

# Brazilian combat athletes face the postponement of the 2020 Olympics

## Atletas de combate brasileños ante la postergación de los Juegos Olímpicos 2020

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## Abstract

The objective of the study is to analyze the perceptions of Brazilian Olympic combat sports athletes (MEC) about the postponement of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games, as a result of the covid-19 pandemic. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four Brazilian Olympic athletes. The research followed social constructionism, with an emphasis on discursive practices, recording the way in which the interviewees produce meanings. Two thematic categories emerge from the interviews that make the analysis possible: a) the logic of hegemonic masculinities and; b) impacts on mental health. The findings of this research suggest that despite having achieved a good performance in the Olympic Games, the isolation produced in the Brazilian MEC athletes a strong impact on their state of mind and expectations, associated with the difficulties caused by the lack of minimum structure available in Brazil. All those interviewed recognize the importance of psychology services for overcoming the difficulties experienced by athletes in the face of the pandemic.

**Key words:** Social constructionism, combat sports modalities, olympic games, qualitative methodology, covid-19.

## Resumen

El objetivo del estudio es analizar las percepciones de los atletas olímpicos brasileños de deportes de combate (MEC) sobre la postergación de los Juegos Olímpicos de Tokio 2020, como resultado de la pandemia de covid-19. Se realizaron entrevistas semiestructuradas con cuatro atletas olímpicos brasileños. La investigación siguió el constructivismo social, con énfasis en las prácticas discursivas, registrando la forma en que los entrevistados producen sentidos. De las entrevistas emergen dos categorías temáticas que posibilitan el análisis: a) la lógica de las masculinidades hegemónicas y; b) los impactos en la salud mental. Los hallazgos de esta investigación sugieren que a pesar de haber conseguido un buen desempeño en los Juegos Olímpicos, el aislamiento produjo en los atletas de MEC de Brasil un fuerte impacto sobre su estado de ánimo y expectativas, asociado con las dificultades ocasionadas por la falta de estructura mínima disponible en Brasil. Todos los entrevistados reconocen la importancia de los servicios de psicología para la superación de las dificultades vividas por los deportistas frente a la pandemia.

**Palabras clave:** Construcionismo social, modalidades deportivas de combate, juegos olímpicos, metodología cualitativa, covid-19.



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## Introduction

On January 30, five months to the beginning of the 2020 Olympic Games (OG), the announcement of the pandemic was the motive to suspend the event. Based on the position of the WHO, on March 24 2020, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) announced the the postponement of the 2020 Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games to 2021. Thus, the Games that were scheduled for the period from July 24 to August 9, 2020, generated great uncertainty among sports authorities and athletes about the implications of the cancellation and on the new date. In addition to that is the great economic impact, as revealed by the Tokyo Olympic Organizing Committee, with the additional cost of USD 2.4 billion, an increase of 22% relative to the initially planned budget (Forbes, 2020).

With the reactivation of the OG and its celebration from July 23 to August 8, 2021, the Brazilian delegation sent 301 athletes: 161 men (53.5%) and 140 women (46.5%). Of these, 28 were combat sports athletes: seven in Boxing (four and three women), two in Fencing (one man and one woman), 13 in Judo (seven men and six women), three in Taekwondo (two men and one woman) and three in Olympic Wrestling (one man and two women). In total, Brazil conquered 21 medals (seven gold, six silver and eight bronze), five of which were awarded in combat sports: three in Boxing (one gold, one silver and one bronze) and two in Judo (two bronze).

This article adopts the definition of combat sports modalities (CSM) made by Franchini and Vecchio (2012). In this definition, although the CSM have an interaction with fighting (F) and martial arts (MA), they are differentiated from these by being "sportivized" modalities of the previous ones, with characteristics common to other sports. Thus, given the peculiarities that mark the modality, the objective of this research was to understand how Brazilian olympic athletes from the CSM were impacted by the postponement of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games, as a consequence of the covid-19 pandemic.

## Methods

This is a qualitative research from social constructionism, based on the assumptions that scientific research must

focus "[...] the processes through which people describe, explain or account for the world in which they live (including themselves)" (Gergen, 1985, p. 266). We have the role of language as a form of interaction and communication between people (Spink et al., 2014). For this reason, special emphasis is given to language in action, since it is the way in which people produce meanings and position themselves in everyday social relationships (Spink, 2004). Thus, when the term "discourse" or "discursive practices" is put on the agenda, we also intend to contextualize it from the perspective of an action directed at something or someone, endowed with historicity and culture.

We carried out in-depth interviews between February 4 and April 26, 2021. It should also be noted that, given that on March 30, 2021, the IOC released the Olympic calendar, two athletes already had this information, which may have contributed to their perceptions.

This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo (CAAE number 38982420.5.0000.5482) and followed all ethical considerations regarding data disclosure and collection. All participants signed the informed consent before conducting the interview. The names used here are fictitious to preserve identities.

### Participants

We interviewed four athletes over 18 years old who had already qualified for the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games. Among the modalities practiced by those interviewed were: Boxing (n. 1), Fencing (n. 1) and Olympic Wrestling (n. 1). We also did an interview with a Karate athlete, favorite to occupy one of the places destined for South America (due to his achievements in other tournaments, with the aim of preserving confidentiality about the identity of the participant). The Karate positions were defined after the OG calendar. For this reason, the Karate athlete ended up not qualifying for Olympic participation. Given the importance of Karate and, given that Tokyo was the first Olympic edition in which the modality was present, it was decided to keep the analysis of this interview in this article. Sample details can be seen in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Participants

Name	Date of interview	Modality	Gender	Age in years	Duration of the interview
Lorenzo	17/Feb/2021	Fencing	Male	28	13'2"
Maciel	26/Apr/2021	Karate	Male	26	24'24"
Mariana	24/Mar/2021	Olimpic fight	Female	28	21'11"
Robson	22/Apr/2021	Box	Male	24	14'15"

Three interviews were carried out with MEC athletes who actually represented Brazil in the Tokyo Olympics. It was

not possible to interview any Taekwondo or Judo athlete, despite several invitations.

### Instruments

To carry out the interviews, we elaborated a script with semi-structured questions, posed through a fluid dialogue, based on the following leading questions:

How did the postponement of the Olympic Games impact your sports career?;

During the period of isolation imposed by health authorities, were you able to train in the same way and pace as before?;

How would you describe your mental health right now?

It should be noted that an investigation is not constituted exclusively by the network of questions formulated a priori, since the individuals act, deploy, and subvert the pre-established script and bring their demands to the stage. The interviews were conducted virtually, using the Zoom platform.

### Procedure

As a strategy to locate the Olympic athletes, we used the "snowball" technique, a non-random sampling where initial participants indicate other people who meet the same criteria, who in turn indicate new members.

The difficulties in locating and inviting athletes must be recognized and highlighted, since, at the time of collecting the information, many were not sure of their Olympic classification, while each modality had its own qualification criteria. Furthermore, those who had already confirmed their classification sought, at the time of the invitation to participate in the research, to focus entirely on training or the search for sponsorships, reasons cited for not agreeing to grant the interview by several contactees.

### Analysis

The interviews were completely transcribed and sent to each participant in order to rectify or ratify information, before being analyzed. The transcriptions followed what was proposed by Potter and Wetherell (1987). After this stage, we followed a dialogic analysis, as proposed by

Bakhtin (2006), based on the assumption that statements are always in interaction, whether in written texts, verbally or even in the dialogues that people have with themselves. In other words, every statement implies the presence of interlocutors, present, past and future, which materialize in the notions of voices and direction (Íñiguez, 2004). This means that all language is dialogic and the result of collective processes, bringing with it the interanimation process that they have in a conversation. The interviews were read in depth by the researchers and categorized using the Atlas.ti software. These categories were constructed from the understandings and chains of common senses that were obtained from the dense readings of the interviews, maintaining the sequence of the interviewer's and interviewee's speeches to preserve the dialogic and local character of the production of senses on a certain topic. The results of this analysis are presented in two sections: a) the silences and logic of hegemonic masculinities and; b) on self-perceived impacts on mental health.

## Results and discussion

The postponement of the Olympic Games modified the training experience and general preparation of athletes, which transformed confinement into a threat towards an opportunity, as presented by Camilo, Raucci and Furtado (2022) with Olympic athletes of different modalities in Brazil, as well as documented by Zamora-Solé et al. (2022) studying Spanish athletes experiences or Reche-Garcia et al. (2022) in young Mexican athletes. In addition to this, it is specifically highlighted that combat athletes brought other senses that are specifically related to their practice as will be presented below.

### *Individualism and the logic of hegemonic masculinities*

The interviews are full of tensions and leaks, represented in the pauses in the speeches of all of them, scattered glances, gestures and expressions that demonstrate the desire not to delve into certain topics that could be more sensitive and trigger criticism in different areas.

**Table 2.** Reactions to questions about sports training during the isolation measures

Athlete	Reaction
Robson	Surprised reaction (raised eyebrow) - seemed nervous and at the end of the answer drank a lot of juice
Maciel	At the beginning, he stuttered and looked away
Lorenzo	Surprise reaction (raised eyebrow) and recurrent gaze deviations
Mariana	She seemed a little taken aback by the questions and even worried about the words she would use. She stuttered, looked away and said "huh?" requesting interviewer approval

Perhaps because of these attitudes, the numerous problems that plague high-performance athletes, such as

the lack of sponsorship, basic training structures, medical care, sports organizations consistent in their calendars and

healthy relationships between the different members of a technical committee that already were identified in other studies (Camilo, 2020), they have been little problematized in the narratives of these interviews. These shortcomings are reflected in discourses supported by the ideals of improvement, confrontations and the desire to win, with an individualizing perspective, opposed to an approach based on collective efforts and achievements.

We also heard speeches with elements related to hegemonic masculinities (Connell, 1995), which bring about the appropriation of culture by certain types of men who emphasize the supposed potential of their bodies, founded and legitimized by the logic of meritocracy, markedly present in the world of high performance sports. The ideal spread by meritocracy still puts us in the presence of a type of ideal human being, present in the hegemonic narratives of white and middle-class men, who is beginning to be desired by athletes considered “successful” (Camilo & Rabelo, 2019), this being a role played either by a man or a woman. Thus, the ideal of strength and improvement is maintained, hiding anguish, denying failures, helplessness and limitation, present in the human condition.

Lorenzo, Fencing athlete, says:

For me (the postponement due to covid-19) was an event that I was waiting for. Just by chance I ended up preparing for this news to happen. (...) so I managed to absorb this topic much more. (...) I see that there were many people who were much more affected than me. I think I also managed to adapt very well to the situation, and this mentality that I have (...).

This narrative seems an expression of omnipotent thoughts, as if it were possible with individual preparation and only with contacts with “other people”, to better manage the innumerable problems and unpredictability that affected the athletes. It is also worth mentioning that, of all those interviewed, this fencer was the one who most positively evaluated his economic possibilities, placing him in a different socioeconomic level compared to the others. The conception of discourse in these issues brings the performative role of language, its reflexivity and its condition as a social practice that does things, and expresses how to consent, perpetuate or resist power relations (Íñiguez et al., 2011).

In addition to Lorenzo, Mariana, who experienced significantly different training conditions, also reinforces an ideal of strength and vigor that silences the complaints and tension of the suspension of the OG, assuming almost exclusive responsibility for her performance:

Mariana, athlete in Olympic Wrestling, says:

I've always had that vision that what I have is enough to do what I need today, so I'm going to do the best I can with what I have. There came a time in my life, especially as an athlete, when I stopped looking at circumstances, or situations, and complaining.

The countless social, economic and health problems that plagued the world in times of covid-19 were reduced, in the speech, to an individual challenge. As if the fact that the subject is “strong”, “focused”, “without fear” and in constant training could be enough to face the pandemic. As if the fact that the subject is “strong”, “focused”, “without fear” and in constant training could be enough to face the pandemic. The discourses of strength, vigor and individual responsibility found, in the context of the CSM, even more basement; there is a kind of tacit social contract that deliberates on the specific actions and attitudes of those who choose struggles as a way of life (Hirose & Pih, 2010; Spencer, 2013).

We must contextualize that in Brazil, at the time of the respective interviews, there was no vaccine available for the entire population, and Olympic athletes began to be vaccinated towards mid-2021, near to the beginning of the OG. There was also no training structure in most modalities, not only for the practice of the sport itself, but also to support measures to prevent the spread of the disease. The the Brazilian Olympic Committee (2021) proposed a set of guidelines for the practice of Olympic sports in the Covid-19 scenario, organized in four volumes released on December 12, 2020. However, these guidelines were not mentioned by the athletes interviewed as a materiality that contributed to the resumption of training, competitions and prevention of the spread of Covid-19.

All the interviews carried out during this investigation with the CSM athletes were quick and tense, with the longest being 24 and 21 minutes respectively, followed by the most agile with 13 and 14 minutes. Perhaps the short time was caused by exhaustion (either from sports training or the use of virtuality in communications). We perceived a certain shyness and/or discomfort with the questions and the need to calibrate the answers that would be given, as if delving into any question or reflection could be dangerous for the subject. Based on this observation, we analyzed the history of the interviewees. An interesting finding is that all those interviewed were part of the “Program for the Incorporation of High Performance Athletes into the Brazilian Armed Forces” (Ministry of Defense, 2013), in which the athlete is temporarily incorporated into the Armed Forces to represent to the Brazilian Army, Navy or Air Force, in sports competitions. According to Diego Thomaz et al. (2021) militarized athletes have as a common denominator “discipline” (obedience, stoicism, resilience) and “patriotism” (which can take on boastful contours). The authors also argue that the “silences” common in these athletes also reveal political and subjective positions, as well as the delicate position they occupy in a masculinizing culture of military life that requires specific stances to remain in the program as military athletes.

Lorenzo says: “My financial support is predominantly from the State, then through scholarships and incentives, also through the Brazilian army” (Fencing athlete).

As Costa (2020) argues, there are several interests and possibilities of influence derived from the process of militarization of high-performance athletes, such as allocating funds to train or hold sporting events, in addition to media attention and publicity of the Armed forces. This “marketing” carried out by the Navy is visible through the use of stickers of the military organization, by the act of salutation (military continence) or by the use of the uniform by athletes in competitions.

Therefore, the narratives of the interviewees, crossed by silences, beliefs of omnipotence, discourses of strength and individual responsibility, reinforce the image of an “ideal” fighter, associated with characteristics of hegemonic masculinity: power, virility and improvement (Almeida, 2015; Nascimento et al., 2011). We find here a specific way of acting in the scenario of covid-19 and the postponement of the OG, with speeches that bring a specific context and

era, also reproducing the imaginaries and social practices around wrestling athletes.

### Impacts on mental health

How to prepare for a sporting event without knowing who the opponents will be, the competitive agenda, the necessary adaptations and whether the athlete herself would actually have the health conditions for such a competitive level? Facing these uncertainties was generally based on the belief that an athlete should always be prepared, defeating any opponent under any circumstances. Thus, a high-performance athlete should not be “sensitive”; he/she should show strength to face whatever is necessary.

During the restrictions imposed by the pandemic there was an intensification of training, which could be motivated by the loss of the daily, weekly, monthly and annual routine affecting the mental and physical state of the athletes, as can be seen in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Reactions to questions related to mental health problems during the isolation measures

Athlete	Reaction
Robson	He looked at the window for a while and his tone of voice throughout the response was lower
Lorenzo	Surprise reaction (raised eyebrow); he seemed uncomfortable and stammered at the beginning of his answer. He took a while to be anxious and agitated as he responded
Mariana	He seemed uncomfortable with the questions. Before answering there was a brief silence. He moved his body and hands many times

However, overtraining can increase the likelihood of injuries and, in turn, cause more frustration, uncertainty, and discomfort in athletes. Additionally, support from fans and the community can provide them with a sense of connection, unity and pride, but at the same time fuel anxiety and anguish (Taku & Arai, 2020). Converging with the idea that the postponement of the OG could bring the opportunity to train more, with the aim of improving performance, Mariana tells us that:

Mariana says: “The pandemic was one of the best times to train, because there I had the opportunity to be firmer and stronger with my sports coach, working harder” (Olympic wrestling athlete).

The narrative states that a high-performance athlete needs to be on the move at all times, working tirelessly. Like the Olympic wrestling athlete, Maciel also raised the topic of daily training in his speech:

The Karate athlete, Maciel told us:

I set up a mat at my parents’ home, which is a large space, I managed to install a mat there, and I trained daily with my partner, with athletes who came from other places to stay here, so we stayed in the same house, we stayed

in our bubble here while training. So I kept my condition pretty normal, let’s say, training every day.

As “tireless” workers, this expresses a problem also diagnosed in other work contexts: presenteeism. The term arises from the recognition of the importance of workers for the organization of work and has been used to describe the relationship between illness and loss of productivity, a consequence of excessive activities and the feeling of job instability (Karanika-Murray & Cooper, 2018). Another reading says that workers may feel obligated to be in person at the workplace, but not fully focused on their tasks, due to physical or mental health issues (Bierla et al., 2013). In the context of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, the feeling of commitment to be at work (that is, in incessant training), the search for taking advantage of the time to train to recover what was lost, may have generated unstructured routines.

In addition to the unpredictability, athletes had to prepare for the games without ideally considered conditions. The lack of preparatory sporting events and the possibility of exchanging with other teammates during the Olympic cycle was something that appeared in all the interviews. In the words of Maciel:

Maciel, athlete in Karate:

There not many competitions or many events, you can't participate in anything, today going to Europe is difficult (...) So, really, it is very difficult, I tried by all means to adapt as best I could, I think I managed to adapt well, but now what we suffer most is the lack of events, the lack of competitions, the lack of everything.

The Boxing athlete Robson also felt the lack of training and preparatory competitions with other colleagues. However, what made the difference in facing such a context was the support obtained by the confederation and the team of professionals involved:

Robson, the athlete in boxing told us:

I have to thank the Confederation a lot, as they did not let us go at any time. (...) we kept in touch with the coaches and they found a way for us to train at home. We kept in contact all the time with the Confederation, the nutritionist, the psychologist, the coaches, and we managed to continue training at home like this.

This interview highlights the importance of support for athletes, the conditions (although not ideal) of training and the constant support of a multidisciplinary team (coaches, nutritionist and psychologist). It is worth mentioning that Brazil obtained three medals in Boxing (one gold, one silver and one bronze), with two medals for men and 1 medal for women. In the fights at the 2016 Rio OG, Brazil got one gold medal, in London 2012, one silver and two bronze medals, while in Beijing in 2008, Brazil had no medals. It is important to say that the athletes who were medalists in Tokyo, even with the pandemic, made important progress as a result of the work that had already been carried out for years. Still, it's worth saying that medal expectations were higher than what was actually won. Here is the importance of multidisciplinary action (Argudo Fuentes et al., 2020; Ponce-Carbajal et al., 2020), not only to promote sports performance, but also to support the different aspects that involve biopsychosocial health (Rubio & Camilo, 2019).

Furthermore, regarding mental health care during the pandemic, the assumption of positive thoughts and optimistic visions was mentioned in the interviews. As acknowledged previously, it is not easy for these athletes to accept that "not everything is fine" but they recognized in their interviews the risks that an event of this magnitude can trigger:

Maciel acknowledges:

Athletes usually have a huge depression, especially when losing the training rhythm, or when you don't know what your schedule is going to be like. But I tried to maintain my training routine (...), to resist these peaks of depression or insecurity (Karate athlete).

In his speech, in addition to valuing the psychological support for athletes in the face of the covid-19 pandemic, Maciel reinforces how circumstances (loss of training

rhythm, calendar reorganization, uncertainty about future events) can cause depression. The pressure becomes even greater when there is uncertainty. This scenario was also highlighted by Robson, who recognized the impact of the pandemic on his mental health:

Robson says:

The demand is high, so at the beginning, when I arrived at the national team, I felt a little like that [psychologically sick], less so now. The last time I felt something, as anxiety or something like that, was during the pandemic, at the beginning. I didn't sleep for a few days, thinking about it, and I didn't feel very well for about three weeks. I spoke with her [the psychologist] throughout the quarantine.

Considering the interviews and reflections carried out, the restrictions imposed by the covid-19 pandemic generated important changes in the reality of high-performance athletes. In addition to the disruption of routine and non-ideal preparation conditions for OG, these professionals had to deal with the risks of the disease, which inevitably had an impact on mental health.

## Conclusions

In this work we present the meanings of the postponement of the Olympic Games for Brazilian combat athletes. The logic presented here, "individualism and hegemonic masculinities" and "the impacts on mental health", are related and complementary, having their discussion set aside here to bring specific problematizations and borders, between discourses and practices that marked this period for the athletes involved.

The analysis of the interviews reveals that the athletes remained cautious, avoiding delving into certain topics that could be more sensitive and trigger criticism in different areas. Individualizing ideals were also perceived in the problems experienced by athletes, covid-19 and the postponement of the Olympic Games, which were often reduced to an individual challenge and confrontation.

The narratives crossed by hegemonic masculinities sought to sustain an ideal of strength and improvement, which denies failures (with the tension felt in the interviews) and helplessness and anguish inherent to human being. All respondents were part of the "Program for the Incorporation of High Performance Athletes into the Brazilian Armed Forces", indicating the need to investigate whether this affiliation impact their speeches, actions and political positions.

Another point highlighted in our study is in relation to preparation for the OG, in a scenario of uncertainties. The unpredictability led to the intensification of training, pursuing to further improve performance, even without minimum working conditions. In this scenario, the importance given to mental health care and the need for psychological support was verified in the athletes' statements, although it is difficult to assume that they will

be able to handle everything necessary alone, questioning the image of strength, vigor and omnipotence that they try to sustain. All those interviewed revealed that they had specialized psychological care.

The findings of this research suggest that the CSM athletes of Brazil, even when they achieved satisfactory results in the OG (considering the medals won), have been impacted by isolation, especially by the numerous difficulties due to the lack of minimum structure available in Brazil. The fact that this impact has not expressed in observable declines in sports performance constitutes an additional obstacle to making the problem visible and raising awareness among sports authorities in order to strengthen the physical infrastructure and psychological support for athletes.

Finally, this article also calls on Sports Psychology to look beyond performance, with the aim of understanding and collectively facing the realities that involve the sporting context and physical activity.

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