Routledge Handbook of Applied Sport Psychology
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I’ve always been an advocate of personal best times and to come here [the Olympics] and get two of them, I’m really pleased about that. Only about 30% of swimmers come here and do personal best times; so I made it my personal mission to get inside that 30% … I set myself a goal and I was pleased with my performance. It won’t be my last goal.

Danyon Loader (New Zealand swimmer, Olympic medalist [Loader, 1996])

As the quote above from double Olympic gold medalist Danyon Loader indicates, the Olympics are challenging (e.g., only 30% of swimmers post a personal best time); a special type of mental toughness is required to succeed at the Olympics. For most athletes, the four-year Olympic cycle generates a level of importance that defines this sporting festival as their career-culminating event (McCann, 2008). As Haberl and Peterson (2006) concluded, the Olympic “crucible creates unique pressures for everyone involved: athletes, coaches, and support staff.” (p. 29)

The Olympic context is different

The Olympic context is different and unique, but the basic models of sport psychology consulting, your consulting philosophy, and your ethics remain constant (Andersen, Van Raalte, & Brewer, 2001; Bond, 2001). The Olympic Games are an atypical and unusual sporting experience for most athletes and an alien competition context for some (Greenleaf, Gould, & Dieffenbach, 2001; Pensgaard, 2008). Most elite athletes quickly become familiar with the annual schedule of international events in their own sports (e.g., FINA swimming world cup series; skiing FIS World Cup race circuit) and adjust to the mental demands of such regular elite competitions within their sporting disciplines. The Olympics, on the other hand, only occur every four years, and the Games are a multisport event as opposed to a single sport event.

The quadrennial Olympic cycle offers few opportunities for most athletes to gain experience in the Olympic environment because most athletes only compete at one Games
in their careers (Gould, 2001; McCann, 2000). Moreover, as Hodge and Hermansson (2007) contended, the key mental challenge at an Olympics is the multisport aspect of the Games, which can be a distraction as well as obscure the normal exclusive focus on the athletes’ own sports.

The prestige and global profile of the Olympics generates huge media coverage and sponsor and public expectations. Consequently, for many sports the Olympics creates a substantially higher public profile and media scrutiny than these athletes typically experience (Haberl & Peterson, 2006; Pensgaard, 2008). The pressures associated with performing under such intense scrutiny can become a burden for many competitors (Blumenstein & Lidor, 2008). The Olympic performance context is often uncomfortable for athletes. They are required to operate outside their normal performance comfort zones. To be successful, Olympic athletes need to learn to be comfortable being uncomfortable (Ravizza, 2005), and to embrace the added pressure as another performance challenge to relish. Clearly, it is not easy being an Olympian, and that is the key point for athletes (and psychologists) to keep in mind when they consider the stress and pressure generated in the Olympic context.

### Common psychological issues and challenges at the Olympics

Elite athletes typically work on core mental skills such as motivation, concentration, confidence, controlling arousal/activation, and coping with adversity. Excellent descriptions of Olympic mental skills training programs that focus on these core skills can be found in book chapters by Gould (2001) and McCann (2000). Nevertheless, a number of mental issues and challenges common to the Olympic environment still need to be addressed.

#### Stress management

Perhaps the most common mental challenge at the Games is stress management and coping (Gould, Eklund, & Jackson, 1993). Competing at the Olympics can be more stressful than competing at annual international competitions, for a number of reasons: (a) the atmosphere of the Games – representing one’s country, competing against the world’s best with the spotlight on one’s performance (McCann, 2008); (b) the global media coverage at the Games (Greenleaf et al., 2001; Pensgaard, 2008); (c) living in the village and dealing with the artificial and sometimes quite foreign surroundings (Blumenstein & Lidor, 2008); (d) transport, security, and organizational hassles (Haberl & Peterson, 2006); (e) interpersonal conflict with teammates, coaches, or managers; (f) dealing with fitness, injury, or health problems; (g) the effort, time, and money required to gain Olympic selection can become a source of stress when the athlete begins to wonder if it is all going to pay off; (h) dealing with the disappointment of a poor performance in the first race/heat/event (Gould, Eklund, & Jackson, 1992); and (i) concerns about life after sport (e.g., “Win or lose at these Games, what will I do next?”). Any one, or a combination, of these sources of stress can cause anxiety, interfere with athletes’ mental and physical preparation, and undermine their confidence (Pensgaard & Duda, 2003). It is important to help Olympic athletes identify the issues they can control and then to focus on controlling the controllables (Hodge, 2004).

One particular issue of stress relates to living circumstances (Blumenstein & Lidor, 2008; Hodge & Hermansson, 2007). Village accommodation invariably involves several athletes in the same room in relatively cramped conditions. These living circumstances often cause
problems (e.g., noise control, sleeping difficulties, lack of privacy), especially as the Games progress and some athletes finish their competitions. Another potentially powerful stressor for some athletes is that their funding may be strictly tied to their Games performances. If athletes succeed at the Games they will secure funding for the next 1–2 years; if not, their funding is often withdrawn (Haberl & Peterson, 2006). The same is true for coaches’ jobs and team funding. If you succeed, you continue; if you don’t then you’re out as a coach or the funds for the team are cut (Haberl & Peterson, 2006). It is difficult for athletes to remain positive and confident in the Olympic context/situation. For example, Jackie Joyner-Kersee (1992), the U.S. heptathlete and Olympic medalist, said:

You have to be mentally strong enough to go through pressure [at the Olympics]. It must be practised as much as running or jumping. You have to concentrate on positiveness, feed yourself positive energy. If you tell yourself you can’t do something, nine times out of ten you won’t be able to do it.

(p. 13)

Pre-event mental preparation

Olympic athletes need to fine-tune their mental preparation to suit the special demands of the Games environment to minimize the stressors identified above (Gould et al., 1992; McCann, 2000). This work typically involves helping athletes modify existing pre-race routines/plans to provide a perception of control over the situation, help deal with stress, and give them confidence that they can perform up to their personal bests (Hodge, 2004). This perception of control is often challenged at the Olympics by the almost inevitable shift toward focusing intently on hoped-for outcomes (Gould, 2001; Hodge & Hermansson, 2007). Given that an athlete’s Olympic selection is typically the culmination of years of training, and because there is intense interest in results, athletes struggle more than usual to stay focused on performance objectives. As Barbara Kendall (1992), the New Zealand boardsailor and Olympic medalist, observed, the challenge at the Olympics is to remain performance-focused rather than results/medal-focused:

Winning a gold medal is an amazing feeling. [But] … winning a gold medal is not the ultimate now. I went to Barcelona and tried my hardest. I knew I had given my best and that is more satisfying than a gold medal … If I win the gold medal again [at the 1996 Olympics] that will be fine, but if I finish 10th that will be fine too … Someone might be better than me. As long as I do my best. That is all I can ask of myself.

(p. 34)

Games wobbles

I created this euphemistic phrase to describe a phenomenon where, despite the added focus on mental preparation mentioned above, some athletes decide to radically change their routines and mental preparation because they are at the Games. Somehow the usual becomes doubted, and athletes sometimes lose trust in their familiar routines (Greenleaf et al., 2001; McCann, 2000). These athletes need to trust themselves and their routines, and with the assistance of their coaches stick to their normal training and competition procedures (Clarke, 2004; Miller, 1997). The sport psychologist can play a key role in reassuring these athletes that their trusted training and mental preparation routines will remain
effective if they have the confidence to adhere to them. In addition, these athletes may well benefit from stress management techniques (e.g., cognitive restructuring, relaxation/centering) and coping strategies such as seeking social support (e.g., coaches, teammates) and using imagery of successful coping.

**Interpersonal conflict**

When competitive people are living closely together in a stressful environment (see issues listed above), there will inevitably be conflict between athletes and their teammates, coaches, or managers (Gould, 2001; Hodge & Hermansson, 2007). Typically, such conflicts develop from, or are exacerbated by, poor communication, limited tolerance, and lack of empathy by both parties (Bond, 2001; Clarke, 2004). A sport psychology consultant often needs to act as a neutral third party who helps negotiate a resolution to such conflicts (see Chapter 35 in this book). Hodge and Hermansson (2007) argued that coaches and managers need to be appointed early in the Olympic cycle by each sport so that the individuals concerned have time before the Games to get to know their athletes (and the athletes get to know the coaches/managers) and develop working relationships.

**Psychological aspects of injury and illness**

The fear of injury and illness (e.g., flu, respiratory infections), and injury/illness itself, have clear psychological consequences (Williams & Scherzer, 2010), especially in the Olympic context when the four-year cycle offers a small window for participation opportunities. Injured/ill athletes will have to cope with the emotions and stress that accompany the worry that an injury/illness may hinder a top performance or, worse still, prevent them from competing at the biggest event of their sporting careers – one for which they have trained and made sacrifices over a number of years (Greenleaf et al., 2001; McCann, 2008). One feature of sport psychology work with injured/ill athletes is the opportunity for consultants to collaborate with a multi-disciplinary team involving sports medicine personnel such as physiotherapists, massage therapists, and chiropractors (Reid, Stewart, & Thorne, 2004; Vernacchia & Henschen, 2008).

**Second-week blues**

In my experience (two Olympic Games and three Commonwealth Games), many members of a Games team, not just athletes but coaches, managers, and medical staff, will experience, to some extent, a phenomenon I have labeled “second-week blues”. It is normal at the Olympics for athletes and others to get somewhat homesick and irritable after the first week living in the claustrophobic Games environment (Miller, 1997; Vernacchia & Henschen, 2008). Living inside the Games bubble can start to irritate athletes for a number of reasons: the cramped Village, bland bedrooms, lack of privacy, limited spare/private time, monotonous food, travel distances between Village and venues, and the tedious and intrusive security checkpoints. Although such issues, individually, may be minor, collectively they tend to become amplified as the lead-up time to competition shortens and the tension associated with competition expectations builds. Not surprisingly these issues can be especially frustrating for athletes who do not compete until the second week of the Games.

Similar to athletes who may experience Games wobbles, as outlined above, athletes experiencing “second-week blues” may also benefit from stress management techniques and
coping strategies. The key issue is that these athletes need to mentally prepare beforehand for the challenge of an extended stay inside the claustrophobic Games environment and the frustrations of waiting to compete until the second week. As with race/game plans, athletes need to plan ahead as to how they will fill in the time productively (a pre-emptive coping plan designed with the help of the sport psychologist), while also adhering to the physical training/tapering program designed by their coaches. Some athletes with second-week blues may benefit from increased communication with family and friends at home (e.g., e-mail, texting, social networking websites), whereas for others such increased communication may exacerbate feelings of homesickness. The sport psychologist can be of assistance to athletes, coaches, and managers by acting as a neutral third party in any discussions about the level of communication with family and friends (see below as well).

Family and friends distractions

Given that Olympic selection is the pinnacle of achievement for most Olympic athletes, many athletes’ families and friends make the effort to attend the Games and support their athletes (Haberl & Peterson, 2006). Typically, these supporters will not have been present at the athletes’ other international competitions, so their presence can create an unusual environment for the athletes, posing uncommon distractions that they are not used to handling. Many more family members and friends show up at the Olympics than at other events, and they want to connect with their athletes once they arrive. The expectation to interact with family and friends at the Games can put pressure on athletes who don’t want to hurt the feelings of Aunty Mary and Uncle Bill who came all the way from Dunedin/Narrogin/Missoula/St. Keverne.

Athletes have told me that new people in a competitive situation can create additional stress, even if they are loving and supportive. For example, an alpine skier commented to me at the 2006 Winter Olympics that he/she was frustrated with her/his parents’ well-meaning comments that they “would be happy if she/he just finished the giant slalom/Super-G course,” but, as the athlete observed, she/he had not qualified for the Olympics to simply finish the course, she/he wanted to go “fast”! Going fast and potentially crashing or missing a gate is the standard risk that all giant slalom/Super-G skiers negotiate in every international race. This skier’s attitude was that anyone could finish the course (if they took a slow, conservative approach to the run), whereas real ski racers focus on going fast and pushing the boundaries to give themselves a chance of posting a competitive time for the run. This skier was dumb-founded and frustrated that after all the years of support, his/her parents still did not fully understand the mindset needed to compete at the international/Olympic level.

Finally, family and friends need to avoid asking their athletes if they think they are going to be selected for the Olympic team. Although this question is sincere, elite athletes know that focusing too much on a potential outcome can interfere with achieving that outcome. Even strong favorites to qualify for the Olympic team hate this question. It makes them nervous. We encourage family and friends to make decisions about going to the Games that are not based upon whether the athletes they know qualify for the team. Athletes often won’t know until the last minute whether they have qualified, and knowing that people are waiting for them to qualify before they book air travel and tickets is tremendous additional pressure that is not helpful.

The challenges mentioned above tend to make up the majority of work at the Games for sport psychologists. Much of this work is performance-focused, but a lot of it can be regarded as performance-related (Bond, 2002). As McCann (2008) observed “every issue … at the
Olympics is a performance issue” (p. 269). Another key issue to be aware of is that the consultant should expect to spend some time helping coaches, not just athletes (Bond, 2002; McCann, 2008; Vernacchia & Henschen, 2008). Compounding the challenges for an Olympic coach may be the presence of an athlete’s personal coach who may travel to the Games but live outside the Olympic Village. The presence of personal coaches can be both a help and a hindrance (Vernacchia & Henschen, 2008), and the consultant needs to be alert to the potential influence on the athlete.

Consulting style at the Olympics: “be available, but don’t get in the way!”

If I were asked to offer only one key piece of advice regarding consulting in the Olympic environment it would be that sport psychologists at the Games need to master the art of being available and accessible, but not getting in the way (Gould, 2001; McCann, 2000). It is important to avoid unnecessary disruptions to athletes’ normal daily training and competition routines and to minimize any potential stigma for athletes who appear to seek help from the “shrink” (Hermansson, 2004). Often sport psychologists who have been officially appointed to Olympic teams for the first time may be too eager to contribute, and to justify their roles by actively seeking clients. Such enthusiasm can be a stressor for some athletes and their coaches. Hermansson likened his approach of developing consulting relationships with Olympic athletes to that of a fly-fisherman:

I have a line out on the water all the time. Sometimes the fish will disappear on you, other times they might come and take a look and if the timing is right, I might get a bite. The work starts then, when you reel them in, if the line is too tight the fish take off, you have to do it slowly. Establishing credibility and having ongoing exposure to athletes within the Games team selection pool in the lead-up to the Games is central to building a consulting relationship with each athlete (Blumenstein & Lidor, 2008; McCann, 2008).

As a team sport psychologist you should plan to be readily available for informal chats with athletes in neutral venues such as the dining hall, Games transport/bus, team/TV room, training venues, and physical therapists’ rooms. In my experience these informal chats (teachable moments or brief interventions) are often just as effective as a formal mental skills training session (see Giges & Petitpas, 2000; Gould, 2001; McCann, 2000 for detailed examples), and frequently they lead to structured sessions in more controlled settings. Although effective, however, these informal chats in public or semi-public places clearly compromise privacy for the athlete and challenge the need for confidentiality (see Chapter 7).

A number of logistical issues common to the Olympics also need to be taken into account by team consultants: (a) time management – working with multiple athletes and teams across multiple venues and satellite villages using unreliable Games transport; (b) working simultaneously with multiple teams – equity of access and consulting time (Haberl & Peterson, 2006); (c) multiple relationships, and the question of who is the client? – athlete, coach, team manager, parents? (Bond, 2001; Haberl & Peterson, 2006); (d) avoiding overidentification with athletes and their results (Haberl & Peterson); (e) confidentiality and ethics (Andersen, 2001); and (f) self-preservation and “Olympic-size stress” (Haberl & Peterson, p. 38),
managing self as the sport psychology provider – time management, sleep, nutrition, exercise, time-out, and seeking peer-supervision (Haberl & Peterson, 2006).

**Multidisciplinary support teams**

As previously mentioned, one feature of sport psychology at an Olympics is the opportunity to work collaboratively within a multi-disciplinary athlete support team (Reid *et al.*, 2004). Such opportunities may not always be possible when working one-on-one with athletes in the build-up to the Games. When these multi-disciplinary teams work well, the opportunity is there for athletes to benefit from a holistic and unified orientation. The experience of working within a team of providers can be a valuable addition to the effectiveness of sport psychology work. Often the sport psychologist’s association with the multi-disciplinary support team can help mitigate the potential stigma of being viewed as the shrink. Such support teams, however, need to be alert to potential problems of task – role overlap, professional territoriality, and role ambiguity across the various support team members.

**Team culture**

Hodge and Hermansson (2007, 2009) contended that developing a strong overall team culture (as seen in the New Zealand or Australian Olympic teams), along with regular efforts to create unity and strength within sub-units (e.g., hockey, sailing teams/groups), can be a powerful method to counter the pressures that are unique to the Olympics. In my experience, many of the common mental challenges identified above for Olympic athletes can be prevented, or at least managed better, if the overall Games team has a strong team culture (e.g., teamwork, team spirit).

Cohesiveness is an important dynamic for any sporting team (Carron, Coleman, Wheeler, & Stevens, 2002). The same aspiration for cohesion may be as much a need in the overall team as it is for each of its separate units (e.g., different sporting teams and support groups). The development of overall national team cohesion could be seen as a valuable objective for any country participating in the Olympic Games, with the purpose of enhancing team members’ satisfaction and performances (see Hodge & Hermansson, 2009, for detailed examples of team-building activities for a national Olympic team). Such team-building, however, is tremendously challenging for large countries such as the USA, China, and Russia, who qualify large teams of athletes (200–300+) for the Olympics.

From a psychological perspective, this team-building philosophy has been helpful in creating a valuable support network as well as an environment where the challenge to perform remains strong. It also provides a settled atmosphere within which individual and team psychological work can take place. These enhanced social-psychological conditions have been important in themselves, but they have also helped underpin the work of the sport psychologist in relation to the kinds of psycho-social challenges previously identified.

**Summary**

The Olympic context is different and unique, but the basic models of sport psychology consulting, your consulting philosophy, and your ethics remain constant. Olympic athletes need to fine-tune their mental preparation to suit the special demands of the Games environment to minimize the stressors. Sport psychologists at the Olympics need to master the
art of being available and accessible, but not getting in the way. It is important to avoid unnecessary disruptions to athletes’ normal daily training and competition routines and to minimize any potential stigma for athletes appearing to seek help from the “shrink” (see Box 42.1 for practical take-home messages from this chapter).

Box 42.1

Take-home messages about working at the Olympics

■ The quadrennial Olympic cycle offers few opportunities for most athletes to gain experience in the Olympic environment – the key difference about an Olympics is the multi-sport aspect of the Games, which can be a distraction as well as obscure the normally exclusive focus on the athletes’ own sports.
■ The most common psychological challenges at the Games are stress management and coping. Competing at the Olympics can be more stressful than competing at annual international competitions.
■ Olympic athletes need to fine tune their mental preparation to suit the special demands of the Games environment to minimize the stressors.
■ Sport psychologists should expect to spend some time helping coaches, not just athletes.
■ Sport psychologists at the Olympics need to master the art of being available and accessible, but not getting in the way. It is important to avoid unnecessary disruptions to athletes’ normal daily training and competition routines and to minimize any potential stigma for athletes appearing to seek help from the “shrink.”

References


