . . .” (Athlete D).

Almost all of the interviewed athletes withdrew from relationships and social or professional networks that were previously in the center of their lives. They tried to isolate themselves to avoid recycling this painful situation. For some of them, it was difficult even to go for a workout in the sporting field or even to watch a sporting event as spectators. As one athlete said, “I did not go for training; it was out of the

question. It was impossible; any contacts with the rest of the athletes were restricted. I was going for a run once a month at a park. I did not want to go to the training field and need to answer questions on how and what; I did not want to. It was hard for me to watch the [Olympic] Games; I avoided it. And even now I avoid watching [Olympic] Games on TV” (Athlete E).

Discussion

The present study attempted to explore in depth the real-life consequences of a doping sanction by interviewing Olympic-level athletes during a competition ban period. The challenges associated with recruiting such a sample make this study unique in filling an important literature gap in the contemporary texts related to doping.

The results showed that when athletes were tested positive in an antidoping test, they were faced with shock and an unpredicted challenge along with multiple negative consequences. Competition ban brought a number of painful changes at many different levels of the athletes’ lives. Athletes found themselves unable to estimate the social impact of such a negative exposure. In addition, most of them revealed their great worry and fear over the reaction of their family members about the particular negative event.

Social identity and public image seem to be under great strain during such a crisis. Feelings of shame and embarrassment were shared among athletes as they felt unable to confront public outcry. All athletes felt that their stories were covered by the Greek media in a demeaning and prejudiced manner. Due to this negative media exposure, athletes felt that all their hard work and many years of great effort were disregarded in the pursuit for higher ratings of TV attendance. Feelings of disappointment, betrayal and distrust over their own country and the sporting federation representatives were commonly shared by most of the interviewed athletes, who felt isolated and degraded as individuals. These results seem to be supported by other studies dealing with the effects of organizational support in the athletes’ career: When athletes are at the peak of their sporting careers, they seem to receive the highest assistance from the organizations supporting them. Conversely, this support decreases dramatically when athletes terminate their careers (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007; Alfermann, Stambulova, & Zemaityte, 2004, Stambulova & Alfermann, 2011). Piffaretti (2011) in a similar way reported lack of support from the official structures in a sample of athletes enduring a doping sanction. These athletes expressed their disappointment over the way they were treated by the sports world at a time they needed them most. Assistance and support from sporting authorities seems to be even more important for the athletes who are willing to continue their sporting careers following a sanction period (Piffaretti, 2011). It is the first time such a lack of support of sporting authorities is evidenced by Olympic level athletes following a doping sanction.

Significant financial problems also followed this negative exposure. As these athletes have been financially supported for years by their national sporting organizations, this competition ban resulted in the loss of their income, an occasion that significantly deteriorated their life conditions and created a sense of insecurity and a loss of their independence. They also felt that the deterioration of their financial condition due to the competition ban was both unreasoned and unrelated to their violation, as they continued to declare their innocence over the substance abuse case. Athletes competing in other countries and sanctioned over doping violations did not report such lack of financial support (Piffaretti, 2011), possibly due to the existence of

various sponsors. As the main financial support of the Greek athletes comes from their national sporting federations, they seem to be in a more volatile economic position when they have to endure such a period of competition ban.

Personally identifying oneself with the athletic role contributes significantly to the creation of the athletic identity (Brewer, VanRaalte, & Linder, 1993). Athletic identity seems to be an important resource during the peak of the athletic career but it can become a barrier in the process of adaptation post career (Stambulova et al., 2009). After a series of losses identified through the interviews of the current study, athletes felt like they were missing the most essential elements and landmarks of their own existence. Most of them felt empty and lost as they described signs of personality crisis (e.g., looking for meaning in their lives). This psychological reaction coupled with the inability to make future plans triggered significant stress and depression symptoms in the majority of the interviewed athletes. Social isolation and withdrawal from the sporting environment came as a normal reaction to all these aversive psychological conditions. Significant negative psychological consequences related to negative internal states, complete psychological breakdown, hospitalization in psychiatric clinic, and even suicidal attempts were also reported by other athletes during a period of competition ban due to doping violations (Piffaretti, 2011). This finding seems to be also in agreement with the results of other studies that have found a strong relationship between high athletic identity and less positive reactions to retirement and the adaptation process (Alferman et al., 2004; Lally, 2007; Lavallee & Robinson, 2007). Even though the athletes in this study were not in a position to take a final decision regarding the termination of their sporting career, it seems that their reactions share many elements of the psychological response related to the career termination process described by the aforementioned authors. Estimating the effects of athletic identity on the athletes' psychological reactions after such a negative incidence was not in the objectives of the current study. Future studies need to examine the connection between athletic identity and the magnitude of psychological reactions following a doping sanction to shed more light in this potential relationship.

Adverse psychological states may also be associated to the incidence of sudden and violent termination of a competitive career. This finding is in line with various authors reporting similar problems in relation to an involuntary sporting career change (Alfermann et al., 2004; Fortunato & Marchant, 1999; Lally, 2007; Lavallee & Robinson, 2007; Lotysz & Short, 2004; Piffaretti, 2011; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). Further, they are in agreement with the studies examining the relationship of athletic injury to the loss or the reduction of athletic identity (Brewer & Cornelius, 2010; Koukouris, 1994; Ogilvie & Taylor, 1993; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). According to these studies, athletes tend to experience significant negative psychological states due to an injury terminated career expressed in the form of grief reactions, depression, separation, loneliness, and substance abuse (Pearson & Petitpas, 1990). It seems that a sudden sporting career interruption produces similar effects irrespective of the causes leading to temporary or permanent career obstruction.

Nevertheless, career interruption or career termination due to a doping violation appears to be even more difficult for the athletes under sanction as the current study provides the first clues relative to the true effects of such a ban: Social stigma over the athlete's reputation creates an unbearable burden that the athlete must endure for a lifetime and appears to create a new type of sporting career interruption (and/or

termination) that needs further research to explore its long-term effects. Athletes seem to encounter feelings of shame which are rife in every social encounter whereas social condemnation takes the place of the previously experienced social admiration and appreciation. There are suggestions that this moral opprobrium should be used in antidoping policy and practice as an effective way against the use of PEDs (Bloodworth & McNamee, 2010; Ehrnborg and Rosen, 2009). Nevertheless as the current study shows the multitude of consequences after a competition ban in the lives of elite athletes, postulates that the antidoping experts and authorities need to reconsider the means of preventing doping use and add the experience of adverse psychological, social, and financial consequences as a powerful message to persuade athletes not to use illegal substances to achieve an ephemeral victory.

Based on the results of the current study athletes were in the process of overcoming this extremely negative situation as they appeared to need additional time to cope efficiently. The analysis of the coping strategies used by the sanctioned athletes was not in the aims of this study. Long-term coping strategies used by the athletes to alleviate the particular negative event need to be examined in other studies in the future. Interviewing the same athletes after two or more years could shed more light on the coping strategies they used to continue their lives. Further, it could provide valuable clues on the type of interventions needed for appropriately supporting the athletes during this critical point of their lives.

Based on the notion that elite athletes face a competition realm that emphasizes victory and tangible rewards, accomplished only by the “lucky” few who manage to get the advantage of the split of the second, while the loser is being left out of fame and money, Johnson, Sacks, and Edmonds (2010), provided the idea of an individual counseling process as a means of decreasing the use of doping drugs for performance enhancement. Their idea is based on the application of three psychological theories and two clinical frameworks that have been proven effective in the elimination of drug addiction. Even though the particular idea lacks scientific verification as it has not yet been tested, the notion of an individualized counseling program aiming to help athletes realize who they are as individuals, the reasons they compete and the purpose of competition in their lives (Johnson, et al., 2010), has been already supported in the literature (Donahue, Miquelon, Valois, Goulet, Buist, and Vallerand, 2006). Similarly, Stambulova (2010) through a holistic lifespan perspective has developed a 5- step career plan to help structure and control situations occurring in the present and future of an athletic career, helping in this way the elaboration of forthcoming career transitions. Her work seems to provide a useful and applicable counseling methodology that could be used also in the case of athletes enduring a doping sanction. The present study provides evidence regarding the importance of such types of counseling approaches, as almost all interviewed athletes reported their need for counseling, both prior and after the competition ban, acknowledging the importance of personal exploration of inner needs and motives.

Evidence of negative psychological consequences following a doping sanction introduced by this study could be used by the antidoping authorities as an additional educational tool trying to persuade young athletes to avoid illicit performance substances. As athletes seem to perceive physical hazards of doping use to be quite distant due to their age and somatic abilities (Kirby, et al., 2011), young athletes need to realize the significance of various negative psychological symptoms that are both unavoidable and abrupt in the incidence of a doping violation.

None of the interviewed athletes admitted that he/she was actually taking an illegal substance during the period that the antidoping test occurred. As we are not in a position to know the reactions of an athlete sharing the same sociocultural characteristics and competition history with the athletes of the current study while admitting taking a banned substance after a positive doping test, it is a clear limitation of the current study not to include such a case. Nevertheless, negative psychological reactions were reported also admitted by athletes taking illicit drugs (Piffaretti, 2011) denoting that these reactions do not seem to be influenced by such an acknowledgment. In any case, future attempts to replicate and extend the findings of this study need to tackle this limitation.

This study attempted to provide some initial clues regarding the various consequences of a competition ban due to doping violation. Hopefully its results will urge sporting organizations to attend to the social and psychological needs of banned athletes to protect their physical and mental health with the cooperation of mental health organizations and professionals.

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Table 1 Interview Guide

Question Number	Question Content
1	How did you experience this incident (with reference on emotions, thoughts, and reactions)?
2	Which were the consequences of the particular event in your life?
3	How do you explain the particular event?
4	How did you cope with this event?

Table 2 A Brief Visual Representation of the Study Results

	Athlete A	Athlete B	Athlete C	Athlete D	Athlete E
Initial Shock/Disbelief/ Confusion	√	√	√	√	√
Feeling as a scapegoat/feeling victimized by sport authorities, state, or media	√	√	√	√	√
Social impact <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facing rejection/contempt by the community • Feeling ashamed, disgraced • Loss of trust to others 	√	√	-	√	√
Emotional disturbance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anger • Disappointment • Helplessness 	√	√	-	√	√
Financial problems	√	√	√	√	√
Personal identity crisis Loss of long-term perspective/orientation	√	√	-	√	√
Clinical psychological symptoms <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insomnia, appetite disorders, lack of concentration, memory loss, fatigue, anxiety, phobia, lowered self-esteem, withdrawal from relationships/activities 	√	√	-	√	√
Sporting career termination	-	√	√	-	√

