

SOUTH AFRICAN SECONDARY SCHOOL CHRISTIAN ATHLETES' EXPERIENCES OF ATHLETICS DURING THE ONGOING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

South African secondary school (SASS) Christian (in this case) athletes and their coaches were faced with the postponement of athletics during the COVID-19 lockdown period; however, the athletes and their coaches were able to employ information and communication technology (ICT) and other means to continue training. In the latter part of 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions were lifted and athletes could resume their training. A qualitative approach was adopted with a case study design, and a Christian lens was used to share their negative and positive experiences during the lockdown period and transition into the new normal. Focus group interviews were conducted with the participant athletes and questionnaires were completed by each of their coaches and a sports motivator. Various coding methods were used to analyse the data. We were guided by Elliot, Drummond, Prichard, Drummond and Mason's four themes related to sport: recognising struggle, reconnection, re-engaging after restrictions and re-imagining sport, to arrive at our three emergent themes. Recommendations are offered to sustain and promote SASS athletics and create international participation opportunities.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic; Recognising struggle; Reconnection; Re-engaging; Re-imagining sport; South African secondary school athletics.

INTRODUCTION

“Given the present crisis-ridden world, with its confluence of multiple crises, we all need to be ready for, and to have thought about, education for and in emergency” (Kagawa, 2005:500). We must therefore strive for a comprehensive education where the school curriculum and physical activities, as well as sport, need to be combined to achieve Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4: “Ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning (Lemke, 2016:7) and “... how sport promotes human development and wellbeing in concert with SDG3... to ensure healthy lives and promote wellbeing for all at all ages” (Gary & Rubin, 2016:30-31). Christian athletes and coaches want to please God and glorify Him by their sports activities; however their behaviour does not always reach the outcomes they desire as “a religiously devoted person seemingly lives a double life on and off the field of play”. They may have goals that do not seem good enough, or they have a problem containing their

emotions. Christian athletes' main goal is to integrate their Christian faith with their sport experiences (Egli & Hoven, 2020:109).

After the COVID-19 restrictions were introduced to limit the spread of the disease, action had to be taken, such as staying at home, social isolation and quarantine, which disrupted sports activities for athletes. As a result, training programmes needed to be adapted to these conditions and cancellations of sports competitions affected athletes' social cohesion, excitement and physical activity. Consequently, athletes became fearful, anxious, confused, exhausted, disappointed, angry and lonely (Filiz *et al.*, 2021:46). This dire situation propelled the researchers to embark on the research, thereby emphasising the athletes' challenges and promoting awareness in the sports community to address these challenges as a priority. The South African government needs to play an important role to distribute resources equitably, to provide leadership and to forge partnerships which are able to deliver by means of sport, on a sociopolitical agenda (Burnett, 2021:351).

As a result of this global pandemic, which had a profound impact on the youth sports setting Elliot *et al.* (2021:1), research identified four themes related to sports: recognising struggle; reconnection; re-engaging after restrictions; and re-imagining sport. The researchers could use these themes as a yardstick to gain insights into the following: the decline in mental wellbeing and physical ability, mainly due to social isolation; the need for more family connectedness; the challenge for sports to attract participants back into the sport; the available opportunities; and the need to reset values, as well as philosophies, that underpin youth sport provisioning. Returning to sport after a break, when athletes may feel anxious and have self-determined motivations, may affect the performance of athletes and even increase risks of sustaining injuries (Ruffault *et al.*, 2020:76). It is therefore imperative that they are provided with psychological and social support during this time (Filiz *et al.*, 2021:46).

Irving (2021:37) found that coaching in challenging circumstances (such as the COVID-19 pandemic) led to abnormal stress experienced among professionals. The resultant environmental pressures exacerbated the complexity of managing coach interactions. Coaches had to focus on self-care and to resort to a great deal of delivery-oriented innovations, be more flexible, and adapt to the circumstances to guarantee successful practice. This called for contingency plans to be made. Coaches resorted to using information communication technology (ICT) to communicate with athletes and produce novel ways to train them remotely with virtual training programmes. Amidst these conditions, the coaches also experienced many challenges, such as resistance from fellow coaches to cooperate and share initiatives, and the decline in athletes' times that prevented them from qualifying for South African championships (Nel & Krog, 2022:23). Although staying at home is a safety measure, it may have negative consequences, for example, reduction of physical activity and sedentary behaviours such as sitting for long periods and may worsen chronic health conditions (Filiz *et al.*, 2021:46).

With reference to "a Christian view" in the title of this study, we consider Egli and Hoven's (2020:110) belief that to participate in sport and integrate one's faith with psychological skills will result in the "spiritual formation and holistic growth for any sports person". Watson (2011:182) looks at "athletic identity" from a Christian theological and psychological standpoint within the sports world and focuses on issues like idolatry, sin and pride, and humility (as states of the heart). Christian athletes put their Christian identity first, that is,

before their other identities (Egli & Hoven, 2020:110-111). A spiritual discipline helps us as we rely on God and not on our own strength. By being disciplined, we sometimes do things we may not feel like doing. Our emotions and desires are drawn from the heart; hence, our behaviours and actions are reflected (Egli & Hoven, 2020:114). Although athletes and coaches study sport by watching videos to see how they performed, it is necessary to study the Word of God and reflect on relevant scriptures and then integrate them into our lives (Egli & Hoven, 2020:115-116).

In the light of the above discussion, the researchers were propelled to conduct research in an effort to revitalise secondary school athletics and enable it to earn its rightful place in the South African and international sports arena. The following research question guided the study: What is the South African Secondary school (SASS) Christian athletes' experience of athletics during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic? The study aimed to explore and offer a deep, first hand description and analysis of South African Christian secondary school athletes' Christian views and experiences regarding the situation of athletics amidst the continued COVID-19 pandemic.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Study design

This study adopted an interpretive qualitative approach, since we sought to establish the meaning of the phenomenon from the participants' viewpoints, interpretations, perceptions, meanings and understandings. We used a case study design. We aimed to describe the incidence of athletics (as contemporary events occurring naturally) experiences through the eyes of a sports motivator, coaches and athletes in 2022 during the ongoing pandemic in SASSs in Gauteng Province. This approach can locate "particular social systems (e.g., athletics) in their particular context" (Bickman & Rog, 2009, in Chowdhury & Shil, 2021:193).

Ethical considerations

We applied for ethical clearance to conduct research from Unisa's Ethics Committee, which was in line with the *University of South Africa (Unisa) COVID-19 position statement on research ethics*. An ethical clearance certificate was issued on 10 August 2022 (Ref. 2022/08/10/1127381/30/AM). Consent was granted by the Gauteng Department of Education and the principals of each participating school.

Context

In this study, we looked at the state of city secondary school athletics in Gauteng Province in South Africa, through the lens of interpretations, perceptions, meanings and understandings of coaches and athletes. We chose an instrumental case study where the issue/concern is selected and one bounded case within-site (City of Tshwane) is used to illustrate the chosen issue or concern through the participants' different perspectives – in this case, the situation of SASS during the COVID-19 pandemic (Creswell, 2007:74).

Participants and data collection tools

Purposeful sampling was used to select the athlete participants, as they are able to "...purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study". (Creswell, 2007:125). The purpose of purposeful sampling is to gain in-depth

understanding and derive generalisation, hence the selection of information-rich cases (Patton, 2002:46). Table 1 shows how cases (athletes) that met a set of criteria were selected. The coaches were requested to select participants according to the following criteria: athletes aged 16, 17 or 18 years of age; qualify for SA championships (track events – short, middle and long distance); equal number of male and female participants; all events equally represented; religiously devoted Christians.

Pseudonyms were used for each school and participant, for example, participant 1 from School G was identified as G1, participant 2 as G2, etc. A sports motivator (JP) who is involved in the selected schools was also invited to participate. Creswell (2007:126) refers to maximum variation as a criterion to differentiate the participants and sites. The reason for this is that there is more possibility that the findings may reflect differences and perspectives, as revealed in the Results section below. The five selected schools are situated in close proximity to each other in the City of Tshwane, Gauteng Province. The individual coaches were seated at each school, have coaching qualifications and had coached and continue to coach SA athletes qualifying for the SA championships. Table 1 illustrates our sampling strategy for athlete participants (criteria), school coaches and the sports motivator.

Table 1. SAMPLING STRATEGY (CRITERIA) FOR ATHLETE PARTICIPANTS, SCHOOL COACHES AND SPORTS MOTIVATOR

SCHOOL	ATHLETES	SCHOOL COACH
School E	E1 (female)	CE
	E2 (male)	
School G	G1 (female)	CG
	G2 (male)	
	G3 (female)	
School S	S1 (male)	CS
	S2 (male)	
School W	W1 (male)	CW
	W2 (female)	
	W3 (female)	
School M	M1 (female)	CM
	M2 (female)	
	M3 (female)	

A semistructured questionnaire was completed by the five Gauteng athletics coaches and the sports motivator, and a focus group interview with three athletes from each of the five selected secondary schools was planned. A total of 13 interviews were carried out, as two athletes were unavailable. The focus group interview questions (athletes) were related to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic; motivation (which included a Christian orientation); athletics training and coaching; and what the future looks like for SASS athletes. Interviews were not repeated during the research period as pandemic conditions remained stable at the time. The questionnaire for coaches comprised questions related to athletes returning to athletics coaching during COVID-19 and the future of athletics in SA schools.

Trustworthiness

One way to ensure trustworthiness in this study was to use tables; consequently transparency is increased regarding data collection, the analysis and, finally, the findings. In so doing, the data is organised and analysed effectively (Clouter & Ravasi, 2021:113). We kept reflective journals of our ideas, feelings, observations. Member checking (participants in different roles in the study) was carried out in an attempt to verify the credibility of the data. To promote credibility, we used several processes/forms of triangulation, that is, we used different information sources or procedures in the field whereby identifiable patterns are repeatedly established. We used more than one type of data, such as transcripts from recordings and questionnaires, to focus on the same phenomenon. We also used the Self-Determination Theory (SDT), a Christian theological and psychological standpoint and the four themes of Elliot *et al.* (2021) related to sport to understand findings and to direct the research. In addition, we used more than one context (five selected schools) to study the focus (Stahl & King, 2020:26-27).

Regarding reliability, the researchers will be able to conduct similar research based on the description that was provided. If the research should be repeated, the results and analyses should be the same or similar, provided the conditions are constant (consistencies). In addition, reflexivity, that is, one's personal reflections regarding one's subjectivities, needs to be incorporated throughout the research project (Rose & Johnson, 2020:435, 439). No conflict of interest was encountered. The research was not conducted at the researcher's workplace or residence. The coaches completed the questionnaires privately and submitted the completed documents in an enclosed envelope given to the researchers. In this case, we looked at content validity, that is, that the items measured what they were supposed to measure, as reflected in the findings below.

Data analysis

The data in this study consisted of interview transcripts that were supplemented/substantiated by questionnaire responses (Saldaña, 2013:16) and our reflective journal. Our appropriate choice for analysing the qualitative data was coding. Saldaña (2013:2) explains that coding is one way to analyse qualitative data, "... only what rises to the surface" (Saldaña, 2013:16, 17). A code "... is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative salient, essence-capturing and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data". (Saldaña, 2013:3-4). The primary goal of a coder is to find "repetitive patterns of action and consistencies in human affairs" that are documented in the data. We chose eclectic coding, for example, *magnitude coding*, which indicates "intensity, frequency, direction, presence, or

evaluative content ..." and used words such as "strongly" (STR) and "moderately" (MOD) (Saldaña, 2013:72). Hence we were able to glean valuable findings from the data-collection tools and categorise the codes according to similarities and differences. By comparing the major categories we could transcend to conceptual/theoretical themes (Saldaña, 2013:169, 188). The outcome of a code/category/analytic reflection is a theme (Saldaña, 2013:9-15). We explored the personal and the interpretive meanings in the data, hence our choice of "theming the data" (Saldaña, 2013:61). To validate the findings, we consulted the participants as a form of member checking (Saldaña, 2013:35).

Recognising struggle, reconnection, re-engaging after restrictions and re-imagining sport (Elliot *et al.*, 2021:1) were the four themes used to guide us in presenting the data in a chronological order, alongside the emerged themes, to make sense of the findings. The attributions and the outcomes are arranged in chronological sequence. Two columns are used to differentiate between causes, conditions, contexts, actions and outcomes, which are consequences (Saldaña, 2013:169). We also used values coding, which reflects the participants' values, attitudes and beliefs, representing their perspectives/worldviews (Saldaña, 2013:110). We reached data saturation when the information was sufficient (as it enabled us to replicate the research and to arrive at new information); thus, continued coding was no longer necessary (Fusch & Ness, 2015:1408).

Saldaña (2013:247) suggests identifying three major themes, arranging them in a triangle (Figure 1) and deciding which one is the apex/dominant item and why – how does it influence, affect and interrelate with the other two themes?

With the use of code weaving, key code words and phrases were integrated into a narrative (as few sentences as possible) and extended (Saldaña, 2013:248). The three major themes that were constructed from the emerging categories were Theme 1: COVID-19 pandemic; Theme 2: motivation; and Theme 3: future SASS athletics. They enabled us to arrive at our research headline and answer our research question. "Training and coaching" were collapsed into the three themes as it was appropriate and resided and integrated well into each of the three themes.

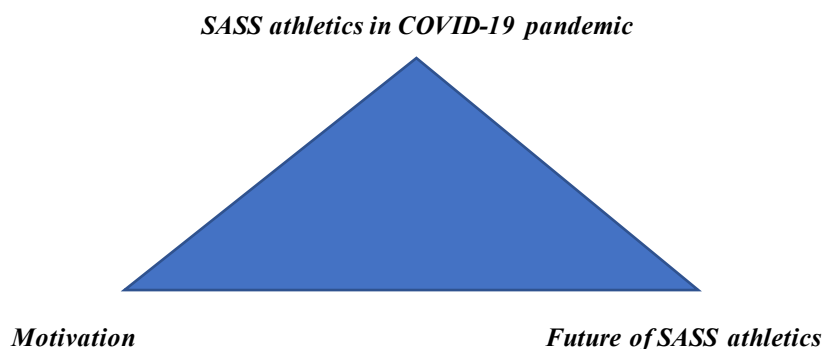


Figure 1. APEX THEME: COVID-19 PANDEMIC, MOTIVATION AND FUTURE OF SOUTH AFRICAN SECONDARY SCHOOL (SASS) ATHLETICS.

RESULTS

The results are discussed below under the headings “Themes” with subheadings representing the main finding/s that are connected to the main themes of Elliot *et al.* (2021), which serve to present the data chronologically and coincide with this study’s themes.

Theme 1: COVID-19 pandemic

Athlete participants’ experiences during the lockdown: “recognising the struggle” (Elliot et al., 2021:1)

S1 explained, “*The struggle was [that] we weren’t able to train in the best facilities for a long while. We had to think for ourselves ...*”. Learners who depend on a need-supporting environment experience more need satisfaction, which in turn predicts intrinsic motivation and linked to adaptive (athletics) outcomes (Standage *et al.*, 2005: 411). JP furthers this statement: “*Most coaches are not educated in mental toughness programmes, so in the end – it is up to the athlete to find a programme! My views on this situation? An amazing opportunity to create ‘masters’ of life – not victims of life!*”

Factors such as uncertainty and a lack of group cohesion made it difficult for athletes to reconnect and get back into coaching, training and even academics, as they did not feel they were good enough. G1 felt that “*no competition was my biggest struggle ...*”. It is evident from the athletes’ responses in the interviews that they were mostly emotionally, socially and physically affected. W3 responded, “*I drastically started putting on weight ... I couldn’t even go and see my friends ... every single day crying in my room ... I literally ran around our house 70 times ...*”. The athletes’ peers also had a big impact on their wellbeing, as G1 explained, “*... my whole friends group changed because you just disengaged from everybody ...*”. JP explained,

“This caused many athletes to become ‘victims’ because their physical environment was so limited with opportunity to train that they literally gave up their dreams and hopes. The world ‘mind-set’ became that of helplessness, struggle, restriction, fear, etc. This mind-set is like a big river that simply sucks you in ...”.

The athletes could develop their own training programmes suited for the home environment (where the surfaces (tar) were different, space was limited and distances straight instead of field tracks) or abandon their athletics career. JP’s response to these experiences are, “*It all comes down to choice. What are you (as individual) going to do with what opportunities (situations) you have in front of you? We all know: It is not what happens to you – it is how you see what happens to you that matters!*”.

The athletes (some with the aid of their coaches) had ample time to find new ways of training at their home environment, for example, M3 explained, “*... the COVID-19 pandemic we had [the] chance to play with new things*”. In addition, W1 stated, “*... in the pandemic, you had that time, that chance to eat, but to also learn how to have a healthy diet ... the opportunity to be able to change this problem*”.

The committed athletes continued training (which remained more or less the same with slight changes, mainly adapting to the new environment), while others made drastic training changes and adaptations. M3 explained that “... *when we find something, we would send it to Coach and Coach would start incorporating it into the training*”. Some consulted YouTube videos, using virtual training programmes provided by the coaches and other ICT devices and communication with their coaches. S2 maintained that “*I would do the normal training programme; it stayed the same ... I got very fit and healthy and the only thing that was negative was like the technique aspect ...*”.

Regarding the coaches, S1 stated that, “... *my gym coach ... she video-taped herself doing the entire programme and from different angles and stuff so you could really see how to do it correctly and that really helped with the gym training at home*”. E2 also shared her positive experiences with her coach, “*Juffrou M, she really helped me get through it, we would talk ... So, she really made it pleasant*”. It was evident from the athletes' responses that the coaches played a major role in their athletic careers. G3 professed that “... *I feel like the coach is my second dad, he is always there when I need him*”. W3 added, “*So, basically my trainers were my parents*”. G2 opined that *my coach, he tried his best to get workouts organised that we could practise in a group ...*. There should be greater co-operation between the athletes' coaches, their teachers, parents and doctors in order for them to develop an understanding of the athlete's demands and their resources (Sorkkila *et al.*, 2018:129).

Athlete participants' experiences after lockdown: “reconnection and re-engagement” (Elliot *et al.*, 2021:1)

The “strict return-to-play protocols and COVID-19 specific training” guided the youth on how to engage in organised sport (Elliot *et al.*, 2021:1). Athletes explained that there were better opportunities and immediate training made them stronger and motivated. They were able to communicate with others, forge new friendships, have more fun together and hug each other.

The majority of participant athletes experienced the restrictions during COVID-19 lockdown as difficult. However, W1 explained that despite the restrictions, “*the reconnection I think was even harder than the struggling, for me ...*”. Just as they got used to adjusting to the restrictions, they had to readjust to new training methods, diets, etc.: “... *some ways it was very positive after the reconnection, ... now you have all those clips and data you can use to find possible talent to use now in sport*”. After COVID-19, the athletes will still have these resources and it will help them to build their careers. Once they were able to train again, they had fun and were happy – they now had a goal and realised they need to work hard and be committed. School M athletes felt that during the lockdown, there was more family orientation and the parents reconnected.

Theme 2: Motivation: recognising the struggle, reconnection, re-engagement and re-imagining athletics (Elliot *et al.*, 2021:1)

Motivation plays a pivotal role in athletics as it predicts “...performance, relational, and wellbeing outcomes” (Deci & Ryan, 2008:182). In our findings, we were able to establish how the athletes' needs were or were not met and how motivation affected them during the COVID-19 lockdown and beyond in terms of their intrinsic and extrinsic aspirations.

Participant athletes' motivation during COVID-19 to date

W1 experienced the COVID-19 pandemic positively as "... I also think really it helped me ... new love and fire for running. That acknowledgement *made me feel special and made me just want to work even harder*". The quality of motivation is more important than the sum total of motivation in order to predict important outcomes like psychological health, wellbeing, performing effectively, problem-solving creatively and being able to gain deep and conceptual learning (Deci & Ryan, 2008:182).

Overall, the athlete participants were well motivated to continue with athletics during the COVID-19 lockdown and afterwards, as they were adamant that "hard work" and the support and encouragement from their parents, teachers, coaches, peers and friends enabled them to reach their goals. These people ensured that the athletes got the right training, ate nutritious food and supplements, got enough sleep and did not overtrain. They encouraged them, attended to their injuries and ensured that they got the right medical care such as antibiotics or cortisone injections. According to the athletes, parents are their most important supporters; as G1 said, *"My father always says ... give your best and enjoy it"*. W3 expressed her feelings in this way: *"... my grandfather saw me running ... and the face that he has shown me after that race made me exactly realise why I run ... it was like a miracle had happened"*. On the other hand, E1 said that she is her *"biggest supporter"* and that *"winning is not everything – it's about the journey, not the destination – it's fun to practice with everyone"*. Parental involvement in the children's extracurricular activities relates to what their level of education is and the family's cultural capital. Parents' involvement in school education is related to their child's extracurricular activity participation. Hence different effective parent strategies should become part of programmes that include parent competencies, consultations and family education, particularly related to adolescents (Goshin *et al.*, 2021:918-919).

The athletes were very positive regarding the support from their coaches as they put in a lot of effort. But there was also a fun element, keeping them motivated and engaging the whole family via WhatsApp. However, an athlete in SG felt that he (the coach) needed to be harder on her as she had become lazy and the group needed to be stronger, needing more competition during practice, training and coaching. SM athletes described their coach as "amazing" as he provided them with challenges on WhatsApp, asked for video feedback, and also did not change his way of training. They felt, however, that they needed more strength exercises. G2 did not think the coach could do more, as he was doing his best, *"He motivates you, he supports you [in] everything"*. G3 felt that *"... he is the best coach you can ask for. He shouldn't change his coaching ways. And also, he doesn't have favourites, everybody is the same and he likes everybody. He has his own little relationship with every athlete"*. W2 also added that their coach sent motivational content, for example, *"Dreams come true to those who want it the most and like quotes from other athletes and I feel that is very much motivation"*.

The athletes in SW all agreed that since they were able to resume training and coaching after the COVID-19 restrictions were relaxed and that the coaching was good, there were opportunities and better conditions. The athletes were enjoying the training and coaching more as they felt better and free, they were more relaxed, were having fun, being with friends, and less stressed and they enjoyed comradeship as they all helped each other. Athletes also

expressed their disappointment in their schools as rugby was given priority over othersports – *“they motivate you if you play rugby but they do not motivate other athletes”*.

Some athletes love winning and hate losing, and they reported that athletics kept them sane – otherwise they may become agitated, moody and cried easily. They also wanted to be recognised, for example, being recognised as the 400-metre athlete of the school. G1 gave reasons for being an athlete, *“I am not a quitter – I would rather win [the] Olympics than run a world record”*. For S1, *“It [athletics] is my passion or whatever. It is heavily influenced by discipline ... it's a way of life ... so if I find myself not training for a while, I will start feeling uncomfortable in my own skin”*. The athletes participated in athletics because it included enjoyment, competition ensured better times and although they did not like to lose, it motivated them. For E2, athletics (hurdles) was a challenge, *“I really like athletics because there is something about it, there is always [the chance that] I can get better, and when I am running, I am analysing ... I fix that, I can get faster and faster and faster. And that's very nice”*. Extrinsic motivation, according to SDT, refers to external sources such as rewards and competition, and can begin within one, feeling pressure which creates negative effects. However, extrinsic motivation can also result in wellbeing and performance if it originates from one's values, as SDT rests on a continuum of autonomy that is underlying (Sansome & Tang, 2021:113).

The balance between academics and athletics

A number of studies have found that high school athletics contributes to learners gaining *“...higher grades, better attendance, lower dropout rates, and fewer discipline problems than their peers”* (Whitmer, 2013:45). The responses from the athletics participants in this study revealed substantiating evidence that this is the case. M2, for example, claims that *“I practice four hours a day, and I am getting the same marks and everything, so I say you just need to handle the time better”*. M2 elaborated: *“I need to study now, and if you run you have more energy to study, because I feel cleaner, I can think better.”* According to E1, academics can be very stressful and athletics is a stress reliever; hence, *“I have a good balance between academics and sport ... directly after school I practice and then I do different sports until about 18:00 at night and then I go home and I study ... I work and I have time in school time, I will do it”*. M3, who earned an American scholarship at a Christian university for 4 years, starting in 2023, shared her view on the importance of academics: *“For me, obviously academics is very important but so is my future and I can't run forever ... I get up, I will do a gym session on my own to compensate and then I will study...”*. E1 also aims to get *“...into a good university and just be comfortable there ... and I think that's the reason why I work hard”*.

Most of the participant athletes regarded themselves as good role models for other youth and their peers through their disciplined training and good time management (academics and athletics). S1 explained that people only see the race, which is 10%, while the other 90% is behind the scenes – hours and hours of training for 10 seconds of fame! W2 added that *“...we have learnt how to work hard in athletics and now we are taking that and doing it also and using and incorporating it in other aspects in your life like the academic work because you want to be a balanced person – that's important”*. G2 said, *“...if you practice hard, you get somewhere; so if you learn hard, you [will] also get somewhere”* while W3 had the viewpoint that to overcome these challenges, *“...you have to focus on those zones and places you lack in.”* However, it is necessary for coaches to be alert regarding their athletes' stress related to

school and school demands since they may be sources of athletics burnout. Many upper secondary student athletes show both sport and school burnout; therefore, they should be taught stress and time-management skills (Sorkkila *et al.*, 2018:129). Athletics relieves academic stress and brings a balance between sport and academics – working hard in athletics teaches one to also work hard in academics.

Competition – winning and losing as a motivating factor

Competition affects athletes differently, although most of them liked competition. S1 explained that it provides satisfaction and extra drive. M3 felt that “...*competition helped me to work harder to become better and to enjoy the sport actually more...*”. E1 said she liked competitions and “*I prefer tougher competitions because sometimes the best time I ran is when I came fifth or sixth, because they push me to run faster*”. JP’s view of success was “*Success is not winning – success is a way of living. If you want to win at all costs – you might lose your life... Is it worth it? Is the meaning and purpose of life not much more than only winning?*” In the Holy Bible, New International Version (2005:818) in the book of Matthew 16:v 25, we find the answer: “*For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.*” The values we bring to sport can have an impact on sport events or affect the results, for example, overenthusiastic parents can have a “win-at-all-cost” attitude and this value is instilled in their children and manifested on or off the field and leads to conflict (Reynard, 2020:449). Often people associate sport with competition where one wins and the other party loses. However, sport can have goals that also promote human development and wellbeing with people of all ages, leading healthy lives (Gary & Ruben, 2016:32). Coaches often value athletes’ thinking skills and their openness to learning more than impressive times and physical prowess, as it indicates that they can learn and change (Rhem, 2019:4).

Prayer and God’s presence

Three ways offered by Egli and Hoven (2020:114-116) to draw closer to Christ in the sport context are to pray, to study and to practise God’s presence. An aspect of the participant athletes’ repertoire is the role of prayer and God’s presence in their athletics career. They expressed great reverence towards God and how His omnipresence is all encompassing in their athletic career, that He is indispensable and all glory is given to Him, whether they win or lose. The individual athletes experienced God’s presence at different times and during different athletic activities. S1 said, “... *I am most in tune with God ... He is always there for me ... if I am insecure or uncertain about anything the first thing that I would do is I would talk to God, so that is something that I’ve learnt through athletics, through my sport*”.

Prayer also featured strongly and went hand in hand with the participants’ relationship with God. They talked to Him when in their starting blocks or when they were not having a good race, asking Him what to do, and to give them strength as it calmed them down. They prayed together as an athletic family, in a circle – they asked God to prevent injuries, to help everybody to give their best. During the focus group interviews, the athletes recognised their God-given talent, that He is pivotal in their athletics careers. He played a major role in all other aspects of their lives. S1 said that “...*everything I do I do for God – it is the main reason for doing athletics ... I am not at the steering wheel, God is and all the glory goes to Him – if I lose, God has a reason – and the Lord doesn’t take something away if he doesn’t have something better for you*”. S2 shared the following, “*I will always praise God ... He gave me this talent ... I will*

always pray but not necessarily to win but to give my best and the other people that race with me should also give their best". M3 also shared her special moments, "The moment we held each other and get on our knees and someone prays, I just feel more saved and more loved before a race". Egli and Hoven (2020:114) refer to a study conducted in which four themes emerged relating to prayers. The first theme was performance-related prayers, which help athletes with stresses, safety and to play their best; routine, which is praying before, during or after practice and competitions; thankfulness, which is a way to be motivated and give a 100% performance; and God's will, where athletes understand that the outcomes of their performances are God's will. W2 expressed his belief that, "...He has chosen me to be part [off], to participate in athletics and to be healthy and to be able to use my body to its full extent..."

THEME 3: Future of SA SS athletics: "Re-imagining athletics" (Elliot *et al.*, 2021:1)

The participant athletes expressed their concern about their preparedness for the SA championships as they felt that they were not where they should be, due to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and would need stringent training and time to prepare for 2023 and beyond. It is imperative to maintain a core of coaches who are healthy and motivated and who can continue to provide the youth with support through their guidance and mentoring (Faraji *et al.*, 2020:768). It is important that athletes and coaches are proactive in order to prevent uninterrupted sport activities where there are potential critical situations like a pandemic such as COVID-19. By being prepared, athletes will not lose physical activity time, which may interfere with their developmental milestones. From the study of Reiner (2020), the results pertaining to strength can be used by sport coaches in an effort to prepare their athletes with appropriate advice, as well as guidance in a quarantine situation, to enable them to transition into competition when returning to sport. Higher classification athletes (as in this study) kept specificity training, since they had "preferential access to limited training resources" such as space, equipment and facilities (Washif *et al.*, 2021).

Limited opportunities and motivation for international participation

The participant athletes agreed that although SA has talented athletes, they have fewer opportunities to participate internationally. They do not have sufficient financial support, as E1 admits that "*We definitely have the opportunities because we do have SA Champs, but I just don't think a lot of people have the right financial support ...*". In addition, there are no incentives, not enough expert coaches and competitions are poorly organised. An SG participant said that athletes feel that systems should be put in place for black communities to represent SA athletics at the highest level as there are very good athletes; however, they have many challenges to overcome. W2 shared his beliefs, "*... I do believe that there could be more support given, especially in schools and school oriented and through ASA and SASA ... more exposure, I think he (the coach) could use us as an example for other schools and primary schools to get more people in*". W2 said "*... the part that everybody sees, that South African Athletics are working hard but we don't get that recognition for it*". W1 added, "*... it's the country's job to show us acknowledgement and to show us that they are proud that we achieved this, and not just to the rugby players*". Hence, M1 suggested "*... we need to take part more like the African Champs, do more meetings like that for athletes to get more experience for Worlds, for international*". Sport contributes to society and peace by bringing people together, uniting communities and nations who have a common cause (Reynard, 2020:448). W3 thought

“...that’s the biggest problem ... that’s why they go overseas because they don’t feel that the country wants them”.

South African athletes need to be more exposed to international arenas and competitions as they have limited opportunities to become acquainted and gain experience internationally. W2 still had hope and a long-term goal, *“...yes, I do have a hope for South Africa, I would like to go overseas but I would love to at least once be able to represent my home country and show them South Africa has what it’s got”.* The United Nations Office on Sport for Development and other global organisations and non-governmental organisations promote the SDGs that support gender equality, sustainability and conflict resolution., and include people living with disabilities and diseases. Hence there are humanitarian programmes that use sport to intervene and to bring about change in geo-political and cultural diverse contexts (Gary & Rubin, 2016:31-32)

Examples of privileged SA athletes (S1)

Participant athletes explained that SA has a good infrastructure when compared with other countries and that they are privileged. Their tracks are either tar or grass and are well maintained, and they have fully equipped gymnasiums and good coaches. During the COVID-19 lockdown, SG athletes felt that the coaches tried their best to continue with training and offered extra activities, motivation and support. However, this only applies to privileged schools.

There are very few SASS athletes that are really going anywhere as they are not the best examples for performance. M3 remarked that *“... I can just say they are not looking after our athletes”.* However, S1 did participate internationally in Colombia in 2022 and he had a good experience, as the athletics authorities paid for his clothes, air fare, food, accommodation and pocket money. M1, who was also selected to participate in Colombia in 2022 added, *“I don’t think it’s that bad in comparison with other countries ... yes, we also broke the South African record with the female 4 × 100-m relay”.*

Only privileged SA athletes have opportunities to compete internationally. An SG athlete opined that SA athletics is becoming racist as the criteria for international participation is, for example, that if two privileged athletes qualify, at least one non-privileged athlete (even if they take the last place) must be chosen. The athlete stated that authorities are trying too hard to have everybody qualify, but that it is more important to provide good coaches and support for the athletes.

The United States as the ultimate goal to further athletics and academics

SM athletes said it was apparent at the Olympics that only one or two SA athletes were visible participants, whereas the United States and Australia dominate the Olympics; hence, they set their goals on moving to the United States where there are better opportunities and facilities. S1 had the opportunity to compete in the United States in 2022: *“I was training with a group of athletes that’s now studying in the [United] States and just hearing what they were planning and what they were working for and just being part of the process was one of the best experiences for me.”*

W2 maintains that “... America goes to scout for talent, [in] South Africa, because everybody knows that’s where pride, and running strength and hard work are being built ... three or four of my matrics now actually went over to America because they go study there”. If the whole country improves, fewer athletes will want to go to the United States. G3 agrees: “I would say yes, we have great coaches here. If you just practice enough and stay, be more committed to everything ...”. G1 added: “Give everybody the support systems they need and then we will reach the highest highs because we’ve got [what it takes], guys ... We have the talent in South Africa ...”.

What do the coaches say?

All the coaches in the study continued coaching and training throughout the pandemic and, as Coach S said, the athlete was “... a much happier person”. Where there is lack of communication between the coach and the teachers of school-going athletes, friction between them can result in fragmentation and a lack of understanding of the learners’ needs, be it scholastically or athletics (Ginsburg, 2007:21). Most coaches kept to their existing training programmes but with the necessary adaptations. It necessitated them gaining knowledge of pandemic pedagogy and being at the cutting edge of new training and coaching techniques that require competency to get athletes at high performance levels. Coach M expressed his concern: “You feel alone, you train alone, you die alone on the training field. We had to maintain a self-care programme physically and mentally”. He stated that satisfactory feedback from the athletics authorities was an opportunity to jump ahead of the rest or remain the same and became better at innovation training methods. Daily communication and stimulating programmes of perseverance are key factors. Coach W added “... it motivates both the coach and the athlete. Parents get involved when there is growth”, and regarding upcoming athletes: “Your athletes are your most important and successful marketers – they live the real story”. The coaches felt that their schools were very supportive during the pandemic lockdown and thereafter. JP commented that

“Most coaches had to trust the athletes’ own integrity and commitment to do the exercises prescribed to them verbally or via e-mail. Their physical presence was jeopardised and thus a much higher demand was placed on mental and emotional relationships. Unfortunately, many coaches have not been trained and educated in this [regard], which caused many athletes to give up and simply quit”.

Coach G explained that lack of competition led to the athletes feeling disconnected and uncertain. Consequently, only half of the athletes returned to training immediately. “Those (athletes) who did contract the virus recovered fast without breathing difficulties and were more productive in their schoolwork.” Hence fun, enjoyment, and communication played a major role (with athletes, their parents and peers), as well as intensive group training, to get them motivated and in full force for training. As a result of their goals shifting from time to time, which was unsettling, the coaches needed to assist their athletes on an individual basis, to reset their goals – short-term goals changed to long-term goals. “Do not dream for them but with them...” (CG). Coach G deemed it necessary to manage the athletes’ time (for academic and athletic activities); to build relationships and to gain their trust and respect and be firm; to attend to injuries; to allow rest; and to arrange more training sessions and encourage more self-motivation. Coach W said, “Commitment and dedication – coaching must be a way of living, not your job”.

Regarding the role of athletics authorities, Coach W said, “*Currently, there is not a national communicated plan in place. Every coach/school/club/province has their own plan – we need a structure. [There is] too much politics and too many brother and sister appointments*”. Coach E opined that Athletics South Africa (ASA) and the Department of Education (DoE) do not work together, which is imperative for SASS athletics to thrive.

LIMITATIONS

The limitations that we recognise in our study can be considered for future research. Firstly, the focus was on high-achieving athletes performing at or beyond previous time records, while there were athletes who had good potential with high expectations and willingness to learn who may have contributed invaluable responses. Secondly, since the research was conducted, the conditions related to COVID-19 have changed considerably in SA, as athletics is in full swing with many athletes competing, and diversity is evident. All athletes participating in this study had high expectations of qualifying for the Olympics in France, 2024. Thirdly, further studies are needed regarding athletes’ growth trajectories in more than one cultural and geographical context. The use of quantitative research could produce statistics that lead to substantial insights, substantiating the qualitative data. Fourthly, other faith identities need to be considered in order to represent the diversity in SA.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In our endeavour to answer the research question, we believe we were also able to reach our aim by exploring and offering a deep, first hand description and analysis of the phenomenon.

SASS athletics may appear to be a losing battle when we consider the negative responses of the participants as they shared their concerns regarding the situation of SASS athletics. However, the other side of the coin is that they also expressed their hope for a better future for athletics as they continue to train and compete nationally and internationally (in a few cases). Even though COVID-19 is ongoing, restrictions have been relaxed somewhat, and athletics is forging forward. We witnessed the recent Olympics in Paris in 2024, where our representative athletes were able to compete on a high level and bring home silver and bronze medals.

As the pandemic continues, it is recommended that health experts, school administrators and the like be informed of the mental and physical health benefits of adolescents’ participation in organised sports. In this study, we strove to ascertain a recognition of the pandemic struggle by athletes and coaches, and their reconnection, re-engaging and re-imagining of sport. It is important to find ways to attract those athletes who resorted to sedentary behaviours and who ultimately quit. The participant athletes and coaches evidenced successful recovery efforts; however, more research is needed to ensure the retention, survival and sustainability of SASS athletics. There is a great need to recognise athletics and to acknowledge its rightful and respected place in the SA sports arena and education system by the athletics and education authorities; to support and encourage the athletes to participate internationally; to respect the athletes’ religious beliefs and the role they plays in their athletics; to provide the necessary opportunities, resources and conducive conditions; and to improve competition management and put in place well organised provincial and national structures and informed policies. Despite the limitations mentioned, this study contributes to the existing literature and the body of knowledge regarding continued athletics during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Since our participant athletes were all Christians, they were able to view athletics through a Christian lens and gain a Christian view of sport during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The most significant conclusion we made was that God played a significant role in the athletics trajectory of the Christian athlete participants, that prayer and that Christian values featured in their lives while COVID-19 still posed a threat to athletes in this day and age. As Hurley (2021) states “sometimes just relying on how athletes ‘feel’ after a training session, or competition can be more beneficial for their wellbeing than any data, especially in the midst of a pandemic.”

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest in this article.

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