



# Experiences of Pregnancy on the World Class Programme: Athlete Partner Research



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Research Report

Experiences of Pregnancy on the World Class Programme: Athlete Partner Research

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## FOREWORD

The findings in this report highlight the experiences of Olympic and Paralympic athletes on UK Sport's World Class Programme (WCP) who have supported their partners pregnancy<sup>1</sup>. Specifically, it documents how athletes respond to and manage the challenges associated with supporting their partner during pregnancy and postpartum whilst on the WCP.

The report indicates that athletes face significant challenges as they balance WCP commitments with supporting their partner prenatal and postpartum with implications on athlete health and wellbeing, performance outcomes and equitable practice. The findings highlight that there are shared experiences between athlete partners and female athletes who start a family whilst on the WCP that proceed from cultures of organisational practice in relation to family planning and pregnancy support. Importantly, the report highlights opportunities for the development of athlete partner support and provision.

The findings of the report are based on a qualitative interview study with 10 Olympic and Paralympic athlete partners on, or recently retired from, the WCP. The research was conducted by Loughborough University and Liverpool John Moores University in collaboration with UK Sport and was designed to extend the empirical insights on athlete pregnancy experience on the WCP to inform UK Sport's pregnancy guidance.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank UK Sport for their investment in the research and support and feedback throughout the research process. We would also like to thank colleagues at the British Elite Athletes Association (BEAA), National Governing Bodies (NGBs) and Home Country Governing Bodies (HCGBs) for supporting the study and facilitating participant recruitment.

<sup>1</sup> Athletes who have supported their partners pregnancy have been termed athlete partners for the purpose of this research.



# KEY FINDINGS

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## Experiences of Pregnancy on the World Class Programme: Athlete Partner Research



### DECISION MAKING

*"2016 was the big one for us in terms of funding – you secure your funding a bit more over that period of time. And that's when we were trying."*



### HEALTH AND WELLBEING

*"I guess it was just the tiredness that really kind of killed us."*



### PROVISION

*"You just need to go and be somewhere where you can just be and it's not your sport, it's not your job and it's not home either."*



### COMMUNICATION AND SUPPORT

*"From my point of view, unless you're the one having the child – whether that's surrogacy or giving birth – it's almost not a forgotten subject."*



### PARENTAL PRESSURE AND MANAGING EXPECTATIONS

*"It...wasn't easy to say the least. I'm trying to juggle a newborn and training at the same time, and I was very conscious that I had to be there, and I wanted to be there to help."*

# METHODOLOGY

The findings in this report are based on a qualitative research project conducted by academics (authors) at Loughborough University and Liverpool John Moores University. The research project was developed in collaboration with UK Sport.

## Research questions

The research was designed to document the experiences of Olympic and Paralympic athletes who have supported, or are considering supporting, their partners pregnancy whilst on, or recently retired from, UK Sport's World Class Programme. For research purposes, this group are referred to as athlete partners. Three main research questions structured the focus of the research. These were:

- What are the experiences of Olympic and Paralympic athletes who support their partners pregnancy whilst on the WCP?
- What challenges and concerns do athletes face in providing support to their partners throughout the pregnancy journey and post-partum?
- How do athlete partners feel they could be supported during the pregnancy and post childbirth by NGBs?

## Research design and method

The research employed a qualitative research design with semi-structured interviews as the method for data collection. Athletes were recruited via a process of open and targeted communications about the research study facilitated by UK Sport, British Elite Athletes Association (BEAA), National Governing Bodies (NGBs) and the lead authors. Interviews were conducted with 10 athlete partners between February and September 2023. This included Olympic (n=5) and Paralympic (n=5) athletes (male n=8 / female n=2) from across Hockey, Cycling, Para Cycling, Wheelchair Basketball, Athletics, Marathon Running, Para Rowing, Judo. Athletes shared their experiences from a range of perspectives, this included prenatal, postpartum and early years.

## Data analysis

Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were conducted by the authors via Microsoft Teams. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim before undergoing a form of qualitative thematic analysis<sup>2</sup>. Data analysis procedures were followed throughout the process to enhance coding reliability and empirical adequacy. The full dataset for this project has been securely archived within Loughborough University's Data Repository.

<sup>2</sup> Wiltshire, G., & Ronkainen, N. (2021). A realist approach to thematic analysis: making sense of qualitative data through experiential, inferential and dispositional themes, *Journal of Critical Realism*, DOI: 10.1080/14767430.2021.1894909

<sup>3</sup> Ethics Review Reference 2022-11265-11509.

<sup>4</sup> Athlete partners may be referred to as athletes throughout the report.

## Ethics

The research study was granted Ethical Approval by Loughborough University Ethics Review Committee<sup>3</sup>. Interview data has been securely managed under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Identifying information has been removed to protect athlete anonymity.

## Research strengths and limitations

The data from this research is drawn from a representative sample of athlete partners<sup>4</sup> on the WCP and the sample size (n=10) is considered appropriate for the form of qualitative inquiry and methods employed. The findings in this report reflect the current context and pregnancy guidance at the time this research was conducted (January – September 2023).

The findings of the study are presented under the following thematic headings:

- Experiences of athletes who have supported their partners pregnancy
- Challenges throughout the pregnancy journey and postpartum
- Providing support for athlete partners

# FINDINGS

## EXPERIENCES OF ATHLETES WHO HAVE SUPPORTED THEIR PARTNERS PREGNANCY

### I. Decision Making

The findings of the study indicated that there are several factors that impact an athlete's decision to start a family whilst on the WCP. Although factors such as age and relationship priorities were considered, the athletes in the study were clear that competition and training schedules, funding cycles and the availability of family/peer support were critical in the decision-making process.

*"We'd sat down and said, 'when should we start?'. We decided May time because I would've got my warm weather training out the way. Oh sorry, maybe February time, and then I'd go for warm weather training and if it worked, it worked."*

*"2016 was the big one for us in terms of funding – you secure your funding a bit more over that period of time. And that's when we were trying."*

*"I think it would be really, really difficult if we didn't have support and back up. But to be honest, that is the same for our careers in general. Our families are really supportive; think we're incredibly lucky to have the support that we do, and I know that they'll be called upon."*

*"Tokyo had been moved [and] it kind of shunted our planning for a baby".*

*"The plan was always sort of go to this Olympics and then we'd have family."*

Indeed, athletes emphasised the need to plan the pregnancy around major events and training schedules to ensure they were present for the birth of their child and to support their partner postpartum. This often led to athletes feeling a pressure to conceive within a specific and relatively short window of time and a sense of needing to balance their commitment to key performance events with the unpredictability and limits of conception.

*"I was looking at the diary being like well, if we want a baby, we're going to have to try and*

*plan it so that it arrives here so that I'm home because we don't get paternity leave. I wanted to try and time it where the baby arrived in my off season so that I could spend the majority of the three week learning how to become a dad or enjoying those experiences."*

*"It's a tough one and it's hard for athletes because so many athletes will have had to wait for the 'right time' to have a baby and when is the right time?"*

*"For me it was like: are we doing it at the right time? ...I was like the thought of being pregnant is amazing, but I'd miss Worlds and I really felt like I shouldn't be having these thoughts because it's a big thing that you want to do, and you can't postpone everything forever and then you realise you're in your late thirties and there is such a thing as a biological clock."*

*"As an athlete the planning to become a parent, you kind of try and fit it around your schedule. The conception, you know, trying to conceive around my rowing schedule. We sat down and did a lot of planning and ultimately like anything, conceiving a baby, naturally, naturally or not, the baby wants to come, and she did."*

*"We'll try up until this point and if it doesn't happen, we'll reschedule until after Tokyo... We gave ourselves a 10 week gap. That gives X amount of time to recover, train, put in a winter training block, and then the Games."*

Planning a family in the case of athletes with partners also on the WCP was perceived as particularly difficult. Certainly, several athletes indicated that starting a family was only possible following their partners retirement from performance sport. Although the introduction of the UK Sport pregnancy guidance has provided greater support and provision for female athletes on the WCP who wish to start a family, for athlete couples, supporting a family within the current system and structure of the performance environment was perceived by some as 'impossible'.

*"If we were both training and competing it would've been impossible, and we couldn't have done it."*

*"If [partner] was an athlete-mum and I was an athlete-dad at the same time, again, I don't think it could work. I just don't think it would work."*

Relatedly, a number of athletes indicated that retirement would be a likely outcome if they were to have a second child having experienced significant challenges supporting their first child whilst on the WCP.

*"Having had the baby and having gone to racing and having gone to training camps and understanding how hard it is, we can't imagine doing it with a toddler and a second baby while I'm still an active athlete."*

Indeed, some athletes indicated that there was still a perception on the WCP that starting a family would lead to retirement.

*"It's almost like a stereotype that is, like literally, he's having a baby. He's finished now, he's done. But it doesn't have to be that way. And I don't know why...but it is very much like, oh, yeah, he's finished now."*

Alongside training and event schedules, athletes described the importance of funding cycles in their decision to start a family. Certainly, several athletes conveyed the importance of securing a period of funding before they considered conceiving so that they were in a better position to manage the financial challenges associated with supporting a family alongside sporting commitments.

*"We had world champs that year then 2016 was the big one for us in terms of funding – you secure your funding a bit more over that period of time. And that's when we were trying."*

*"There's still pressure to go out there and medal but the pressure's not on as much, and we could kind of plan a bit more. You know, further down the line with [my son] and how I how I was going to divide my time to get the performance element right as well as being a good father figure as well."*

However, the most notable factor that influenced athletes decision to start a family whilst on the WCP was the presence and proximity of family and peer support networks. For many of the athletes in the study, family support, particularly in the postpartum, was 'vital' to their ability to manage childcare responsibilities with WCP commitments.

*"I've got both my parents locally, and so does my wife because she grew up in a village in Leicestershire not far from mine. So, we're like ten minutes or maybe twenty minutes from both sets of parents which is really, really handy. Obviously, everything else – like the preparation before birth, if I couldn't make a scan then her parents would go with her, and if we needed anything doing or needed advice or help it's relatively close by and so yeah, a very vital support system."*

*"I think it would be really, really difficult if we didn't have support and back-up. But to be honest, that is the same for our careers in general. Like, our families they are really supportive; think we're incredibly lucky to have the support that we do, and I know that they'll be called upon."*

*"Both our parents are just retired, so we knew that they'd have the added time to help. Whereas a couple of years ago we wouldn't have had the help from my mum."*



*"For me it was like: are we doing it at the right time?  
...I was like the thought of being pregnant is amazing,  
but I'd miss Worlds and I really felt like I shouldn't be  
having these thoughts because it's a big thing that you  
want to do, and you can't postpone everything forever."*



## II. Communication and Support

Although there is a myriad of factors that influence an athlete's decision to start a family whilst on the WCP, the importance given to funding and family network for the athletes in this study largely stems from the current dearth of guidance and support available to athlete partners on the WCP. Indeed, many athletes conveyed the extent to which the challenges around family planning and supporting their partner prenatal and postpartum was compounded by a lack of formal advice on strategies to manage their new family set up on the WCP – "[it was] one of the biggest challenges and just a complete unknown".

Certainly, a number of athletes indicated that there had been very limited dialogue with support staff and NGBs about how their partners pregnancy might be managed in the context of training and performance commitments.

*"There's very little communication I'm getting from them, you know, couple of the contacts I have at [NGB], you know, messaged me to say congratulations, but nothing in terms of direct, in terms of support or anything like that for anything really... from my point of view, unless you're the one having the child – whether that's surrogacy or giving birth – it's almost a forgotten subject."*

*"They've hardly spoken to me about it... they've only really spoken to me about it with regards to what I would do with the World Championships which I'm meant to go to in June."*

The findings indicate that athletes typically seek advice on managing family and sporting commitments via informal networks which often included peers with shared experiences.

*"You are literally doing it [getting support] through, you know, friends and things like that. You know, word of mouth [is] how your kind of getting your support."*

*"I work closely with [name], who is a runner... and has three kids, so he's been very supportive."*

*"He's more kind of like a close friend now and he's got an 18 month old baby and so he's experienced it all very recently. He's, you know, very much kind of a friend to say look [name removed] back off you're training a little bit when the baby comes...so he would be the person that I would go to for advice. You know very much from a friend perspective to talk me through it – kind of share experiences and stuff like that."*

*"[I was] speaking to other athletes who have had kids."*

In some instances, athletes reflected on the extent to which they chose not to seek advice from NGBs in the knowledge that there was an absence of formal guidance to support athlete partners and/or that they simply did not expect support.

*"I don't know whether this is more fool on me, but I didn't really access anything through the governing bodies."*

*"It's like I didn't necessarily expect anything from the governing body."*

There was also an extent to which some athlete partners were cognisant of the differences in the implications and experience of pregnancy and parenthood for female athletes on the WCP – "whereas when you're a female athlete considering having a child, that's a huge implication on the sporting career" – with this often compounding their decision not to seek advice from NGBs.

Several athletes indicated that conversations with Performance Directors and Coaches around their partners pregnancy were difficult to initiate.



*"If my coach wasn't as amazing as he was, it would never have happened".*

*"It's difficult when you go into your PD's [Performance Director] office and you go on and be like 'Oh my baby's due right in the middle of races'. It's a very scary conversation to have."*

*"It's just the way he worked. And I don't mean it nastily, it's just he was so hell-bent on winning and stuff like that... I knew people who were almost nervous to tell him certain news."*

*"I guess from my point of view my performance director at the time was really good. Looking back, she was very ... supportive in various means of saying how they could help out in performance-related issues."*

*"It's interesting how certain people have been very vocal recently about the lack of support... I couldn't be more positive about that support."*

Indeed, the findings highlight that positive experiences of support were typically influenced by the coach-athlete relationship and early and forthright conversations around how and what adjustments may be needed.

*"If my coach wasn't as amazing as he was, it would never have happened."*

*"I think I've got quite a good working relationship with my performance director and coach, where we've been able to work around things. You know whether it's me changing my training so I train on a different day because the midwife appointment, or whether I came in early, whatever it may be, I felt incredibly supported by my organisation. And I think part of the reason for that is because I went to them really early, you know, we didn't have a very successful early pregnancy. We almost lost her. So, when I came back at the start of the season this year, I just went to the PD and coach and put it on the table. And said I'm very happy to tell you that we are pregnant. We're not sure what's going to happen, but there will be time where I need some support."*

The positive experiences of support described by a handful of athletes in the study are important to recognise. However, in the absence of formal athlete partner guidance, the support offered is unevenly distributed and inequitable. Certainly, there were instances when athletes felt that conversations with PDs and coaches around family support was received negatively and accommodations only possible by virtue of their 'status' and/or the nature of their relationships with NGBs.

*"I think you're afforded more opportunities and support that keep you well, which is which is right, we want the athlete to be 100% focused, committed. And if that involves family*



*being involved, then that that's going to happen. Whereas I suppose previously conversations would be shot down quickly and when it wasn't the case that I was the current world record holder or won the European Championship."*

*"I'm on the [removed] Commission board and I'm on the board of [removed] and so I feel*

*that I've got, I've just got that relationship with those people that I can go and have those conversations, and if it was a no, it was a no. But I feel like I could have the conversations."*

### III. Priority Shifts and Motivation

The findings demonstrated that athlete partners experienced a shift in priorities and motivation following the birth of their child and the addition of a new identity as Parent/Father/Partner that they felt was conducive to performance and psychological drive. Although athletes experienced significant challenges in maintaining training and performance outcomes in the postpartum, there were important positive changes in their outlook on performance sport.

*"I've had the baby and she is my priority, and she really is because I wouldn't be working kind of the way I'm doing now but I've still that desire and that burning to be an athlete."*

*"Bringing a medal home for my little boy. That's what drives me now. The look on my lads' face. I'm not as hard on myself anymore. It's a positive thing. Now it's just like life goes on. I've got my boy... I remember sat there at the world championships and I lost, and usually that's ground zero for me, but I took a breath and that was that. Psychologically it's a positive thing."*

*"My determination has always been high but it's even higher now because... I want to show them that [child] what I do so they can, when they're older, remember those things – all the hard work I've been doing."*

*"I think since having kids my performance has naturally been elevated because it's kind of given me more substance to appreciate what I do and the time that I've been able to spend with them then subsequently makes me want to do better for them because they're there."*

*"I remember rugby players used to joke about 'dad strength'. In terms of when I spoke to them, they said you'd become stronger, and you'd become this. I think you have a greater motivation in life when you have family."*

Indeed, this finding indicates that, for some athletes, having children led to more productive psychological states that enabled them to reach higher performance levels.

*"I was having a sort of a battle with this guy, and we got to like 8K [in the race], and she [child] entered my head. And it's very much like...right, I'm going to win this for you, now...I kicked and moved away from the guy in second place... and then it's that's dad power for me."*

## CHALLENGES ATHLETES FACE SUPPORTING THEIR PARTNER THROUGHOUT PREGNANCY AND POSTPARTUM

### I. Parental Pressure and Managing Expectations

The findings demonstrate that athletes faced a number of challenges supporting their partner through pregnancy and postpartum. One of the primary challenges was managing the day-to-day logistical complexities of childcare and the division of parental labour whilst on the WCP. Many athletes described the difficulty in finding time to be present and support their partner during key moments throughout the pregnancy journey, such as ante-natal classes, pregnancy scans and midwifery appointments.

*"There're these ante-natal classes but we were looking at our calendars to see when we're both here or when he's here particularly and there's like no time. And because of training camps and work commitments, that's going to be the case going through next year."*

*"I didn't go to all the midwife appointments... [name of partner] always jokes 'we're not pregnant, I was pregnant', and I do agree with that."*

Athletes described the challenge in managing day to day childcare with training and recovery, particularly in the postpartum where childcare routines were being established and athletes were providing additional support to their partner following childbirth.

*"And the first thing you want to do is take the baby off the other parent. But the same time you also need some break, but you don't want that break because it's the best part of my day is going home to see the baby. So that's really like conflicting that you know the best thing for you, training and your recovery is to go and have a nap."*

*"I know it's not the same for every relationship...but we are in an exclusively breast fed household and lucky to be so...I probably would have preferred to have had*

*more input but by the time I come home from work, I'm physically exhausted cause I've had a day of training. But [name of partner] is physically exhausted because she's been up all night feeding the baby."*

*"I'd do the feeds and then [my wife] would do the rest. So, I got a night's sleep before my heavier training sessions. And then at the weekends, whoever did the night feeds would then get the lay in. So, the early morning shift would be the person who didn't do the night feeds."*

*"I think helping [my wife] out was just...even if it was just, I came home at lunchtime, made her some lunch and then I'd go back out again and then I'd come back, do the washing whilst she's taking care of [our son] and then she can go for a nap and recover."*

A number of athletes identified the importance of taking time in the postpartum to 'recover' and establish a 'strategy' or routine with their partner that enabled athletes to find a balance between childcare and training commitments.

*"And I'd already given myself quite a good chunk of time to recover and get used to it. And then also it gives me a chance to plan."*

*"I think we've got a good routine and we're establishing it around my lifestyle, and I think that's important. You live your life to schedules and goals and everything so often and training programs and then when something like a baby comes along that doesn't live by a schedule, that's just it, like a mental thing trying to get a baby, to live to your schedule. Because while I've had flexibility, I still had a schedule and I still have to train, I still have to eat at certain times and sleep. You know, all these kinds of things that was really difficult, but I think we're*

*now getting to point where all three of us in this relationship are now kind of on a similar schedule."*

*"It's trying to manage my time and expectations as well on both parts is something that you have to be and have a strategy and be open-minded as well."*

Indeed, managing time away from their family required 'negotiation' with Coaches and Performance Directors, and there was a sense amongst some of the athletes in the study that there existed an 'attitude' toward family provision on the WCP that made such conversations difficult. This perception may stem from the extent to which athletes feel unsure of what adjustments and additional support is reasonable to request from NGBs in the absence of formal athlete partner guidance.

*"I try to come down on Tuesday evening until Saturday and then head home Saturday. It's not ideal but it's the best we can do. You know, between negotiation with coaches."*

*"I think I don't want to say non-negotiable, but I think I think that's the attitude."*

However, there were instances when adjustments to current practices were made to support athletes who were concerned about being away for a significant period in the postpartum.

*"So this period would have been six weeks but I spoke to my performance lifestyle manager and I just said I'm really nervous about that because that in a week of a newborn baby, there's so many changes and as a new dad, you want to kind of see them, and if I'm away for six weeks, it's going to be like a different baby when I come home. And so, he suggested I took the baby away on camp with me and I said, well, you can't do that, it's never been done. I was a bit apprehensive, a bit hesitant about*

*asking. And I was actually quite shocked of that response because I thought I would have had a lot of pushbacks from the sport. So, [partner name] and my mum and the baby came out to Italy. I could see them on my half days or the evenings and it just it just worked, and it helps you know."*

Indeed, the quote above is instructive of the extent to which conversations around support requirements were perceived as difficult to initiate – "I was a bit apprehensive, a bit hesitant about asking" – yet did result in support that had a positive impact on the athlete's wellbeing and performance. However, athletes were cognisant that the organisational environment and performance culture of the WCP limits the form and degree of accommodations and support that can be offered to athlete partners.

*"I understand it and you know they're not going to develop a crèche. And you know, I don't know how useful it is for children to be in the professional environment, but also by the same token, you know if it enables me to train 100%, and gets the best out of the athlete then it's worth considering."*

## II. Parental Guilt

Many of the athletes in the study were aware of the extent to which managing childcare whilst on the WCP often meant that a greater degree of parental labour was placed on their partner. Despite establishing strategies to support their partner with childcare, commitments to the WCP and the need to maintain performance levels throughout the pregnancy journey and postpartum made it particularly difficult to provide a more equitable division of parental labour.

*"I'm trying to juggle a newborn and training at the same time, and like I was very conscious that I had to be there, and I wanted to be there to help. So, how I divided up my time was the trickiest part."*

The findings indicate that this induced feelings of guilt among athlete partners with implications for mental health and wellbeing.

*"I think that's probably the hardest part is the guilt of not doing enough."*

*"I felt guilty that I was just coming home from training and sitting on the sofa and having the baby and having all the good parts of the day and not having the facilities to help because I was shattered or injured or whatever it may be."*

*"It can be challenging you know when you see the realities of a tired wife and children missing the father and yeah you know finances being tight."*

*"The sense of guilt was compounded by the reliance on family and peer support networks that offered crucial support to athlete partners, and which enabled them to balance childcare and training commitments."*

*"So there's that element of guilt as well that you you're so reliant on help from other people*

*because of our lifestyle, that it impacts their life as well, you know."*

*"Honestly, if it wasn't for my wife, parents, we wouldn't be able to do this. I am incredibly grateful. But also, you know thankful that they sort of buy into this project as well and see the value of you know I'm sure they would support the kids anyway, but I think without that it would be, just wouldn't be possible."*



### III. Support

As noted above, for athlete partners, family and peer support networks were crucial to enabling them to balance WCP commitments with childcare in the absence of any formalised guidance and support from NGBs. However, athletes spoke of the challenges associated with utilising family support and the extent to which this support only went so far.

*"We had a lot of support. We couldn't have done it without the support but that's only like 1 percent of your life covered."*

*"I book people into help with [name] ... and trust that it's going to be OK... you beg, borrow, steal time from friends, family, grandparents."*

*"I go back to training and it will be a mixture of my mum supporting, [name of partner] mum supporting, a childminder and I haven't even got all the time covered yet. This is the biggest challenge by far."*

*"I had an issue in winter training where my wife had no more leave from work, and we had a week where the grandparents were on holidays... it wasn't ideal, but it was difficult."*

Indeed, this was a particular concern for athletes on centralised programmes where there was an expectation to be located some distance away from family support for training.

*"I would say that being part of a centralised programme in Berkshire makes it incredibly difficult to access family support. However, we are very fortunate that [partner] parents are retired so we had her mother live with us for 10 days in the immediacy after birth. But after that it has been incredibly difficult."*

Furthermore, athlete partners identified the financial challenges associated with childcare and the pressure

they experienced to maintain performance levels and secure funding. This was one of the primary motives for maintaining training commitments in the postpartum despite the impact on their emotional and physical wellbeing.

*"So therefore, I've got pressure on me this year to maintain my funding level or maintain my performance to maintain the funding. Otherwise, we would be really struggling."*

*"I guess there are some certain pressures and weights – paying for nursery fees, an extra mouth to feed, the extra toys and clothes, all the accessories and holidays that come with it – it does add financial stress."*

*"You become consumed by, you know, financial stress, not really wanting to be there and which then makes training hard. Mental health probably impacted, not significantly, but [I] don't feel like my tails up."*

Again, this was a particular concern for athletes on centralised programmes located in areas with a higher cost of living, e.g., Southeast of England.

*"But because of the sport that I do, we've had to move to Berkshire... But with the cost of living here, it gets harder and harder. I'm very lucky to be paid, but also, it's only ever be so much. The ceilings, you know, everything is a ceiling...When [partner] returns to work, the financial position of the APA grant will make it difficult to afford nursery costs, average price being £75 per day, which is a necessity as we are living away from family. This wouldn't be a cost we would incur if living back in Wales as we would have Grandparental support and care."*

*"When you add in a baby into that, it's even harder and I'm from a sport where it's a centralised program, so you have to be here."*



*You can't be anywhere else. You have to be in this part of the world on the funding."*

Certainly, there was a sense amongst the athletes in the study that being a performance athlete on the WCP was "not a financially viable option" if they were to continue to have children. Although athlete partners developed self-management strategies to balance WCP commitments with childcare, there is an extent to which they were just managing – [doing] "what we need to survive" – and with implications on emotional and physical wellbeing.

*"It has expedited the end of my sporting career. Like I said, through financial means and through wanting a 'normal life' or the flexibility*

*to have a 'normal life'. You know, if you cast your mind 5 years forwards and baby number 2 are in school for the first time or whatever, they only get certain holidays off and only allowed holidays in certain times, but they never fit with my schedule. You kind of look forward and you're like, well, actually it's going to be an issue."*

*"So yeah, I think actually having had the baby, it's kind of opened your eyes up to other things that would play a part and the blocks that sport put in the way."*

#### IV. Health, Wellbeing and Performance

The challenges that athlete partners experienced in managing family and WCP commitments had implications for their health and wellbeing. Although several athletes took a period off from training and/or adapted training routines following the birth of their child, this was typically in the case of individual sports (e.g., athletics) which allowed athletes greater flexibility around training routines in the postpartum. Many athletes described how they struggled to manage training and recovery around the acute pressures of childcare in the postpartum leading to sleep deprivation and with implications on wellbeing.

*"It was tough. Some days I had to train when you really don't want... But he goes down and you think right I can do a short session now."*

*"Which, as you know, as an athlete just getting out of bed in the morning knowing what lies ahead of you – it's tough. But then doing that, being knackered on maybe four- or five-hours' sleep is even worse. And then trying to do that again and again and again."*

*"I guess it was just the tiredness that really kind of killed us."*

*"I think sleep was a big issue for me – psychologically and physiologically."*

The efforts to continue WCP commitments during the postpartum despite the implication on recovery, sleep quality and wellbeing, stems, in part, from athletes feeling pressure to maintain performance outcomes and secure selection and funding.

*"And you shouldn't have to worry about the knock on effects. But given our funding structure, given the way that my sport works, you do worry about them because you want to be selected. So, you get your funding, and you want to go to world champs, and you want to perform so you retain your funding."*

*"Yes, you've had a child. Yes, we get you're tired. But you're playing rubbish. We can't pick you because you're playing rubbish. Like, we know it's due to this stuff and you can play better when you'd have sleep, but we can't pick you."*



## PROVIDING SUPPORT FOR ATHLETE PARTNERS

The findings of the study point to a number of opportunities to develop provision and guidance for athlete partners throughout the pregnancy journey and postpartum. Although there are instances where athlete partners felt supported by their NGBs, this currently occurs on an individual basis largely contingent on informal practices. In the absence of any formal guidance, the support offered to athlete partners by NGBs is thus unevenly distributed and inequitable.

However, although there is a need to develop guidance that can ensure NGBs offer standardised forms of provision for all athlete partners, there is an extent to which this needs to be sufficiently flexible given that each pregnancy journey and postpartum experience is unique. Indeed, whilst recognising the need for equitable support, there were cases where athletes saw the value of having flexibility to self-manage when they took time off during the pregnancy journey.

*"There is agility and flexibility that has come about from not having a policy in place because it's meant that I've been able to go to every single appointment... when we're not being fixed to, for example, you can have 5 days for appointments in two weeks...you know, it's always been fairly flexible, and I actually think sometimes there are spaces where you need it."*

Based on the findings, formal guidance may indeed seek to provide a framework of provision that provides athlete partners with a degree of autonomy over how/when the provision is utilised. For instance, athlete partners may benefit from the opportunity for a fixed amount of time off from the WCP that could be taken at discretion throughout the pregnancy journey and postpartum.

*"I think in sport a lot of the time that if you want time off or if you want flexibility in your program, you always have to justify it. What the guidance may offer is not having to justify your actions and just having a set amount of days where you can go and be a dad today*

*and have no repercussions from that."*

*"I think when I look back on the program and being a father, one of the things that would be really good is almost if UK Sport provided some minimum guidelines in terms of where flexibility could be offered."*

The findings demonstrated that managing WCP commitments with childcare induced feelings of guilt and emotional stress amongst athlete partners. This was often compounded by the pressure of childcare, sleep deprivation and poor recovery, and maintaining training routines and performance outcomes for future funding security. Certainly, there is an opportunity for athlete partner provision to offer broader non-performance related support for athletes.

*"The only support I was given was performance-related, like: How can we help you not get injured? Which is fine, I guess, but then when your head's a bit muddled, in a stressful environment, and you don't know how your performances are going to be panning out."*

*"You just need to go and be somewhere where you can just be and it's not your sport, it's not your job and it's not home either."*

The findings of the study further demonstrate that there is a dearth of knowledge sharing and communication around athlete partner experience. Indeed, athletes indicated the benefit of hearing others' experiences of the pregnancy journey particularly in terms of sharing accounts and self-management strategies.

*"I think having or hearing or knowing of the lived experiences of other athletes who have gone through it and dealt with it, and the genuine problems they've had and the stresses."*

Athlete partner guidance may seek to develop a network or forum to build an athlete partner community and facilitate the sharing of experiences and knowledge. This may support athlete partner voice and promote confidence in managing the situation via the sharing of childcare strategies and support mechanisms. This may further support athletes with feelings of guilt associated with parental expectations and help them make informed decisions to positively influence their health and wellbeing.

*"I think also people sharing their experiences or creating a library around people's experiences will also encourage more people to do it because I think up until this point it's just been like as soon as you're ready to have a baby, your professional career is over."*

A number of athletes saw value in athlete partner guidance ensuring a degree of funding security, particularly in the postpartum where athletes were establishing childcare routines and were most likely to experience emotional stress and performance and training implications. Any funding support could be loosely modelled on the provision offered in the current UK Sport pregnancy guidance whilst recognising the very different experiences and performance implications for female athletes who start a family whilst on the WCP

*"I think that's where the maternity guidance did so well for the women, because it guaranteed them 18 months of the same funding. Now I'm not suggesting that a man needs the same length of time. But maybe if there's security around his funding position in his first year of becoming a father so that they could have a buffer."*

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings in this report have highlighted the experiences of Olympic and Paralympic athletes on the UK Sport World Class Programme (WCP) who have supported their partners pregnancy. Drawn from qualitative interview research with 10 athlete partners, the findings documented how athletes respond to and manage the unique set of challenges associated with supporting their partner during pregnancy and postpartum on the WCP.

The findings indicated that there are a number of important factors that contribute to an athlete's decision to start a family with their partner whilst on the WCP. Alongside factors such as age and relationship priorities, athletes highlighted that competition schedules, funding cycles and the availability of family/peer support was critical in the decision-making process. This was to ensure athletes felt equipped to manage the challenges associated with starting a family, e.g., financial responsibilities and support with childcare, with WCP commitments and performance outcomes. This often resulted in athletes experiencing a pressure to conceive at specific points and was particularly challenging for athletes with partners also on the WCP.

The findings document the unique set of challenges athlete partners experienced throughout the pregnancy journey and postpartum. The primary challenge was the management of day-to-day logistical complexities of supporting their partner through the pregnancy journey and managing childcare responsibilities in the postpartum with WCP commitments. Family support was critical to enable athlete partners to manage WCP commitments following childbirth, however, this was particularly difficult for athletes on centralised programmes located some distance from family support networks. There were further challenges to athlete partners emotional wellbeing, physical health, and performance outcomes. Athlete partners found it particularly challenging to manage training and recovery schedules with childcare responsibilities, particularly in the postpartum and when providing support to their partner, which led to athletes experiencing a sense of guilt with implications on their wellbeing and mental health. This was often compounded by the anxieties around the precarity of, and reliance on, informal family support networks.

The findings highlighted that one of the primary motives for athletes to maintain training commitments in the postpartum despite the challenges to their emotional and physical wellbeing was to maintain performance outcomes and subsequent funding so they could meet the financial challenges associated with starting a family. Importantly, the findings highlighted instances where athlete partners felt supported by their NGB and where starting a family had a positive psychological impact on performance motivation and outlook. However, in the absence of formal guidance, the support and provision offered to athlete partners by NGBs is unevenly distributed and inequitable.



In summary, there is a pressing need to provide guidance and support to athlete partners. Based on the findings from the study, there is an opportunity to provide a framework of provision that includes:

- The implementation of a set number of discretionary days off from WCP commitments to be utilised by athlete partners across the pregnancy journey and postpartum. This would provide athlete partners with a degree of flexibility and accommodate differing support needs and pregnancy types/journeys.
- Funding security loosely modelled on the provision offered in the current UK Sport pregnancy guidance. Whilst it is important to recognise the differing needs, experiences, and implications of parenthood on performance outcomes and career trajectories between female athletes and athlete partners on the WCP, there is opportunity to provide athlete partners with short term funding security. This would support athlete partner health and wellbeing, particularly in the postpartum when athletes experience significant disruption to training routines and recovery strategies.
- The development of a network to build an athlete partner community and facilitate the sharing of experiences. This may support athlete partner voice and promote confidence in managing the situation via the sharing of childcare strategies and support mechanisms. A network may support athletes with feelings of guilt associated with parental expectations and help them make informed decisions to positively inform their health and wellbeing.



