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‘Post-Olympic Blues’ –The Diminution of Celebrity in Olympic Athletes

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27 Abstract

28 *Objectives:* To explore the concept of the ‘post-Olympic blues’ through examining the  
29 antecedents of the negative affect experienced following Olympic participation and to articulate  
30 whether the post-Olympic blues is a ‘normal’ short-term phenomenon or whether it is more  
31 serious and enduring.

32 *Design and method:* Four female British athletes who competed in the 2016 Rio Olympic Games  
33 were interviewed and asked to draw timelines about their Olympic experiences on one or two  
34 occasions. The interviews and timelines were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological  
35 Analysis.

36 *Results:* The athletes’ experiences of the Olympic and post-Olympic period were characterized by  
37 highs around the Olympic Games and lows following their return to the United Kingdom. There  
38 were distinct temporal periods that were pertinent in the consideration of the ‘post-Olympic  
39 blues’; *The Olympic Experience*, *The Homecoming*, and *Moving Forwards*. A fourth theme  
40 *Celebrity* involved integral and dynamic development over time. *Celebrity* comprised the  
41 development and the subsequent destruction of the athletes as celebrities.

42 *Conclusion:* This study has articulated what post-Olympic blues means to those who have  
43 experienced it, identified the negative impact that the athletes’ celebrityization had on their mental  
44 wellbeing, and suggested that the negative emotions and subsequent behaviors were interpreted to  
45 be a normal response to returning home following Olympic participation. It is hoped that this  
46 research will engage coaching teams to formulate what support should be offered for athletes  
47 prior to and after the Olympic Games to limit the wellbeing impact that that the post-Olympic  
48 blues has on athletes.

49 **Keywords:** depression; depressive symptoms; elite; mental health; Olympic Games

50

51 'Post-Olympic Blues' – The Diminution of Celebrity in Olympic Athletes  
52 As athletes left the Rio Olympic village in 2016 and returned home, academics,  
53 journalists, and sports reporters were warning of the risk of the 'post-Olympic blues' for athletes  
54 (e.g., Florio & Shapiro, 2016; Howells, 2016; Pendleton, 2016). A perusal of online media  
55 revealed that the flurry of writing activity on this topic corresponds with the quadrennial cycle of  
56 the Olympic Games, and the articles published detail stories of athletes feeling lost, confused, and  
57 without purpose. Noting the same occurrence following the London Olympic Games in 2012,  
58 Uphill and Dray (2013) commented that: "Media reports of the 'Olympic Blues' among athletes  
59 have been considerable yet our scientific understanding of athletes' post-competitive emotional  
60 reactions has been largely neglected" (p. 660). Since that rather pejorative reflection on the  
61 academic reaction to what the media appear to have identified using anecdotal reports, there has  
62 been a relatively muted response from the academic community and few have focused on the  
63 post-Olympic period as a critical time in respect of the wellbeing of the athletes.

64 There are a few exceptions, whereby sport psychologists have focused on interventions  
65 during specific Olympic quadrennial cycles. Reporting on the psychological preparation of the  
66 2004 South African Olympic team, Gahwiler (2016) described a 5-stage model that was delivered  
67 by a team of sport psychologists. A novel characteristic of the program was the provision, for the  
68 first time, of a budget to support the post-Olympic intervention stage (which comprised stage  
69 five). This stage reflected the recognition of a need, "to support the re-integration of positive and  
70 negative Olympic experiences into the athletes' future lives and competitions" (p. 69). In  
71 evaluating the model, Gahwiler identified an uncertainty and lack of goal-focus in the athletes  
72 after competing in the Olympic Games that he posited was central to the (anecdotally) recognized  
73 phenomenon of 'post-Olympic depression'. Moreover, reflecting on their consulting experiences  
74 after the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympic Games, Gordin and Henschen (2012) articulated the  
75 "post-Olympic transition" (p. 96) as a time that was characterized by potentially detrimental  
76 organizational stressors (e.g., funding decisions made by National Governing Bodies [NGBs])

77 and the loss of a long-term goal for athletes. The authors warned of athletes' confusion,  
78 depressive symptoms, anger, resentment, abandonment, or emptiness and suggested that the  
79 formulation of new goals may assist in dealing with the problem (Gordin & Henschen, 2012).

80 More recently, prior to the London 2012 Olympic Games, the Irish Institute of Sport (IIS)  
81 implemented a post-Olympic career transition program to increase athletes' coping resources to  
82 successfully negotiate the post-Olympic period. Their program comprised three tiers of support  
83 that were initiated in the year before the Games. The latter two tiers focused specifically on the  
84 normalization and management of the post-Olympic experience (McArdle, Moore, & Lyons,  
85 2014). The authors recommended that athletes should have two contacts with psychological  
86 services to support this challenging career transition. They stressed the importance of  
87 psychoeducation involving anticipatory coping which involves an individual preparing to deal  
88 with a future critical event (cf. Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). The program was well received by  
89 athletes who benefited from anticipatory and proactive coping and considered that the opportunity  
90 to disclose to an independent sport psychologist was cathartic. A similar intervention study  
91 (Samuel, Tenenbaum, & Bar-Meher, 2016) conceptualized the Olympic Games as a career  
92 transition with six distinct phases (the sixth being the post-Olympic experience). They found that  
93 the motivation of Israeli athletes who competed in the London 2012 Games to continue in their  
94 sport after the Olympic Games was related to their satisfaction in their coping after their Olympic  
95 Games experience, and the provision of professional support. However, importantly, the authors  
96 reported that the athletes experienced a decrease in motivation after the Games alluding to a  
97 period of the 'blues'. This program highlights the importance of a focus on coping strategies and  
98 professional psychological support. Finally, Schinke, Stambulova, Trepanier and Oghene (2015)  
99 reported on the first step of a project developing support for the Canadian Boxing Team in the  
100 2013–2016 Olympic cycle which conceptualized the Olympic experience as comprising six career  
101 meta-transitions. During the final meta-transition (i.e., the "post-Games") the program  
102 endeavoured: (a) to develop ideas of how to further improve the National Team Program; and (b)

103 to ensure that the boxers were supported in the instigation of new goals in sport/life. The authors  
104 acknowledged that “sadness” (p. 85) may occur as the boxers negotiate their future pathways, but  
105 suggested that it was paradoxically accompanied with excitement for the future.

106         Despite this relatively subdued academic response, Olympic athletes such as the 10K  
107 Swimming Bronze medalist in Beijing 2008, Cassie Patten, have been vocal in articulating their  
108 experiences, revealing to Sky Sports (2012) that “In the year after the Games, I felt lost. I got  
109 really depressed, I was really unhappy. I would come swimming and just sit on poolside and just  
110 cry”. It has been suggested that these athletes may be susceptible to significant depressive  
111 symptoms as they struggle to adapt to ‘regular life’ following their return from the Olympic  
112 Games; this is particularly the case for those who have a strong athletic identity (see, Brewer, Van  
113 Raalte, & Linder, 1993). These athletes are inclined to have a myopic focus on their sport  
114 performance and find it difficult to balance other aspects of their non-sports lives (Howells &  
115 Fletcher, 2015). Somewhat counter-intuitively, failure to win a gold medal is not a sufficient  
116 explanation for the negative affect that may be experienced after the Olympic Games have ended,  
117 as Olympic swimming champions, Allison Schmitt (USA) and Michael Phelps (USA) have also  
118 been open about experiencing depressive symptoms within months of returning from Olympic  
119 success (Frank, 2016). Victoria Pendleton, a British cyclist who won a gold medal in the 2012  
120 London Olympic Games, stated in a media article: “It’s almost easier to come second because you  
121 have something to aim for when you finish. When you win, you suddenly feel lost” (Pendleton,  
122 2016). Murray-Williams a judoko (judo player) in the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games and his  
123 former coach Rhadi Ferguson labelled the depressive symptoms that Olympic athletes can  
124 reasonably expect to experience as constituting a condition they coined Post-Olympic Stress  
125 Disorder (POSD; Ferguson, & Murray, 2014). However, exploration of POSD as a disorder has  
126 not been pursued by either a clinical or an academic audience, therefore it is necessary to examine  
127 the wider literature on depressive disorders, depressive symptoms, and the blues to inform our  
128 understanding of the post-Olympic experience.

129           In the course of our lives, depressive symptoms are common, as fluctuations in mood are  
130 part of the human condition. Depression refers to a range of mental health issues characterized by:  
131 the absence of a positive affect (e.g., a loss of interest and enjoyment in everyday experiences);  
132 persistent low mood; and a range of cognitive, emotional and behavioral symptoms (NICE, 2009).  
133 Neither the origins nor the development of depressive disorders are definitively known. However,  
134 they are believed to be multi-factorial, and to be determined through a combination of genetic  
135 predisposition, psychological vulnerabilities, and life stressors (Malhi, et al., 2015). Certain  
136 clinical signs and symptoms of depression when grouped together form syndromes or conditions,  
137 such as Major Depressive Disorder (MDD; APA, 2013). The term ‘the blues’, with reference to  
138 Olympic performance, is reminiscent of the post-natal academic nomenclature of the 1970s and  
139 1980s when researchers (e.g., Edwards, 1973) began to distinguish between baby or postpartum  
140 blues and post-partum depression. In order to clarify what the ‘baby blues’ comprised, O’Hara  
141 and Wisner (2014) proposed using the ‘Handley Blues’ criteria to identify the presence of the  
142 blues if individuals experienced four or more commonly occurring features (e.g. crying and  
143 irritability) in the first week to 10 days postpartum. This is largely consistent with Kettunen,  
144 Koistinen, and Hintikka (2014) who identified the ‘baby blues’ as a transient mood disturbance  
145 which is manifested in certain behaviors such as tearfulness, as well as interpersonal  
146 hypersensitivity (i.e., heightened sensitivity to criticism and rejection), insomnia, and sometimes  
147 elation. It is also consistent with Buttner, O’Hara, and Watson’s (2012) identification of the  
148 postpartum blues as a relatively commonplace (experienced by circa 40-80% of post-partum  
149 women), mild, and transient mood disturbance that may manifest itself in the days after  
150 childbirth. Postpartum depression or a postpartum major depressive episode (APA, 2013), on the  
151 contrary is a diagnosable disorder, which is often defined as an episode of an MDD that occurs in  
152 the four weeks following delivery (APA, 2013; O’Hara & McCabe, 2013).

153           A further domain where the use of the term ‘blues’ has become a normative  
154 characterization to explain negative mood is in reference to the deleterious emotions experienced

155 by some brides following their marriage ceremonies. Gordin and Henschen (2012) likened the  
156 post-Olympic experience to ‘wedding blues’ as in both instances a goal has been pursued at the  
157 expense of many other activities, relationships, and endeavors and having reached the culmination  
158 of that goal, “an emptiness vacuum” (p. 96) remains. Specifically addressing this phenomenon,  
159 Carroll (2012) referred to a wedding as a ‘redemptive illusion’ which occurs when the bride, in a  
160 state of fantasy, identifies with the concept of celebrity, yet soon realizes that her life is neither  
161 transformed nor redeemed, and she experiences negative emotions that are termed the ‘blues’.  
162 This concept of celebrity was alluded to in a qualitative investigation by Jackson, Dover, and  
163 Mayocchi (1998) of the experiences of Australian Olympians who won a gold medal between  
164 1984 and 1992. The authors noted that the athletes were treated as “heroes” (p. 133) on their  
165 return home, but they struggled to cope with the high expectations placed upon them in both the  
166 sporting and public arenas and complained of feeling like “public property” (p. 128).

167         Across a variety of domains there has been a surge of interest in not just depression, but  
168 mental health in sport more generally. From an academic perspective, there have been peer-  
169 reviewed journals promoting special editions dedicated to the subject (e.g., *Frontiers in*  
170 *Psychology*; MacIntyre et al., 2016) and researchers have explored various aspects of mental  
171 health in sport (e.g., Newman et al., 2016). However, despite ongoing research related to  
172 depressive symptoms and the elite environment, it can be challenging for athletes to discuss their  
173 mental health concerns, due to the dominant narrative in elite sport that reiterates an expectation  
174 of ‘mental toughness’ in athletes; this has in turn exasperated the societal stigma of mental ill-  
175 health in athletes along with the public perception that exercise is curative of depression (e.g.,  
176 Morgan et al., 2013). However, the evidence is clear that within the elite sport environment there  
177 are a number of risk factors for significant depressive symptoms that include being elite (e.g.,  
178 Hughes & Leavey, 2012), identity foreclosure (e.g., Hughes & Leavey, 2012), the pressure to  
179 deliver peak performance (e.g., Weigand, Cohen. & Merenstein, 2013), sport specific demands  
180 (e.g., Nixdorf, Frank, & Beckmann, 2015) and retirement from elite sport (e.g., Lavalley &





207 hermeneutic, where “the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make  
208 sense of their world” (Smith & Osborn, 2015, p. 26). The focus of IPA is on the interpretations  
209 that participants have of their experiences and on their cognitive and affective reactions or  
210 accounts of what has happened to them (cf. Smith, 2011). Consequently, the present study  
211 focused not only on what happened, but also on how experiences impacted on the individual, and  
212 how perceptions of the impact of the experiences varied over time.

213         Individuals’ meaning-making activities are central to IPA and are informed by aspects of  
214 Heidegger’s (1962) phenomenology (cf. Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2013). Through engaging with  
215 IPA we acknowledge that the interpretation of events is both temporal and in relation to other  
216 aspects of our participants’ lives. Accordingly, the study employed two semi-structured  
217 interviews with three participants and (due to training and competition commitments) one semi-  
218 structured interview with one athlete. The use of two interviews and timelining allowed for an  
219 exploration of how perceptions of the post-Olympic period change (if at all) over a year and how  
220 they are impacted upon by other (more recent) experiences. Through utilizing two integrated  
221 qualitative methods, different perceptions of the athletes’ experiences over time were accessible,  
222 this nuanced understanding may not have been elicited through the use of interviews alone (cf.  
223 Williams, 2017). Cognizant of the lack of understanding of this topic area, we endeavored as  
224 much as possible to “be consciously naïve and open: and to be receptive to change and  
225 ambiguity” (Eatough & Smith, 2017, p. 206). Accordingly, although semi-structured interviews  
226 were utilized for data collection, at times the interviewer (first author) was led by the athletes  
227 through their experiences without feeling a need to be prescriptive about the order and form of the  
228 questions. At other times she guided the participant to engage in a more “deliberate controlled  
229 reflection” (Smith et al., 2013, p. 189) encouraging them to recall and interpret their experiences  
230 in more depth to allow an in-depth exploration of the post-Olympic experience (cf. Smith, 2017).

### 231 **Participants and Researchers.**

232         **Recruitment and inclusion criteria.** Following institutional ethical approval, a criterion-

233 based, purposive sampling strategy was used to identify a demographically homogenous sample  
234 (Robinson, 2014) of four participants who expressed an interest in talking about their experiences  
235 of the “post-Olympic blues” and the events that they perceived were contributory factors. The  
236 inclusion criteria comprised British female athletes who had competed at the Olympic Games in  
237 2016 in an individual sport, and who had made the decision to continue competing at an elite  
238 level after the Olympic Games. In the first instance NGBs were approached with a request for  
239 access to potential participants; one participant was recruited via this strategy. Two further  
240 athletes were recruited through personal contacts, and one athlete following an appeal for  
241 participants on Twitter.

242         **The athletes.** A brief synopsis of the participants is provided below; the names are  
243 pseudonyms and personal details are non-specific to ensure anonymity. All four athletes were  
244 white British and ranged in age from 24 to 37 years old at the time of their Olympic participation  
245 (*Mean* = 26.5, *SD* = 5.8).

246         ‘*Emily*’ is a non-funded endurance athlete who was competing in her first Olympic  
247 Games. The year prior to the Rio Olympic Games was uncertain for Emily as she was negatively  
248 affected by organizational stressors surrounding her Olympic (pre-) selection. Having qualified  
249 for her Olympic event, she was accompanied to Rio by her husband and her mother. She did not  
250 achieve her outcome goals which involved being above a particular placing; she attributed this  
251 failure to not “being brave enough”. Following her return to the United Kingdom (UK) her  
252 husband took her on a surprise vacation. Emily was distressed at times during the initial  
253 interview, crying on multiple occasions, but reflected in her second interview that the initial  
254 interview was a cathartic experience that facilitated a return to a state of normality.

255         ‘*Sian*’ is a funded swimmer, who was competing in her second Olympic Games (having  
256 previously competed at the London Olympic Games in 2012). Although Sian did not achieve her  
257 main outcome and performance goals, in one of her events she achieved a lifetime personal best.  
258 On her return to the UK she visited her immediate family whilst suffering from a mild illness and

259 then vacationed with her long-term partner. Shortly after her return she was told that she had lost  
260 her funding and that there were to be significant changes in the structure of her coaching team in  
261 the upcoming season. Sian was interviewed on one occasion only.

262         '*Ailsa*' is a funded field athlete who was competing in her second Olympic Games  
263 (having previously competed at the London Olympic Games in 2012). Following the London  
264 Olympic Games she set what she considered a realistic outcome goal of winning a Gold medal.  
265 However, her preparation for the Games was beleaguered by injury that at the time potentially  
266 jeopardized her Olympic qualification. As a consequence of her injury and subsequent  
267 rehabilitation, her outcome and performance goals were re-evaluated in the months before  
268 arriving in Rio. Accordingly, having qualified for the final in her event she was satisfied that she  
269 had achieved her goals. She was accompanied in Rio by her husband. On her return home her  
270 husband returned to work and she vacationed with another family member.

271         '*Hattie*' is a track athlete who is partially funded and was competing in her first Olympic  
272 Games. She was accompanied in Rio by her husband, but not by her coach who had not been  
273 selected as a team coach. On the day of her race she awoke with a temperature and a cough and  
274 felt that this had some impact on her performance. Ultimately, she did not feel that she achieved  
275 her goals. On her return home she went on a short city break with her husband. He then returned  
276 to work and shortly afterwards she returned to her part-time job and training.

277         **The researchers.** Understanding the motivations and backgrounds of the researchers is a  
278 fundamental facet of IPA to contextually locate their interpretations. This collaboration brought  
279 together two researchers with contrasting backgrounds and different research interests, yet whose  
280 beliefs and values are broadly aligned. The first author is a practicing applied sport psychologist  
281 who works with athletes at all levels predominantly from individual sports. Her research interests  
282 are in adversarial growth in elite and competitive athletes, and the impact of competitive sport on  
283 mental health particularly in elite sport. She has primarily engaged in qualitative research  
284 involving both IPA and narrative analysis. The second author has worked as a registered

285 occupational therapist in state-funded mental health services in the UK and New Zealand,  
286 predominantly in the child and adolescent mental health field. His research in mental health has  
287 been psychologically orientated with an emphasis on mood disorders, and has involved both  
288 qualitative and quantitative methodologies. There is coherence in the researchers' respective  
289 epistemological stances, in that both describe themselves as constructivist who are interested in  
290 making sense of peoples' own constructions of their experiences; this is despite tending towards a  
291 preference for different research methodologies. The researchers' respective contributions were  
292 predominantly in their areas of strengths, with the first author contributing her subject knowledge  
293 of elite sport and qualitative research, and the second author contributing his expertise in  
294 depression and human occupation/activity.

## 295 **Procedure**

296 **Data Collection.** Following institutional ethical approval at the authors' academic  
297 institution, a retired male swimmer who had competed in the London 2012 Olympic Games (and  
298 who was known to the first author), provided feedback on the interview questions. The questions  
299 were then subsequently refined. Despite an intention to interview athletes as soon as possible  
300 following their return from Rio, delays in recruitment, athletes' vacations, training schedules, and  
301 camps, meant that three athletes were interviewed 8 weeks after their return to the UK and then  
302 36 weeks after their initial interviews. Due to training and competition commitments one athlete  
303 was interviewed only on one occasion 18 weeks following her return. It is important that the  
304 reader is aware that the participants' reflections are on past events and their accounts represent the  
305 meanings that these experiences held at the point of interview (cf. Papatomas & Lavalley, 2010).

306 The initial interview commenced with participants being asked to draw a timeline of their  
307 experiences from their arrival in Brazil to the present day. Timelining is a form of graphic  
308 elicitation which records, extends, and deepens understanding of participants' past experiences  
309 (cf. Howells & Fletcher, 2016; Sheridan, Chamberlain, & Dupuis, 2011). In this study timelines  
310 provided a useful structure for the interviews and complemented discussions to encourage

311 participants' recall and interpretation of events. The interviews comprised four sections: the  
312 Olympic experience (e.g., "Can you tell me about your Olympic Games experience in Rio?"), the  
313 post-Olympic experience (e.g., "What was it like returning home after the Olympic Games?"),  
314 future plans (e.g., "Generally speaking, how do you feel about the future?"), and the interview  
315 process (e.g., "Can I contact you in about 9 months to a year for a follow up interview, to see how  
316 things have changed at least a year after Rio?"). However, to maintain the integrity of the  
317 participants' accounts and to allow them to focus on areas pertinent to them, the structure was  
318 used as a guide rather than a prescriptive formula. The second interview and associated timeline  
319 followed a similar format to the initial interview, but included questions on member reflections  
320 (cf. Smith & McGannon, 2017), that is, the participant's interpretations of the initial interview,  
321 involving for example, a collaborative exploration of similarities (and differences) in  
322 interpretations of the timelines, and additional participant-specific questions that emerged from an  
323 analysis of the information provided at the initial interview (e.g., In your last interview you  
324 displayed despondency about never feeling anything like what you experienced at the Olympic  
325 Games, have you've got any thoughts on that now?). The second timeline was useful as a  
326 comparative tool so the participants could visually reflect on variations across their timelines and  
327 the intensity of their emotional highs and lows. The interviews lasted from 44.30 minutes to 65.14  
328 minutes ( $M = 56.42$ ,  $SD = 7.87$ ), were recorded using an audio device, and manually transcribed.

329 **Data analysis.** IPA is idiographic in nature; analysis commences with a detailed  
330 examination of each case, which, in this study involved one or two interviews (i.e. an initial  
331 interview and a follow-up interview for three out of the four participants), one or two timelines  
332 (i.e. one timeline per interview), and correspondence in the form of emails between the  
333 participant(s) and the first author. In the first instance, the initial interview transcript and the  
334 associated timeline were reviewed thoroughly and repeatedly by the first author. Initial coding  
335 was carried out noting down anything of interest, interpretations and making summaries of ideas.  
336 This initial coding was utilized to inform the development of individualized interviews for each

337 participant's second interview. This procedure was then repeated for each of the initial interview  
338 transcripts. After the follow-up interview, the transcript of the second interview and the  
339 associated timeline was then subject to iterative and repetitive reading and initial coding. The  
340 individual participant's interviews were then combined and considered as a single case and,  
341 where applicable, additional coding was added to the original transcripts. From this stage  
342 recurrent themes were identified, with key words acting as codes. This procedure was then  
343 repeated for the remaining participants. The next stage involved the first author attempting to  
344 identify repeated patterns and thematic connections, both within and across transcripts.  
345 Throughout the data analysis the authors were cognizant of the need to identify differences as  
346 well as similarities (both within and between the athletes' accounts) and to be appreciative of:  
347 intersubjectivity; the sometimes shared and overlapping, relational engagement with our social  
348 world (cf. Heidegger, 1962).

#### 349 **Methodological rigor and quality**

350         The founder of IPA when reviewing a large corpus of IPA illness studies, argued that  
351 generic quality assessments lack the specificity required to assess the quality of an IPA study  
352 (Smith, 2011). Indeed, recently Smith and McGannon (2017) have argued against adopting an  
353 approach that judges *any* qualitative study in "preordained and set ways" (p. 16). Nevertheless, to  
354 encourage a reflective and dynamic appraisal of the quality of this research, the present study was  
355 designed and was iteratively appraised through engagement with Smith's (2011) principles of  
356 what constitutes good (and acceptable and unacceptable) IPA research. In light of criticisms  
357 surrounding the use of member checking to enhance the trustworthiness of a study (viz. Thomas,  
358 2017), this study utilized 'member reflections' (cf. Smith & McGannon, 2017) to encourage  
359 participant engagement, deep reflection, and as a means to understand the participant-constructed  
360 realities. This was realized through the follow-up interview which, in addition to exploring the  
361 main research question also involved both the researcher and the participant reflecting back on  
362 both the original interview and their respective appraisals having had the opportunity to reflect.

363 Given the small number of athletes who compete in each event at the Olympic Games there was a  
364 high possibility of breaching confidentiality via deductive disclosure in the process of writing up  
365 the analysis. Accordingly, following the second interview, participants were provided with an  
366 initial report to assist in the anonymizing process (cf. Smith & Gannon, 2017). Given the  
367 researchers' differing backgrounds, the second author acted as a critical friend (cf. Smith &  
368 McGannon, 2017) to the first author during the analysis, not to strive for consensus, to agree on  
369 themes, or to seek inter-rater reliability, but in the first instance, to provide a challenging voice in  
370 questioning the first author's assumptions about her specialist area of elite sport, and secondly,  
371 given his expertise in the field of mental health providing opportunities to discuss depression in  
372 the context of established theoretical frameworks.

### 373 **Results**

374 Analysis of the timelines revealed a consistent representation of the athletes' experiences  
375 of the Olympic and post-Olympic period that was characterized by highs around the Olympic  
376 Games and lows following their return to the UK (see Figure 1 as an example). There were two  
377 distinct temporal periods that were pertinent in the consideration of the 'post-Olympic blues'; the  
378 first *The Olympic Experience* and the second *The Homecoming*. A third theme that emerged from  
379 the interviews related to *Moving Forwards*. However, construing these three themes as discrete  
380 and mutually exclusive would be superficial and disingenuous to the athletes' experiences and we  
381 interpreted that a fourth theme *Celebrity* involved integral and dynamic development over time.  
382 *Celebrity* comprised the development and the subsequent destruction of the athletes as celebrities;  
383 the process commenced during *The Olympic Experience*, reached its peak during *The*  
384 *Homecoming*, and then is shattered shortly after. It has lost momentum in *Moving Forwards* and  
385 does not appear again. *Celebrity* is not presented as a separate theme but is evident in the themes  
386 and sub-themes presented forthwith. For a visual representation of the themes see Figure 2.

#### 387 **The Olympic Experience**

388 To provide insight and context into the participants' interpretations of the post-Olympic

389 experience, it was necessary to address the athletes' broader Olympic experiences. All four  
390 participants interpreted that their experiences both prior to and during the Olympic Games  
391 impacted on their cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses when they returned home, and  
392 consequently, how well (or otherwise) they managed the post-Olympic period. Accordingly, *The*  
393 *Olympic Experience* comprises two main sub-themes, *Preparation for Rio* and *The Games*.

394 **Preparation for Rio.** The process of striving for and achieving Olympic qualification,  
395 and the preparation in the months leading up to their participation at the Olympic Games involved  
396 the participants' active and autonomous *Event preparation*. This had psychological, physical, and  
397 practical aspects. Qualification for the Olympic Games also elevated the athletes to a status that  
398 warranted heteronomous participation in a system that involved their transformation into  
399 celebrity. This is further articulated in *Building celebrity*.

400 **Event preparation.** We interpreted that the extent to which the athletes retrospectively  
401 viewed their Olympic preparation impacted on their vulnerability to experience low mood  
402 following their return to the UK. Sian was positively informed by her prior participation at  
403 London 2012 and focused on her psychological preparation: "In London I was very daunted . . . I  
404 was overwhelmed by the whole thing . . . . So I kind of made it my mission to not do that for  
405 Rio". She interpreted that this preparation had a positive impact on her swimming performance  
406 and of the three athletes we interpreted that she was the least impacted by negative affect  
407 following the Olympic Games. The other three athletes, focused on more negative aspects and  
408 were particularly affected on their return by low mood. Ailsa appraised her eventual position in  
409 her event as "being amazing" given that she had had "injury after injury and missing so many  
410 months, even years of training". Hattie also focused on injury: "It was just after the Europeans  
411 that I found I got picked for the Olympics, but it was a bit stressful because I had a bit of a few  
412 niggles". Emily spoke at length about the organizational stressors involved in qualifying:

413 So I come off the back of Berlin [European championships] thinking I'd qualified for the  
414 Olympic Games . . . and they said sorry, we've not selected you, we're only selecting



415 people who we think are clear medal potential. . . . So that was just a punch in the face, a  
416 complete punch in the face because we were on a high.

417 ***Building celebrity.*** Irrespective of any prior participation at international competition,  
418 qualification and subsequent preparation for the Olympic Games involved the systematic  
419 development of a celebrity identity that was contingent on Olympic participation that is, being an  
420 Olympian. This identity and the athletes' commodification was promulgated at an organizational  
421 level through the provision of Great Britain (GB) official kit and memorabilia, and at an  
422 individual level through body modification in the form of tattoos. The participants spoke about  
423 the kitting process with excitement and pride although we interpreted that the development of the  
424 visible Olympian depersonalized and eclipsed the individual characteristics and achievements of  
425 these athletes. Ailsa explained: "I've got something to look forward to because . . . you go to  
426 Birmingham and you get all this free kit. And then you're excited that in a couple of months' time  
427 you're going to wear it all". Participation in this heterogenous system required the participants to  
428 engage in unfamiliar (albeit often exciting) practices that cemented their Olympian identity. For  
429 example, Emily talked about the "high" that she experienced following her qualification and how  
430 she was expected to engage with the media, an engagement that began her transformation into a  
431 celebrity. This engagement, which was not within the control of the athletes, was so intense that  
432 the athletes were not able to engage in any reflection on their situation:

433 I'd had two weeks of intense, we want to interview you, BBC Radio are ringing up or the  
434 newspapers, they're all wanting interviews, and it was just like people throwing things at  
435 you. I didn't have time to breathe or reflect or get down about anything.

436 **The Games.** There was dissociation between the narratives of the athletes' athletic  
437 performance in the their respective events and the narrative of being a celebrity Olympian in the  
438 Olympic Village. Accordingly, there were two distinct sub-themes evident in *The Games*, namely,  
439 *Performance matters* and *Intensifying celebrity*.

440 ***Performance matters.*** None of the athletes lost sight of their purpose, and that was that

441 their role was to represent their country in their respective events. This placed pressure on the  
442 athletes and perhaps unsurprisingly, the athletes experienced pre-event competitive anxiety and  
443 self-doubt competing in the biggest competition of their lives. As Ailsa explained:

444 My warm up was awful . . . a bit panicky. It's the biggest competition of the year, I  
445 needed to qualify for the final, and I'm not giving my best performance. . . . [I] calmed  
446 myself down and just was like 'you've got nothing to lose, just go out there and give it  
447 your best'.

448 Although the participants interpreted that the UK public were anticipating GB medals, the athletes  
449 were primarily performance and process goal focused. Nevertheless, for three athletes there was  
450 some incongruity about whether they achieved their goals. As Hattie explained:

451 I would have liked to have been in that final, but if you'd said to me this time last year  
452 "you'll make the Olympics but you won't make the final, you'll be disappointed". I'd be  
453 like, "no, no, no I wouldn't". But I think . . . you always want that tiny little bit more.

454 Ailsa explained that despite setting a realistic outcome goal, when she achieved it she was  
455 disappointed suggesting that her interpretations of her performance were situated in the context of  
456 her earlier expectation of becoming an Olympic champion which, at another point in time, may  
457 have been realistic:

458 In London . . . my coach said . . . you should be Olympic champion in four years. . . . But  
459 after having surgery a string of problems happened for me. . . . So we went to Rio wanting  
460 to make the final and then see what happened. . . . I came so close to winning a medal . . .  
461 but we were disappointed with that, but to finish [in the position achieved] was good.

462 ***Intensifying celebrity.*** The celebrity identity that had been molded in the build up to their  
463 arrival in Brazil was augmented following their arrival in the Olympic Village. Although the  
464 athletes were focused on their upcoming performances, they were in awe of the way that they  
465 were treated as members of the Olympic community and interpreted that "it made you feel special  
466 walking around in GB kit knowing that you're there at the pinnacle of your sport. . . . You're

467 spoiled for three weeks” (Ailsa). The culture at the village was one of extravagance, involving  
468 seemingly infinite resources and services. Sian described it paraphrasing a well-known idiom:  
469 “it’s like a little part of your brain that’s like a ten-year-old child that just wants to run around like  
470 you’re in a sweet shop”. This was elaborated on by Hattie who described:

471           The dinner hall was massive . . . you could have a curry for breakfast if you wanted it,  
472           there was food available all the time. . . . We got a free phone . . . and we got some nice  
473           little cards that said: ‘Once an Olympian, Always an Olympian’.

#### 474 **The Homecoming**

475           Initially, and irrespective of their individual experiences in Rio, the participants reached a  
476 point following their competitions and their subsequent sight-seeing opportunities that they were  
477 ready to return home, as Sian stated, “I just wanted to go home and be with my loved ones”. This  
478 expressed need to go home may represent a perceived vulnerability that represents the first overt  
479 sign of ‘the blues’ and some disconnection with their transient identities as celebrities in a village  
480 where they were devoid of autonomy. Sian explained:

481           You’re in the village and you’re in high security . . . we did go out, but it wasn't that easy  
482           to do. The village was based in the middle of nowhere. . . . And for me it sounds really  
483           sad, but I was counting down to go home and spend time with my family.

484 Their return to the UK was marked by the pomp and circumstance of a British Airways aircraft  
485 painted gold, a media frenzy, and homecoming parades. Initially, they mostly reveled in the  
486 attention that they received although this was tempered by an awareness that “it’s all about the  
487 medalists” (Ailsa). However, the attention waned, the athletes returned to their ‘mundane  
488 normality’, and they experienced feelings of being “lost” that we interpreted as being  
489 characteristic of the ‘post-Olympic blues’. Accordingly, there are three separate sub-themes; A  
490 *Celebrity Welcome, Reality Dawns, The Blues.*

491           **A Celebrity Welcome.** There was conflict within the athletes’ accounts that recognized  
492 the perception that they were special due to their participation at the Olympic Games but this was

493 tempered by the perception that they had *failed* to win medals.

494         *Something special.* The narrative of being something special that had begun during the  
495 preparation for the Games and had been reinforced in the Olympic Village continued as  
496 arrangements were made to bring the athletes home. Hattie described the experience:

497         We got on the plane and it was all exciting. That's another high . . . and that was  
498 something you'll never forget . . . we had champagne and sung the national anthem. . . .  
499 [and had] a special menu that said, a thing from the captain saying how proud everyone  
500 was and the food had been specially selected. . . . And then walking off the plane through  
501 the airport with everyone cheering and stuff was really nice.

502         *About the medalists.* Whilst echoing Hattie's excitement about the homecoming, the other  
503 athletes acknowledged that there was a hierarchy of attention, with more interest being given to  
504 the medalists. Sian explained that "I think it would have been more cool for the medalists because  
505 they all went in first class". Ailsa interpreted that despite the effort that had been made to create  
506 an exciting and visually appealing spectacle the focus on the medalists may have "reflect[ed] how  
507 low I felt after". She explained:

508         The medalists really get preferential treatment, but it's so black and white. When we  
509 arrived . . . all the medalists get off and have photos, and then all of a sudden it was like  
510 right everyone else can just disembark the flight. It just made me feel a bit rubbish.

511 This resonates with Emily's account. Describing her return home during her second interview she  
512 was able to cognitively appraise the impact that a conversation with a member of the public had  
513 on her at the time. However, she was also able to reflect on and reframe the erroneous  
514 assumptions of the general public:

515         The lady across from me was: "So you've been to the Olympic Games", because I was  
516 wearing the kit, and as soon as she said "Did you win a medal?" and I said "no", it was  
517 the end of conversation. It was like she didn't know what to say to me then. . . . It was like  
518 have I failed? And when I look back on it now, it's a massive achievement. There were

519           only three people in my event that were going to win a medal.

520           **Reality Dawns.** As the initial excitement of returning home subsided, the athletes were  
521 faced with the recognition that life had not changed appreciably, the routine tasks of living  
522 remained, and that their transient status as celebrities had not afforded them any special treatment  
523 at home. Accordingly, they had to cope with *The mundane* and *Lack of support*.

524           ***The mundane.*** The mundane represented an acknowledgement by the athletes that they  
525 were still required to engage in normal everyday behaviors which they found “boring” (Ailsa) or  
526 uninspiring following the excitement of the preceding months. Hattie explained:

527           Coming to work . . . is boring . . . [I] can’t be bothered to cook as much. You know, I’ve  
528 got to go shopping, I’ve got to spend money. I think it’s just like that. I just didn’t have  
529 quite that get up and go.

530 The need to engage with these routine tasks went beyond disinterest and created levels of  
531 frustration, as Emily explained:

532           There were days where I could have thrown the dishes everywhere and broken them. I  
533 didn’t want to do normal things. I don’t know what I wanted to do but I just didn’t want to  
534 do the washing up. I didn’t want to be washing clothes or cleaning or going to Tesco, it  
535 would drive me crazy.

536           Emily used a wedding metaphor to articulate her experiences of how it felt transitioning  
537 from being something special to being ordinary again:

538           It’s a bit like when you get married. . . . You build up to this day and you plan it and . . . it  
539 was an absolutely great day, but then you come back home. You go to Tesco [grocery  
540 store] shopping and nothing’s changed. Everything’s the same but you almost built it up  
541 as if you expect something to be different and it’s not.

542           ***Lack of support.*** The athletes talked at length about the lack of support that they  
543 perceived from the public and their significant others. Three of the athletes were surprised about  
544 how quickly interest in them waned, Ailsa explained: “Once the novelty had worn off I was kind

545 of just sat there at home like well this is a bit weird, I expected it to last for longer”. Hattie was  
546 disappointed by the public perception of her performance in Rio and how she perceived that the  
547 public did not understand. She recollected an example:

548           People think I did really rubbish and I did Tesco’s Click and Collect [grocery store home  
549           delivery] and the guy had seen me running . . . he knew I got to the Olympics and he was  
550           like ‘why didn’t you run like you ran in America when you qualified?’

551 However, we interpreted that of more concern to the athletes involved their relationships with  
552 their significant others whose perspective the athletes struggled to understand. All of the athletes  
553 expressed their gratitude to their families for the support in the build up to the Games, but they  
554 also expressed surprise and irritability that this perceived support did not have sufficient  
555 longevity. We interpreted that this intersubjectivity, the divergence of perceptions about what was  
556 the appropriate level of support following the athletes’ return, was in part explained by the  
557 incongruence in the categorization of the Rio experience with parents and significant others  
558 perceiving taking part in the Olympic Games as the accomplishment of a long-term goal and the  
559 athletes perceiving that they had not fully realized their goals. Emily interpreted her mother’s  
560 response to her sustained low mood: “I think all she said to me was I don’t understand why you’re  
561 upset. You’ve achieved what you want to do for 25 years. What’s there to be upset about? I don’t  
562 understand”. Hattie described a similar response from her mother, but in her second interview  
563 acknowledged that her mother’s motivations were about helping her deal with her negativity:  
564 “My mum’s . . . she’s a bit like ‘hang on a minute, now look stop thinking about yourself all the  
565 time, how you feel and things. . . . Keep things in perspective here, you’ve been to the Olympics,  
566 you’ve had a great year, be grateful for what you’ve achieved and experiences you’ve had’. So  
567 that’s kind of how she’s helped me try and deal with it”.

568           One athlete explained that the post-Rio experience had a negative impact on her  
569 relationship which was suffering at the point of the initial interview, however, a period of  
570 reflection between the two interviews had allowed her to reframe the experience and empathize

571 more with her husband. During the initial interview Emily explained:

572 I am really down and he's like 'what's your problem?' But then I notice he's down. . . .

573 We can't help each other. . . . I just thought I don't want to be here with you right now. I

574 don't want to be around you. You're not helping my situation. We argued a lot.

575 In the later interview she recognized that she had harbored irrational thoughts towards her

576 husband and acknowledged that her husband was attempting to help her:

577 I don't think it was that he didn't understand how I felt about things, but he was trying to

578 say okay, right, you feel lost. You haven't got a goal. Let's put a goal in place. I just

579 didn't feel ready for that.

580 We interpreted that the perceived lack of social support could be part explained by the

581 incongruence between how two of the athletes and their significant others perceived the Rio

582 experience and the return to the UK. This was manifested in what could be considered

583 interpersonal hypersensitivity whereby the athletes felt abandoned. Ailsa explained that her

584 husband had interpreted his time in Rio as a holiday and that the return to the UK represented a

585 return to work and routine. She contrasted that with her own experience which involved the return

586 to the UK as representing a period to relax and spend time with her loved ones:

587 I got frustrated sometimes because when I texted him asking 'When are you getting home

588 from work, can we go for coffee? He'd be like 'oh I just want to chill'. And I'm like "but

589 I've done that all day, I want to go out and go for coffee and spend time with you!"

590 **The Blues.** All of the athletes experienced low mood that was articulated as feeling "lost".

591 They had not consciously conceptualized this as a condition or a concept but had attributed their

592 negative state(s) to some aspect of their Olympic experience. Interestingly notwithstanding the

593 previous comment, three of the athletes had been warned that they would experience the blues,

594 and all were during the interview able to reflect on their own experiences to theorize about the

595 phenomenon. Accordingly, the blues comprises *a priori expectations*, and *conceptual*

596 *understanding*.

597            *A priori expectations.* The athletes' exposure to the phenomena suggested an  
598 internalization of a narrative that identifies low mood as a normal response to the Olympic  
599 experience, yet none had identified it as a specific phenomenon nor had they been provided with  
600 any specific skills or strategies to manage the experience. Three athletes had been warned that  
601 they may experience some low mood but it had not been conceptualized as 'post-Olympic blues'  
602 nor had they anticipated that they would experience it. Hattie explained her reaction when she  
603 was warned by her physiotherapist about the prospect of negative affect following her return: "I  
604 was like 'No I won't be. I'll have been to the Olympics and I've had this amazing time and I'm  
605 ready to get onto the next thing'. He was like 'Hmm we'll see'". Emily explained why she had  
606 not taken the prospect seriously: "I never really talked about what came after [the Olympic  
607 Games], because I couldn't see past Rio".

608            *Conceptual understanding.* The athletes were articulate about what they thought that the  
609 blues comprised and all made causal attributions about their own experiences. Ailsa explained it  
610 in terms of coming down from a high which we interpreted was compounded by the athletes'  
611 experiences of celebrity:

612            You're spoiled for three weeks, and you're experiencing these massive highs and  
613            competing in front of massive stadiums, and everyone's talking about it. . . . And then you  
614            get home and it's just you're not used to just being back in reality.

615 Coming down from the 'natural high' articulated by Ailsa may explain the negative affect that the  
616 athletes experienced. However, we interpreted that the nature of the Olympic Games created a  
617 'unique buzz' that the athletes perceived could never be replicated. Emily explained "when you  
618 come off the Olympics, what is there to do now? That is my problem. I've spent 25 years  
619 dreaming of becoming an Olympian and it's like I don't know what will give me that fire again".  
620 Ailsa referred to a void that had been left: "It feels like nothing's going to fill, it kind of feels in  
621 the moment like nothing's going to ever, you're never going to feel like that again".

622            Sian had an alternative narrative and that was that her depressed mood was less about the



623 experience in Rio but more concerned with the organizational stressors that negatively impacted  
624 on her autonomy:

625         Big restructures, funding is cut or funding increases [is] to be expected . . . after an  
626         Olympics. So for me it wasn't the fact that I'd come back from an Olympics that made me  
627         feel down. . . but the instability. . . . I felt like decisions were being made on my behalf.  
628         And I didn't like that at all. I like to be in control.

629 With the benefit of reflection over two interviews, Emily questioned the terminology of 'blues'  
630 suggesting that this did not capture the severity of what she experienced. In her first interview she  
631 ruminated over her current state of mind:

632         I think I [am] depressed, a little depressed. Blues is almost like a bit sad, something you  
633         can get over in a week. This is not. This is not a week. This is . . . over two months since I  
634         competed. That's a long time to still be thinking some days, why do I feel like this?

635 In her second interview she reflected back on how she was feeling and although her sentiment  
636 remained the same, her articulation of her experience represented a move from a descriptive  
637 account of her emotions to a more interpretative focus on her psychological state where she  
638 sought to seek meaning in her experience.

639         I think that it must have been depression. . . . I wouldn't have expected to be feeling like  
640         that for so long, feeling so helpless... there were some days where I just thought what's  
641         the purpose of me being here? Don't get me wrong, I was never going to do anything. But  
642         I just sat and I was like what is the purpose of my life? ...And is that depression? I feel  
643         like almost it is . . . because we're not talking days. We're not talking weeks, we're  
644         talking a couple of months.

645 She went on to discuss the therapeutic benefit of engaging in the research:

646         It really, really helped to talk to you. And it wasn't like you were counselling me. I think  
647         it was just you were prompting me to think about things in a different way. And I think  
648         that's what you need. It's not necessarily that you want someone to tell you it's going to

649 be all right, because you have to deal with it in your own way, but what you want is  
650 someone just to listen and maybe ask the right questions that you can start putting things  
651 back together for yourself.

### 652 **Moving Forwards**

653 Moving forwards was present in the second interviews of the three athletes and in the sole  
654 interview of the fourth. We interpreted this as being due to the fact that the initial interview was  
655 temporally too close to the Olympic Games for the athletes to process their experiences and  
656 reflect on future plans. Moving forwards represented both a state of mind and a tangible  
657 assessment of where the athletes currently are and what the future may bring. It is represented by  
658 acceptance of their performances and a focus on the positives which is articulated in *Reframing*.  
659 The athletes discussed their current situations which are represented by *The Present* and their  
660 plans for the future both in respect of their personal and sporting lives, this is articulated by the  
661 theme *The Future*.

662 **Reframing.** Although there were periods of incongruence in the athletes' accounts of  
663 their goal achievements, there was evidence of reframing the performance experiences to protect  
664 the sporting self. Emily was adamant during her initial interview that she had not achieved her  
665 goals, but in a more reflective account, in her second interview she positively reframed her  
666 experience: "So I didn't have the perfect race, but I actually still finished [in the top 1/5]. I was  
667 still at the Olympic Games. And I think that's how I've got to look at it now". She elaborated on  
668 how her initial perceptions were overly negative: "I think looking back, actually, I've been very  
669 hard on myself for a long time and I have actually achieved quite a lot". Despite identifying  
670 unpleasant experiences about how she was treated by certain members of the public, in her second  
671 interview she had a more positive narrative about how she is treated as an Olympian although she  
672 attributed this to a change in how people treated her:

673 A guy in a shop . . . was like "Oh, my god, how amazing. I've never met an Olympian  
674 before!". . . . I think you get a lot more of that now... but going back nine months ago it

675           was all about the medals. “Oh, you didn’t get a medal. Oh, sorry to hear that”. But it’s  
676           definitely all changed. I think the way people react to me has changed as well.  
677   However, Alisa went further, reframing not only her performance but the exposure afforded to  
678   individuals who win medals at the Olympic Games. We interpreted that this reframing was  
679   protective, focusing her attention not on the past but on her re-evaluated performance goals (i.e., a  
680   medal at the World Championships) for the future:

681           I think the frustration looking back was lots of people won medals, therefore unless you  
682           won a medal it didn’t matter; whereas now I think athletics is one of the main sports  
683           there’s a lot of emphasis on the World Champs and Commonwealth Games. So . . . if I  
684           was to win a medal these [at] this World Champs, I’d get way more exposure than if I was  
685           to win a medal at the Olympics because there’s so many other athletes at that time that  
686           will win it.

687           **The Present.** Although the athletes had not all had positive experiences between the two  
688   interviews, with both Ailsa and Hattie experiencing on-going injuries, their cognitions, emotional  
689   states, and behaviors were focused on the present rather than being connected to their Olympic  
690   experiences. Hattie articulated her current problems with a leg injury as being distinct from any  
691   negative affect related to the Olympic Games: “The Olympics was forgotten. . . . [My coach and  
692   I] clashed a bit for a few months, training was horrible. . . . We had this big discussion about it  
693   and made quite a lot of progress”. Similarly, Ailsa focused on the highs of a record and the lows  
694   of a serious injury which she reflected surpassed those associated with the Olympic Games,  
695   which in her initial interview had been the most extreme that she had experienced: “I don’t think  
696   I’ve ever experienced such a high and then ten days later experienced such a low. . . . I think it’s  
697   the lowest I’ve maybe ever been in my life, just because it’s so horrible”. We considered that her  
698   interpretation of the intensity of her experiences were impacted upon by the recency of the events  
699   and through collaborative meaning making in the second interview encouraged her exploration of  
700   her interpretations:

701 Interviewer: Do you think that over time events that were traumatic, because they were  
702 very fresh in your memory, are no longer traumatic?

703 Ailsa: I said to my coach the other day, 'I've never felt this bad, I feel awful, I feel like  
704 this is the worst thing that's happened', and he was 'you have to remember that, three  
705 years ago you had surgery which meant you couldn't do your sport for a whole six  
706 months'. . . . If that was now then it would feel much worse. But because this is  
707 happening to me right now, this is the worst thing.

708 **The Future.** Possibly in part due to managing their post-Olympic blues experience  
709 (whereby a lack of goal-focus is thought to be particularly unhelpful), two of the athletes (Ailsa  
710 and Hattie) were adamant that they wanted to compete at the next Olympic Games. Ailsa  
711 explained that "I want to be an Olympic champion in Tokyo. And on the way to that I want to win  
712 as many medals as I can at major champs". Hattie expressed a desire to improve on her past  
713 performance adding: "I really want to try and get to the next [Olympic Games] Tokyo". The other  
714 athletes (Sian and Emily) had no intention to retire but were unsure whether they would compete  
715 in the next Olympic Games.

## 716 Discussion

717 This study gave voice to four female Olympians who competed at the Rio 2016 Olympic  
718 Games to explore the notion of the 'post-Olympic blues' providing a linear account of the  
719 athletes' experiences before, during, and after the Olympic Games. In collaborative meaning  
720 making with the participants, we explored the antecedents to the negative affect that the  
721 participants reported experiencing following Olympic participation. Through integrating several  
722 interviews and timelines into one study (cf. Williams, 2017) and by adopting IPA which informed  
723 an acknowledgement that our interpretation of experiences is both temporal and exists in relation  
724 to other aspects of our lives, we accessed the shifting interpretations of the athletes' perceptions  
725 of their experiences and development of the post-Olympic blues. We also explored whether the  
726 post-Olympic blues is a 'normal' short-term phenomenon or whether it is more enduring, and

727 hence likely to require formal interventions.

728           The athletes were vague about the specific antecedents to the depressive symptoms that  
729 they experienced after their return home, although one athlete attributed her low mood to  
730 organizational stressors which is consistent with experiences of Australian Olympic gold  
731 medalists (Jackson et al., 1998). We interpreted that it was the overall experience that elevated the  
732 athletes to a celebrity status, rather than any specific performance issues that contributed to the  
733 negative experience of the post-Olympic period. However, there was some incoherence in the  
734 narratives of the athletes; where they were simultaneously resentful of the attention given to the  
735 medalists but acknowledged that (enhanced) success would have had little impact on their post-  
736 Olympic blues. The notion of the celebrity Olympian was a pervasive narrative, whereby the  
737 athletes' identification with celebrity began with their commodification (i.e., the kitting process  
738 and the media interviews). This continued during the Games, and then culminated with the  
739 athletes' being treated like celebrities on their return from Rio. However, this celebrity Olympian  
740 identity depersonalized and eclipsed the individual characteristics and achievements of the  
741 athletes. This 'Olympian' identity epitomized in the presentation of "Once an Olympian, Always  
742 an Olympian" cards distributed in the village and the perception of celebrity was internalized by  
743 the athletes and was reinforced by interactions with members of the public. The identity of being  
744 a celebrity Olympian was consistent with, and complemented, the strong athletic identity that is  
745 evident in many elite athletes and has been linked with a vulnerability to a depressive reaction to a  
746 relevant negative life event (Brewer, 1993; Doherty, Hannigan, & Campbell, 2016). When the  
747 excitement of the Olympic Games had subsided, interest in the athletes waned, from both  
748 significant others and members of the public, accordingly the athletes experienced a loss of  
749 identity (as well as the corresponding status) and experienced feelings of loss and associated  
750 negative emotions. Their short-lived identification with celebrity is comparable to bridal  
751 identification with celebrities and the expectation of veridical change following the wedding  
752 festivities (cf. Carroll, 2012). In both cases reality is almost immediately omnipresent following

753 the event and results in a reluctant acceptance that little has changed and that the mundane that  
754 was previously present remains.

755         Social support in the elite sport performance literature has been shown to be fundamental  
756 in dealing with adversity in relation to adversarial growth (e.g., Howells, Sarkar, & Fletcher,  
757 2017) and specifically perceived social support in respect of resilience (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012).  
758 This present study also highlighted importance of perception in the provision of social support.  
759 The internalization of ‘being special’ impacted on the expectation of social support which was  
760 incongruent with the perception of social support that the athletes considered that they received  
761 from their significant others. All of the athletes reported that they had strong, stable relationships  
762 and had been supported by their wider families in their sporting careers. However, having  
763 experienced considerable tangible support prior to, and during the Olympic Games, they were  
764 surprised and disappointed in that they perceived that the support was limited in extent and  
765 duration following the Olympic Games and were annoyed that the focus of others turned quickly  
766 from the athletes’ sporting careers to other members of the family, work commitments, or  
767 conversations about starting a family. This acknowledgement of frustration towards others  
768 reflects the participants’ inability to share and fully understand their significant others’  
769 experiences and is consistent with Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) assertion that our understanding is  
770 shaped by our own embodied position in the world and we cannot truly understand the social  
771 world from another’s perspective.

772         The reports from the participants in this study about the stories that they had heard from  
773 fellow athletes, recollections and visual representation through timelining of their own  
774 experiences, and multiple media reports collectively suggest that the negative emotions and  
775 subsequent behaviors were interpreted to be a normal response to returning home following  
776 Olympic participation. The post-Olympic period was difficult for the participants and was  
777 characterized by periods of depressed mood and a general loss of interest in life, which are both  
778 common depressive symptoms (APA, 2013). The athletes reported negative emotions (e.g.,

779 anxiety, irritability), and behavioral responses (e.g., crying; interpersonal hypersensitivity) that  
780 are consistent with the notion of the ‘blues’ as conceptualized by the post-partum (cf. Kettunen et  
781 al., 2014; O’Hara & Wisner, 2014) and wedding (cf. Carroll, 2012) literature. However, the  
782 prevalence and extent of these symptoms differed between the four athletes and over time. Three  
783 athletes acknowledged in their initial interview that the post-Olympic period comprised the worst  
784 experience that they had encountered in their sporting careers. They articulated the negative  
785 emotions that they had during this time were incomparable with any prior experience. However,  
786 one of these athletes derogated that initial account in her second interview referring to a worse  
787 experience that had subsequently followed. This temporal incongruence is consistent with a  
788 changed sense of lived time and involves a changing narrative of the embodied self over time (cf.  
789 Coventry, Dickens & Todd, 2014). All of the athletes reported that the symptoms lasted for  
790 several weeks but two of the athletes reported a more enduring period of negativity that lasted for  
791 several months. One explicitly stated that she did not think that she had experienced the ‘blues’,  
792 as what she had encountered was more intense and longer lasting than the ‘blues’ nomenclature  
793 suggests. Instead she thought that she was depressed. Whilst we cannot interpret whether this  
794 athlete would have been diagnosed with an MDD if formally assessed, the reported intensity and  
795 durability of the athletes’ depressive symptoms during the post-Olympic period illustrates the  
796 gravity of the athletes’ experiences.

797         Theoretically, this research has identified differences between the blues (which appear to  
798 be a transient ‘natural reaction’ to the Olympic experience) and a depressive disorder, such as  
799 MDD, which is more concerning and develops in some athletes after their participation in the  
800 Olympics. However, certain points related to the value of psychopathology and in labelling more  
801 generally in this area remain unclear. In particular, given that there is a growing consensus that  
802 psychiatric diagnoses “are akin to social constructs” (Malhi et al., 2015, p. 8), this raises a  
803 question about the usefulness of diagnoses and labels (such as the ‘post-Olympic blues’) for  
804 athletes experiencing problems after the Olympics. This point is perhaps particularly salient for

805 elite athletes, who are used to embracing mental toughness, whereby any signs of ‘mental  
806 weakness’ are viewed with negativity. Therefore, these athletes may feel reluctant to identify as  
807 experiencing the post-Olympic blues (and may be especially reluctant to be diagnosed with  
808 MDD), for fear that this will negatively impact on them (e.g. in terms of their future sporting  
809 career). Conversely, without labels like the post-Olympic blues, athletes can be devoid of a  
810 framework which can assist them to make sense of the challenges they experience after the  
811 Olympics.

### 812 **Limitations, Future Research and Applied Implications**

813         Adopting a longitudinal design was an important consideration in the planning of the  
814 research to access the athletes’ shifting perceptions of their lived experience of the post-Olympic  
815 period. Such a design requires a certain degree of commitment and an ongoing availability by the  
816 participants. Due to training and competition commitments, one of the athletes was only  
817 interviewed once 18 weeks after her return home. Her narrative, perhaps tempered by the passage  
818 of time and by not having the opportunity to reflect on her earlier account, was often incongruent  
819 with the accounts of the other participants and we cannot be certain whether the differences in her  
820 story are related to her Olympic experiences or her fundamentally different experience of the  
821 research process. A limitation of this research may be the inclusion of her incomplete data.  
822 However, removal of her data was inconsistent with our constructivist epistemology; her  
823 constructions of her experiences are as relevant to understanding the shifting perceptions of the  
824 post-Olympic experience as are the constructions of the other participants.

825         Our understanding of the post-Olympic blues is in its infancy and this study has  
826 highlighted scope for further research specifically, in terms of the elite sample and the lack of  
827 intervention studies that focus on the post-Olympic blues as a discrete issue. The study comprised  
828 a sample that was restricted to athletes who did not win a medal (and who had lower than  
829 expected performance outcomes) and thus based on the findings from Hammond et al. (2013) it is  
830 be expected that they would experience depressive symptoms. Nevertheless, research (cf. Jackson



831 et al., 1998) and anecdotal media reports have indicated that medaling at an Olympic Games is  
832 not a protective factor against negative outcomes following the Olympic Games or the  
833 development of depressive symptoms. Previous research by Hammond et al. (2013) has  
834 demonstrated a link between under-performance and depression in world class swimmers,  
835 whereby performance failure was significantly associated with depression in the top tier athletes  
836 (defined as the top 25% of performers who were competing to represent Canada internationally).  
837 Considering this incoherence, it would be useful to explore the prevalence of the post-Olympic  
838 blues in a sample of athletes who did win a medal. We did not explicitly explore the specific  
839 preparation for the Olympic Games, yet the athletes conveyed that the build up to Rio was  
840 exciting and all encompassing. However, irrespective of their prior Olympic experience only one  
841 athlete engaged with a sport psychologist to ensure that she was not daunted by her Rio Olympic  
842 participation in the same way that she was for London. It is possible that this preparation may  
843 explain why in this athlete's retrospective account of the post-Olympic experience she does not  
844 consider that her low mood was attributable to her Olympic participation (rather she interpreted  
845 that it was organizational stressors that were of consequence). However, none of the athletes were  
846 specifically prepared for the post-Olympic period, despite their accounts indicating that  
847 knowledge of low mood following the Olympic Games was common amongst coaches,  
848 physiotherapists, and other athletes. To date, there has been little evidence of any substantial  
849 programs other than that implemented in Ireland to assist athletes to normalize and manage the  
850 post-Olympic experience (cf. McArdle, et al., 2014) and none that have addressed the post-  
851 Olympic blues as a discrete issue, which is likely to require specific interventions.

852         The reflective nature of this research informed by phenomenology (viz. Heidegger, 1962;  
853 Merleau-Ponty, 1962) gave the participants opportunity to reflect on the strategies that they  
854 perceived would have mediated their negative responses to returning home. Their suggestions  
855 articulated in this research under the themes of *Event Preparation*, *Moving Forwards* and *The*  
856 *Future* provide the basis for applied implications for practitioners working with Olympic athletes.

857 The sample size in this study was consistent with other IPA studies but issues around  
858 generalizability are important, particularly in the context of deriving implications for applied  
859 practice. The application of statistical-probabilistic generalizability, that is a confidence that these  
860 findings can be applied to all other athletes, is a misnomer in qualitative research such as IPA that  
861 uses small samples, and is incongruent with the epistemological and ontological assumptions of  
862 this research (cf. Smith, 2018). Nevertheless, we contend that this research has naturalistic  
863 generalizability (Stake 1978, 1995), that is given the depth of the accounts presented, the findings  
864 will the resonate with Olympic athletes' experiences of their return from participation in the  
865 Olympic Games and as such are useful in informing applied practice. Accordingly, it is important  
866 that *all* Olympic athletes are given the opportunity to engage with sport psychology provision to  
867 prepare for their response to the post-Olympic period, are afforded the opportunity, following  
868 their return home, to engage in reflection and reframing of their experiences, and are encouraged  
869 to re-evaluate and focus on goals for the future. Given that we cannot realistically predict who is  
870 going to perform or under-perform and in light of findings from studies (e.g., Jackson et al., 1998)  
871 that discounted medaling being a protective factor, all athletes should be given support and  
872 psychoeducation about the post-Olympic blues prior to competition and provided with  
873 anticipatory and proactive coping strategies (i.e., reflection and reframing) to facilitate successful  
874 negotiation of this particularly challenging transitional period. Furthermore, irrespective of medal  
875 success following the Olympic Games, cognizant of a duty of care, all athletes should be provided  
876 with the opportunity to engage with psychological support following their return to manage the  
877 feelings of loss, their negative emotions, and the identity challenges that are characteristic of the  
878 post-Olympic blues. Athletes interviewed in this study, regardless of their funding status, were  
879 not provided with tangible support after the Games despite varying levels of psychological (and  
880 other) support prior to the event. One of the athletes in this study interpreted this as being a  
881 consequence of the inevitable personnel change following an Olympic Games where for a period  
882 the main focus shifts from the athlete to job security for support staff.

883           In conclusion, in giving voice to these female Olympians this study has articulated what  
884 the phenomena means to those who have experienced ‘post-Olympic blues and explored the  
885 impact that the athletes’ celebritization may have had on their mental wellbeing. It is hoped that  
886 this research will engage NGBs and coaching teams to work with the recommendations of the  
887 Duty of Care in Sport report (Grey-Thompson, 2017) in formulating what support should be  
888 offered for athletes prior to and after the Olympic Games to limit the wellbeing (and potentially  
889 performance) impact that that the post-Olympic blues has on athletes.

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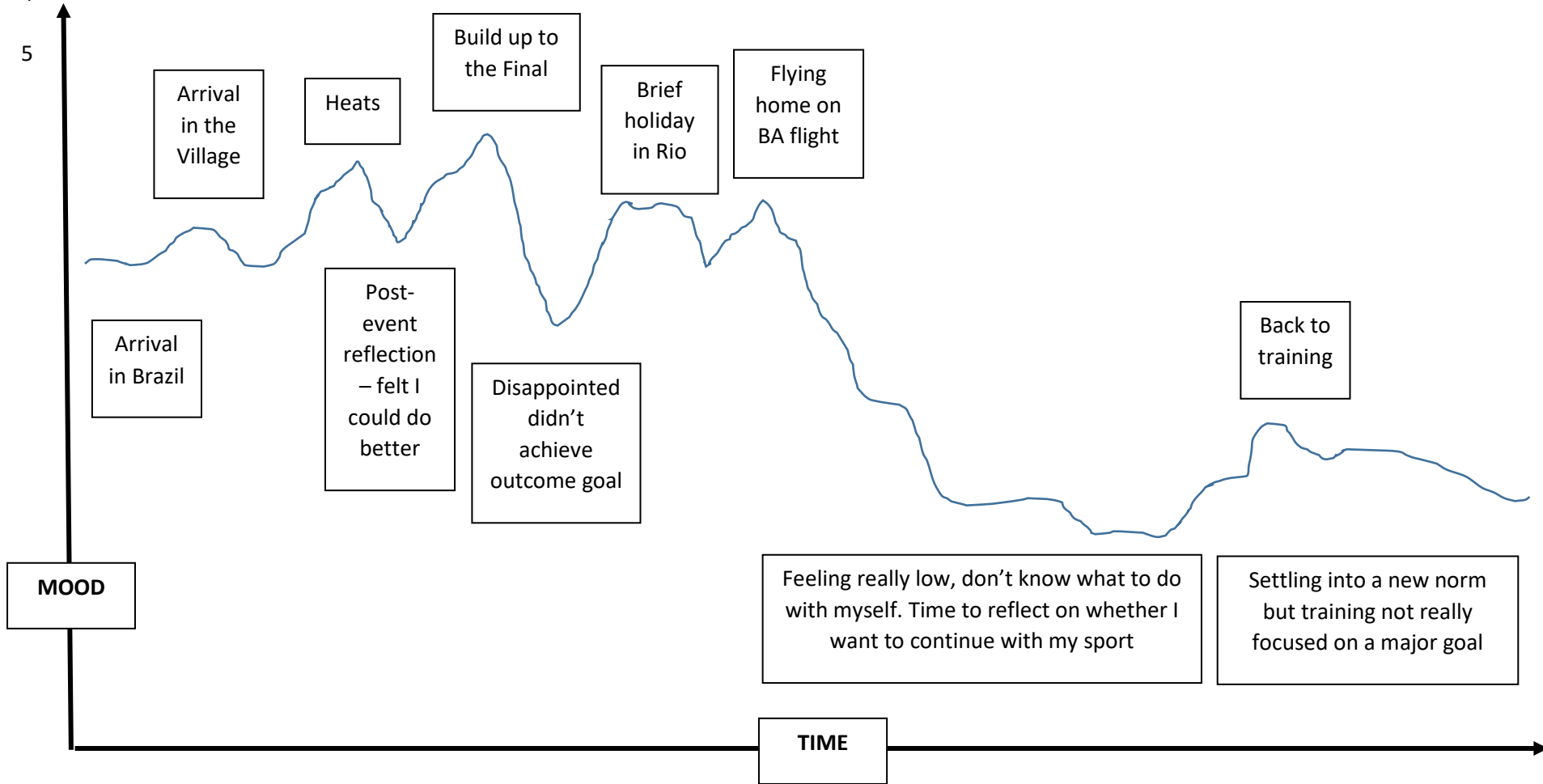
1 Figure 1

2 Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Indicative timeline of athletes' highs and lows

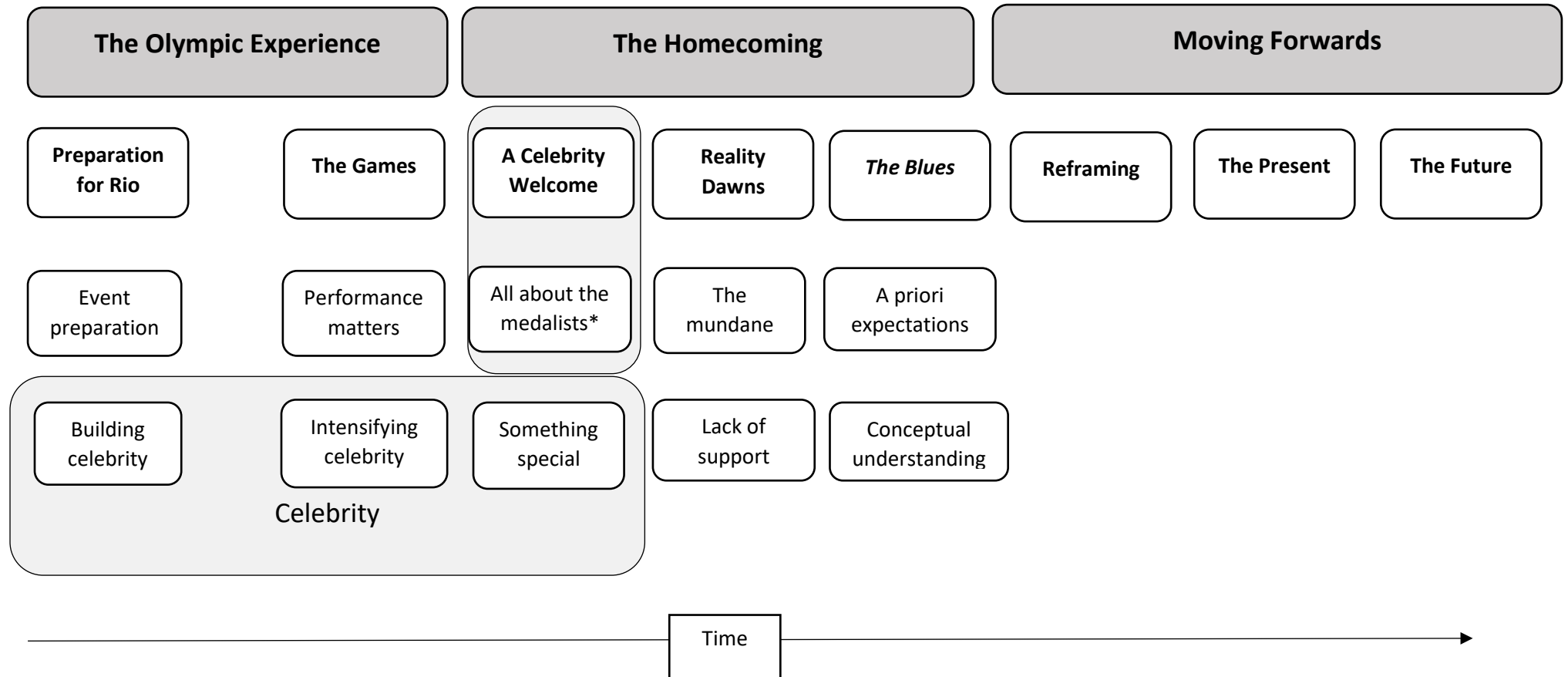
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- 1 Figure 2
- 2 A Visual Representation of the Themes



\*'All about the medalists' is presented in this model before 'Something Special' for presentation purposes. In temporal terms it follows 'Something special'.