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IN THIS ISSUE

Olympic Quadrennial Planning: Psychological Keys for Maximizing Performance and Minimizing Distractions at the Olympic Games - page 4

Moving Past Performance Slumps - page 12

Psychology within the Paralympic Context - Same, Same or Any Different? - page 15

So You'd Like A Sport Psychology Consultant to Work with your Team? Three Key Lessons Learned from Olympic Teams - page 26

Flourishing at the Olympic Training Center on the Road to Success at the Olympic Games - page 31

Mind-Body Training for Performance Under Pressure - page 43

2013 USOC Coaches of the Year - page 50



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Message from the
Chief of Sport Performance
Alan Ashley



Welcome to our summer issue of *Olympic Coach*. In this issue we'll do a deeper dive into the world of sport psychology by tapping into the expertise of our five full-time sport psychology team members for insight and advice. These individuals form the backbone of our high performance approach in helping athletes and their coaches use mental skills to prepare to succeed. Between them they have experience in more than 30 Olympic and Paralympic Games and I'm excited personally to share a great resource with our community. We're also grateful for the collaborative efforts between our USOC sport psychologists and our international colleagues for contributing to this issue.

Our psychologists work with a number of different teams and athletes and play key roles in their development and performance. It's a critical area in which they work – to balance the mind and body to come together for world class performances. One of the newer additions to our professional staff delves into the psychophysiology area – how the mind affects the body, and how the body affects the mind – truly interesting and valuable information for our Team USA athletes and coaches to understand.

Our psychologists will tackle a few areas in which they work – from thriving at an Olympic Training Center to getting through slumping performance, to working with a sport psychology consultant. Each day these folks are looking for any possible angle to share with athletes and coaches to extract the best possible performance.

We are certain that this issue of *Olympic Coach* will contain something that will assist you in your summer competition season or your off-season training. Best of luck!

Olympic Quadrennial Planning: Psychological Keys for Maximizing Performance and Minimizing Distractions at the Olympic Games

Alexander Cohen, Ph.D., CC-AASP, Senior Sport Psychologist, United States Olympic Committee

Multiple factors contribute to a successful Games experience. The foundation of performance excellence clearly begins with capable athletes and effective coaching- facilitated by a four-year (or longer) plan for maximizing performance in the Olympic Games setting. A quadrennial High Performance Plan should outline a pathway for success at the Games by identifying realistic performance markers to be incrementally accomplished along a progressive trajectory – with the goal of achieving specific performance metrics at the Olympic Games.

While there are many similarities between Olympic Trials, World Championships and the Olympic Games, there are many aspects of the Games environment that are entirely unique and require special preparation. This article examines some of these characteristics with a focus on psychological preparation for maximizing performance at the Olympics. Issues related to pre-Games preparation and Games-specific challenges are addressed. Anticipating and planning for potential obstacles will allow your athletes to focus on simple keys that maximize opportunities for performance excellence.

Pre-Games Preparation

Selection

Many athletes have described the selection for the Olympic Games to be more stressful than the Games themselves. Whether selection occurs through qualifying competitions or through defined Olympic Trials, athletes face a number of unique challenges and stressors compared to the previous three years of the quad. Inviting athletes to be involved with the creation of Olympic selection procedures (through designated representatives), and working closely with the United States Olympic Committee's high performance directors (HPDs) and sport performance team managers regarding team selection processes can minimize confusion and decrease the potential for complaints or arbitration. Clear definitions of selection criteria will help athletes psychologically prepare to achieve goals within their control. While athletes typically desire objective selection standards, coaches and selection committees often value subjective, discretionary options for selecting team members. Further, team sport selection is often more subjective than individual sports. Selection is therefore both a policy and a process. Clear communication between athletes, coaches, and high performance staff is a beneficial strategy for balancing objective and discretionary selection criteria.

Athletes and coaches may have divergent interests regarding Olympic selection. In many Olympic sports, coaches must balance the achievement of individual performance goals with the overall need to create a cohesive team. Getting athletes to buy into the concept of "Team USA" prior

to Olympic selection may be facilitated by meeting with athletes individually and providing each with a plan for progressive improvement and personal success based on mutually established goals. Following Olympic selection, the challenge is often one of quickly transitioning from athletes competing against each other for Olympic spots to converging into a unified team.

Periodization and Peaking

In the final year of the Olympic quad, athletes are often required to physically and psychologically “peak” for trials and the Games within a short time span. Preparing and frequently discussing a periodization plan will guide athletes to be disciplined with performing well enough to make it through trials, while simultaneously maintaining a focus on achieving elite performances at the Olympic Games. Peaking twice in such a short time span presents a variety of challenges depending on the athlete’s personal goals, circumstances, selection criteria and team needs. An athlete whose goal is to qualify for an Olympic team may have a very different approach to peaking for selection and the Games compared to an athlete who has the potential to achieve an Olympic medal.

Though competition schedules in the first three years of a quad may differ from the competitive calendar in an Olympic year, it is beneficial for athletes to maintain a consistent multi-year periodization plan as much as possible. For example, building a plan in which athletes can peak in August in the years preceding the summer Games (or February for the winter Games) will facilitate the development of physiological and psychological routines that will transfer to the Olympic setting.

Holliday, Burton, Sun, Hammermeister, Naylor, and Freigang (2008) provide an excellent overview of periodized psychological skills training. As Holliday et al. (2008) state, periodization principles can work similarly for mental as well as physical training, and the proactive nature of mental training makes it ideally suited for periodization. Too often, sport psychologists are asked to “fix” struggling athletes experiencing psychological challenges as they approach major competitions or rebound from poor performances. Although mental skills training programs may prove beneficial to resolve specific problems in the short run, such approaches fail to address athletes’ long-term developmental goals. Properly designed periodized mental skills training programs recognize and plan to achieve long-term objectives by providing a systematic and coordinated approach to helping athletes achieve peak performance during their most important competitions.

Team USA Identity

National Governing Bodies (NGBs) can bring a cohesive team to the Olympic Games by creating a specific culture for Games performance. Cohesion—a dynamic process reflected in the tendency for a group to stick together and remain united in the pursuit of its instrumental objectives and/or for the satisfaction of member affective needs (Carron, Brawley & Widmeyer, 1998, p. 213)—provides resilience when a team is confronted by potential performance disrupters at the Games. Building a cohesive culture that promotes Olympic success takes time and effort, and must be

attended to throughout the quad. Coaches and HPDs are ideally positioned to create an environment in which a team identity and shared purpose can be developed. This is critical for maximizing success at the Olympic Games, since creating a collective identity and purpose has been shown to enhance overall performance and improve the quality of competitive experiences (Statler, 2010).

Martin, Paradis, Eys, and Evans (2013) suggest targeting five factors to develop team cohesion: 1. group norms (e.g., a team behavior code), 2. individual positions (i.e., cohesion is related to the degree to which athletes understand, accept, and are satisfied with their roles and positions on the team), 3. distinctive environment (e.g., developing a “we vs. they” mindset by developing a team motto, wearing team uniforms, traveling/eating together, etc.), 4. individual sacrifices (i.e., cohesion increases when athletes are seen to be acting for the good of the team), and 5. communication and interaction (promoting trust and collaboration).

The commitment to building a culture for success at the Games applies to coaches and support staff as well as athletes. It is important to clarify where each athlete, coach and staff member fits into the team’s collective identity, with clear expectations communicated regarding their roles in contributing to and enhancing the team’s identity (Statler, 2010). Even experienced coaches and staff will be presented with new challenges at the Games. It is important that everyone involved clearly understands their roles and responsibilities going into the Games. The focus should be on the athletes-with coaches and staff in a supporting role. A stable, experienced staff is more readily able to take care of their own interpersonal needs and provide athletes with the tools necessary for Olympic success. As a sport psychology colleague of mine stated, “It’s about them, not us” (Nicole Detling, personal communication, 2012).

Credentials and accreditations are often limited at the Games, meaning coaches and support staff may not have the same amount of access to which they are accustomed. Housing may present similar challenges – with some coaches and support staff located outside of the Olympic Village. Issues around coach and staff availability must be identified ahead of time to minimize distractions during competition. Similar to athlete conduct, an agreed-upon mechanism for accountability regarding staff behavior should be established prior to entering the Olympic setting. If not planned for, seemingly small issues (e.g., athlete vs. staff apparel) can become disruptive distractions during the Games.

Pre-Games Team Camps

Many NGBs utilize pre-Games camps to promote a team culture in the period between Olympic selection and the Games. While pre-Games camps can certainly facilitate a sense of “Team USA,” promoting a team atmosphere as often as possible throughout the quad is the most effective way to maximize collaboration.

In addition to providing further opportunities for team building, pre-Games camps allow for acclimatization to variables such as different time zones, jet-lag, fatigue, altitude and other environmental factors. A pre-Games team camp is often the last opportunity athletes and coaches have to finalize

plans and review routines before going through team processing-transitioning into the Olympic Village and deciding whether to participate in the Opening Ceremony. A pre-Games camp also provides an opportunity to reiterate expectations regarding roles and responsibilities during the Games.

Team USA Ambassador Program

To help athletes prepare for the intensity of the Olympic spotlight, the Team USA ambassador program was developed to expose U.S. Olympians, Paralympians and hopefuls to the expectations, roles and responsibilities of representing the United States at the Olympic and Paralympic Games. This extensive athlete education program guides athletes through what it means to be an ambassador for their sport and country-how to embrace being a role model and the legacy they hope to create.

The multi-phase program includes presentations, inspirational speakers, and small group activities covering topics such as:

- What it means to be an Olympian/Paralympian
- The athlete's role as an ambassador
- The Olympic ideals and why they matter
- Interview and media preparedness
- Leadership
- Leaving a lasting legacy through sport and Olympism
- Challenges all Olympians and Paralympians face

Olympic Setting

Location-based Challenges and Opportunities: The Importance of Routines

I observed several themes while working with various NGBs in the years leading up to the Sochi 2014 Olympic Winter Games. A prominent theme was the Games' location and perceived difficulties presented by the setting. Travel time to Sochi, Russia was considerably greater for U.S. athletes compared to many other countries. With the majority of venues being newly constructed, there were limited opportunities to gain venue-specific experience through international training or test events. Questions about security were common along with discussions about Olympic Villages, nutrition, travel among venues and team processing. Ideally, athletes will be familiar enough with the logistics and venues to execute similar routines used at previous competitions. These routines will require some modifications for the Games setting, but careful planning will minimize distractions that can impair performance. The key is to prepare for potential challenges during the Games setting while maintaining a positive outlook about the experience.

As we prepared for the Sochi Games, I was aware of a sentiment that U.S. athletes might be at a disadvantage due to the Sochi setting. Any negative statements related to the Games' location

must be carefully monitored going into future Games, as any perceived disadvantage can undermine athletes' confidence going into such an important competition. Promoting a sense of excitement about the Games environment and resilience regarding Games-specific challenges takes time and preparation. Numerous psychological factors (i.e., positive personality, motivation, confidence, focus, and perceived social support) protect the world's best athletes from the potential negative effect of stressors by influencing the way they evaluate challenges (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012). Further, these processes promote responses that precede optimal sport performance. Encouraging resilience in athletes throughout the quad pays dividends at the Olympic Games.

Advanced site-visits, international training periods, and test events in Olympic venues supply a great deal of information, though frequently plans will have to be adjusted quickly when athletes, coaches and support staff initially enter the village. When athletes are quickly able to establish their Games routine (i.e., training times/locations, dining options, medical support, distance from village to venue, transportation of equipment, etc.), they are more able to focus on their established keys for success.

All too often, athletes can be distracted from their routines by thinking they need to do something extra or different at the Games, leading them to change their process and preparation. While achieving a personal best is sometimes necessary for Olympic success, this should be a challenging but realistic goal that is within the athlete's capability based on the periodization plan and developmental trajectory.

It can be tempting to introduce "game changers" immediately prior to the Olympic Games (i.e., innovative equipment, clothing, or procedures) to give your athletes a performance edge. Frequently, sponsors will offer athletes updated versions of gear intended to provide state-of-the-art performance advantages at the Games. While coaches and athletes should take advantage of technological advances, even the best innovations often require time for athletes to adjust to changes in feel, technique, etc. Having athletes compete in conditions that mimic the Olympic venue as much as possible in the final year(s) of the quad – using the equipment with which they are most familiar– facilitates the transfer of routines and builds confidence going into the Games. Working with the local organizing committee to gain early access to Olympic venues and supply athletes with information needed to select task-specific equipment and strategies can help provide a home-field advantage.

It has been said that pressure is a lack of preparation. Guiding your athletes to commit to established routines prepares them for a smoother transition into the Games, minimizing the perceived pressure of competing in this distinctive setting. Psychological preparation for the Games involves listening carefully to your athletes, observing their behavior, and encouraging the use of established performance routines that can be adapted to the unique Games environment.

Potential Games-Specific Distractions

Below is a brief list of potential Games-specific distractions. With appropriate planning and an emphasis on cognitive flexibility these may become opportunities to gain a performance advantage.

Moving into the Village

As noted by Blumenstein and Lidor (2008), there is a unique psychological and social atmosphere in the Olympic Village that is felt by even the most experienced athletes and coaches. A multitude of psychological challenges are present in the village that can interfere with preparation for competition, such as a stressful atmosphere, distractions, and a lack of privacy.

Blumenstein and Lidor (2008) describe several sources of internal and external stress experienced by athletes and coaches while in the Olympic Village, such as the pressure to perform in the world's most important international sporting event, representing their country and its residents, and helping their national delegation rank higher in the final medal count. Various distractions are also present in the village. Among them are coping with media, meeting high-profile athletes from different sports and countries, and disturbances generated by other residents. Team delegations are assigned to their section of the village by the local Olympic organizing committee-which can create logistical challenges. Athletes often must share rooms as well as eat with other athletes and coaches from their own country and other nations. From the moment they arrive at the village, they have very little privacy.

For these reasons, psychological preparation given to athletes during the Games should be conceptually connected to the psychological preparation given to the athletes before the Games. Ideally, it will be planned in advance and reflect what the sport psychology consultant had previously done with the athletes before the Olympic Games. Blumenstein and Lidor (2008) present a four-phase approach of psychological preparation for athletes during their stay in the Olympic village-which is very similar to the periodized psychological skills training approach advocated by Holliday et al. (2008). These phases are (a) the habituation phase (i.e., overcoming jet lag, becoming familiar with the village and venues), (b) the psychological routine phase (resuming typical practice and competition routines), (c) the specific psychological preparation phase (preparation for specific competitions), and (d) the recovery phase (i.e., recovering from the extreme emotional, physical, and psychological efforts invested during the Games). This last phase is critical for individual athletes competing in multiple events who must quickly recover and refocus for subsequent competitions, as well as team sport athletes who compete for the entire duration of the Games.

Opening Ceremony

Many athletes report that representing Team USA in the Opening Ceremony is one of the most profoundly meaningful aspects of their Olympic experience. Athletes are required to walk and stand for several hours late into the evening. With additional events being added to the Games immediately before and following the Opening Ceremony, athletes must decide if they are going to participate in all or some of the Opening Ceremony, how they will maximize recovery, and how they will harness the positive energy from the experience.

Friends and Family

Careful planning is required to allow athletes to connect with friends and family while remaining focused on their performance routines. Prior to the Games, athletes should develop a plan for when



and where to meet (i.e., village, USA House, or a sponsor house), how to obtain venue tickets, and how to communicate during the Games. Athletes are also encouraged to specifically state topics they do or do not want friends and family to discuss with them before competition. Many NGBs have a system in place to assist friends and family with Games logistics. USOC Sport Psychology also provides an Olympic Friends and Family brochure to help with these issues.

Sponsor and Media Requests

These opportunities can be beneficial for athletes, but must be carefully managed to not interfere with training and recovery. In addition to having athletes prepare for sponsor and media requests by participating in the Team USA Ambassador Program, each NGB's accredited press officer plays a valuable role in helping athletes navigate media interactions. While athletes understand and often appreciate such opportunities, media exchanges can also be a source of significant pressure for athletes before and after practices and competitions.

Competition Schedule

It is possible for Olympic athletes to remain focused for competition while also experiencing the multi-discipline and multi-sport nature of the Games. Attending teammates' events or other sport competitions may be energizing and also serve as a form of recovery. Since Olympic success is accompanied by an increase in potential distractions, athletes must be disciplined and consistent with their schedule and routines to ensure a plan for "managing victory."

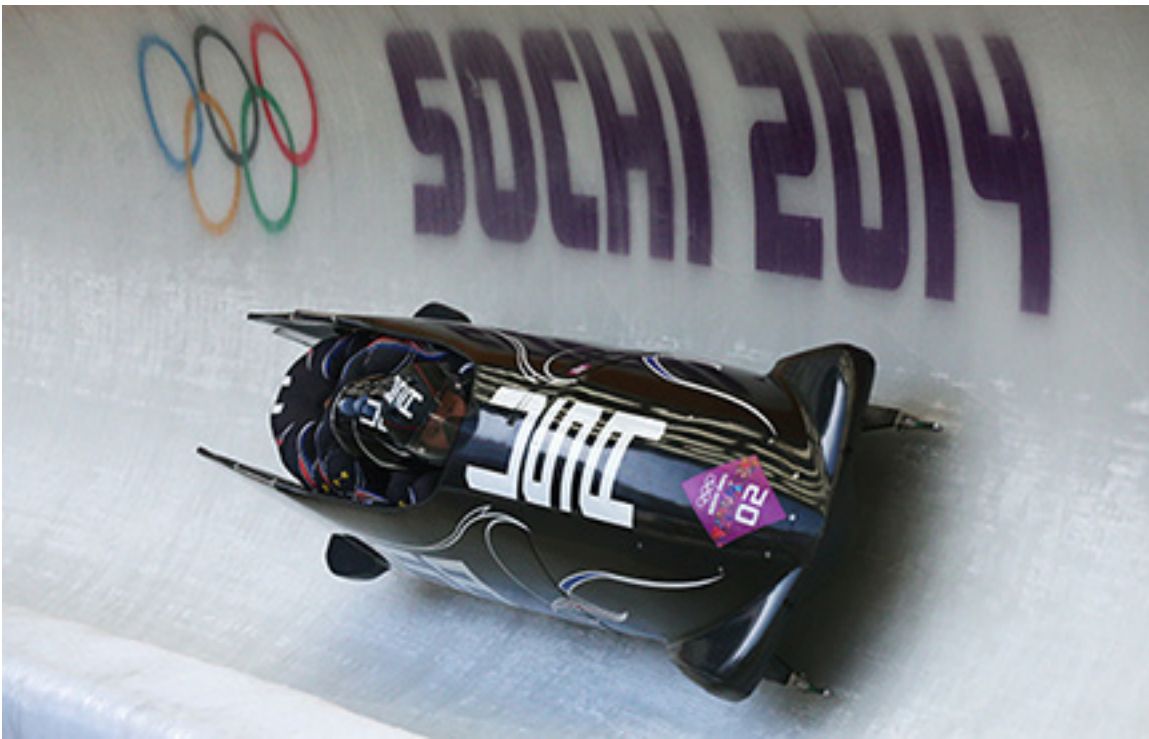
Concluding Thoughts

The objective of this article is to provide coaches and high performance staff with suggestions for quadrennial planning for the Olympic Games, with a particular focus on psychological preparation. Since the coach is typically the primary catalyst for developing and maintaining good team dynamics (Freischlag, 1985), this preparation involves creating a culture of excellence, and attending to the individual and organizational factors that can impede or facilitate the athlete's success. As noted by Vernacchia, McGuire, and Cook (1996), three keys to successful coaching are anticipation, preparation, and dedication to the pursuit of excellence. Coaches who anticipate and prepare for the types of psychological distractions discussed in this article will help athletes maximize performance at the Olympic Games.

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Pilot Steven Holcomb, Curtis Tomasevicz, Steven Langton and Christopher Fogt of the United States team 1 make a run during the Men's Four Man Bobsleigh on day 16 of the Sochi 2014 Winter Olympics at Sliding Center Sanki on February 23, 2014 in Sochi, Russia. (Photo by Cameron Spencer/Getty Images)

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Moving Past Performance Slumps

Karen Cogan, Senior Sport Psychologist, United States Olympic Committee

Question: How do you get past an Olympic medal slump?

Answer: You most certainly DO NOT talk about winning medals.

Odd as that might seem, it works. Consider USA Diving as an example.

As the London 2012 Olympic Games approached, USA Diving was very aware that the sport was in a twelve-year “medal drought.” The last time an American had won an Olympic diving medal was in 2000. USA Diving’s High Performance Director, Steve Foley, took a new approach and didn’t talk about winning in his team meetings and presentations. What he did instead was consider the numbers. He compared scores from past international events to understand what score was needed to be in medal range. He then broke it down to scores needed on each dive and determined that scoring consistent 8’s or 8.5’s on dives with adequate difficulty levels would put an athlete in medal range. The focus was on diving consistently, taking one dive at a time, and staying in the moment. He further determined that the synchronized diving events offered the best chance for medals. Only the top eight countries could send teams to London, so once a country qualified, medal chances were three in eight. Looking at previous results, scores on the first two, more basic dives, set the medalists apart from the non-medalists. So, performing easy dives consistently well became another focus.

In London, the first diving event was women’s synchronized spring board. The U.S. athletes dove well, hit the first two dives, and stayed consistent to the end, which earned the duo a silver medal and broke the drought! Their performance set the stage for three more medals, including the bronze medal in men’s synchronized platform, the bronze medal in men’s synchronized springboard, and the gold medal in men’s individual platform. As predicted, three out of the four medals were in synchronized events. And the focus was NOT on winning.

Slumps can occur for a variety of reasons, including technique problems, poor nutrition, poor sleep habits, external personal stressors, and mental factors. Athletes often have all of the necessary physical skills and talent, but their heads get in the way of a good performance. For this article, we are going to examine the mental factors associated with a performance slump and the use of sport psychology strategies to get back on track.

To combat their medal drought going into the London Games, USA Diving’s approach was to move away from a focus on winning; but this is sport. How can we let go of the win-at-all-costs mentality in such a results-laden environment? Even if we could eliminate winning from our



own minds, everyone else (i.e., media representatives, fans, family, and friends) are likely to ask questions or make comments about the end result of an event. It is difficult, but not impossible, to work toward shifting the focus away from winning. Such a change in focus won't happen overnight, but progress can be made through a consistent effort. Remaining firm about maintaining a performance-oriented focus will assist in tuning out distractions from others.

How can you create an environment that leads to success without a focus on winning?

Keep it performance-based by setting performance or process goals rather than outcome goals. Performance goals focus on overall personal performance, such as running a faster time or jumping higher than one's previous performance. Process goals focus on improving form, technique and strategy. Outcome goals focus primarily on the end result, meaning the win, points scored, or rankings (Burton & Raedeke, 2008). A focus on performance and process goals, rather than outcome goals, is a fundamental component of sport psychology and generally leads to better performances. Setting goals is an established way of maintaining motivation and direction. If an athlete doesn't have a goal in mind, it is difficult to succeed, and so setting goals is often a good place to begin when working on mental skills. Athletes should spend most of their time focused on performance and process, and keep winning on the back burner. Remember that following the right process will get the right results!

Play in the moment. It is easy for athletes and coaches to think too far ahead to the end result, which will often lead athletes to make mistakes, as they are not focusing on what to do in that moment to perform their best. Losing focus for even a few seconds is all it takes to make a crucial error. An athlete performs best when taking one skill at a time, doing everything possible to perform that skill to their best ability. A coach can assist the athlete in developing cue words, a word or short phrase that helps to maintain focus. For example, fencing athletes talk about "next touch" which allows the athlete to let go of what just happened and think only about the next point against the opponent.

Practice Mindfulness. Related to staying in the moment is the practice of mindfulness. Mindfulness is defined as, "paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally." (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). Athletes who practice mindfulness are encouraged to focus on their breathing, scan their bodies, and/or slowly eat a raisin in order to gain better focus abilities and practice experiencing the moment. These focusing skills can be transferred to the athletic environment so that staying in the moment becomes easier and more natural.

Turn off your brain. Our minds are always active, but can sometimes get in the way of a solid performance. Sports performance is a physical action, something we hope our bodies can do automatically. Talented athletes can get in their own way by thinking too much about physical actions that should come naturally after so many years of training. For these athletes, it can be helpful to use an image of flipping a switch to "OFF" to enable the brain to take a back seat and the athlete to operate more on instinct. This is another strategy to assist athletes in staying in the moment and being mindful.

Take “win” out of your vocabulary. A coach is often the person an athlete looks to for guidance. If a coach talks about winning, scores and rankings, then the athletes will think these are important. Of course results are important, but right now we are trying to get into the performance zone! The less a coach talks about winning and more about process and staying in the moment, the more likely it is that athletes will adopt that focus as well.

Talk to athletes’ parents and significant others in their lives about adopting a performance approach. Although a coach can’t always control what others say to athletes, coaches can help influential people around an athlete to understand this approach. They may need to be reminded that a focus on winning can result in intense pressure for athletes and compromise their performances. A coach can share the performance- and process-focus philosophy and ask for their cooperation. In addition, coaches can encourage athletes to tune out comments about winning and always return to a performance orientation.

Shifting the focus away from winning at all costs while learning to focus on performance, one thing at a time, are ways of overcoming performance slumps. As with most training, it is a process to learn this new approach. Think about adopting some of the strategies discussed in this article to try with athletes. Change won’t happen overnight, but persistence and consistency encourages change over time. Take care of the process, and the results will take care of themselves.

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*Nicholas Mccrory and David Boudia (R) of the United States compete during the Men’s Synchronised 10m Platform Diving on Day 3 of the London 2012 Olympic Games at the Aquatics Centre on July 30, 2012 in London, England.
(Photo by Al Bello/Getty Images)*

Psychology within the Paralympic Context - Same, Same or Any Different?

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Is working with a Paralympian the same as working with an Olympic athlete from a coaching and sport psychology perspective? Certainly, both are athletes and the experience of being an athlete has the potential to facilitate basic psychological need fulfillment, while also combatting need thwarting. Psychological need fulfillment is important for human flourishing. Within self-determination theory three basic psychological needs are emphasized, including feeling competent, a sense of autonomy and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Need thwarting of these basic psychological needs can lead to ill-being and need fulfillment can actually be a greater challenge in the population of disabled individuals. Obviously, when dependent on support and compared to people with no disabilities, feelings of being less competent may occur. In addition, autonomy may be challenged in many cases since disabilities may create different degrees of dependency on equipment, personal, and technical support. In contrast to feelings of relatedness, physical and cognitive disabilities often result in exclusion and feelings of not belonging in many domains in society and the sporting community. It is therefore important to be aware of the fact that, while sport has value in everyone's life, it is even more important in the life of a person with a disability.

Based on our shared experience of working as sport psychology consultants with Olympic and Paralympic athletes in everyday practice, in preparation for the Games, on-site during and after a number of Olympic and Paralympic Games, we constantly get challenged to adapt and refine our skills to deliver in each context. We have learned that each context is somewhat similar but also unique, and self-determination theory has become a useful guide for us. As we explore the question of the uniqueness of the Paralympic athlete, let us begin with an applied example that acknowledges the importance of meeting the basic psychological need of relatedness. The applied example is a teambuilding exercise, which took place at a pre-camp leading up to the London 2012 Olympic Games with the Swedish Paralympic Team. The whole team got together for the first time across the different sports. The main purpose of the exercise was to facilitate a sense of belongingness and relatedness to the team as a whole. Considerable time went into preparation for this exercise. Professional quality pencils, colors, and canvas were bought in Sweden, transported and set up in an appropriate space to assure the best quality of the painting exercise. During the exercise, several groups were formed across sports and disabilities, and each group was assigned a carefully chosen keyword, which was meaningful to the context of performing at the Games, to discuss and define. Keywords were chosen to include both potentially desirable and undesirable constructs, such as flow, relatedness, fear, anxiety, exhaustion, trust, responsibility, joy, happiness, control,

and mindfulness. After each group reached an understanding of the keyword, they were asked to write a definition. In the next step, each of the 17 groups was asked to express the keyword in a painting as a collaborative effort. Figure 1 is chosen as one example out of the total of 17 paintings accomplished during the exercise.



Figure 1: "Relatedness is important across boundaries. No matter color, form or looks – we will support each other and stand united." Relatedness described by Paralympic athletes.

The following day, an arts exhibition was organized with finger-food and sparkling drinks (non-alcoholic, of course) and everyone circled around to hear each group present how they discussed and understood their key word, and how their understanding was expressed in the painting. After this exercise, each of the paintings was carefully stored, transported and at last displayed in the forthcoming Swedish house in the Paralympic Village that is usually a very sterile and cold environment. Upon arrival at the Paralympic Village, the paintings were perceived by many athletes as welcoming and created a sense of relatedness. The exercise was successful in creating a sense of team, belonging and feeling more at home in the village. Yet, we also learned an important lesson in how the Paralympic environment is different, requiring an extra dose of sensibility and planning. One of our visually impaired athletes, sadly enough, pointed out after the Paralympic Games that no one told this athlete about all of the paintings being a part of the environment in the Paralympic Village. The athlete participated in the creation of one of the paintings, but was not aware that it was in the village. This emerged as a strong message in feedback to continue developing our repertoire, sensitivity, and support within sport psychology to better meet the different needs of Paralympic athletes in order to enhance their performance and well-being.

Much is to be learned, and before moving on it should be noted that sport psychology practice and research has explored the domain of elite sport since the late 1970s, but it is only in the last 10–20 years that researchers have started to conduct sport psychology research with a focus on athletes with disabilities. Consequently, Paralympic and disability sports have received much less coverage in academic circles in comparison to the Olympic and able-bodied sports.

Interestingly and on a similar note, female elite athletes have been less included in sport science research compared to their male counterparts. The growing number of female participants in sport is gradually reflected in the research output with a focus on female participants. The advance in knowledge continues to inform the discussion on similarities and dissimilarities between female and male athletes across scientific disciplines. At the Munich 1972 Olympic Games, only 15 percent of athletes were females. At the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games, the number had increased to 38 percent, and eight years later at the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games, the number became historic with over 50 percent female participation. As the number of female athletes increased, it became evident in research findings that female athletes often experience medical disorders to a larger degree than male athletes. For example, female athletes are at greater risk to develop conditions of disordered eating, amenorrhea and osteoporosis (i.e., loss of bone density) – the female athlete triad is a well-known collection of these three interrelated conditions. Younger female athletes that compete in so-called weight bearing, weight class, and aesthetic sports are at an especially greater risk. In general, elite female athletes are at greater risk of injuries as compared to male athletes. With the increasing number of Paralympic level athletes, the same trend of increased sport science research will hopefully occur. More research is needed to advance knowledge regarding similarity or dissimilarity, and to better inform professional practice in coaching and sport psychology.

There has been rapid growth and development since the first official Paralympic Games held in Rome in 1960 with 400 participants from 23 different countries. Over 4,237 athletes from 164 countries competed in 20 sports at the London Olympic Games, with an amazing crowd of 2.7 million spectators. The rapid performance development was highlighted by 251 world records set in the 503 medal events at the Games. Most recently, another 547 winter sport athletes represented 45 countries and competed in five sports at the Sochi 2014 Olympic Winter Games. Classification is and always will be an important and integral part of the Paralympic movement. The main purpose of classification of impairment is to ensure that competition is fair and equal. The current classification code was adopted in 2007, providing rules and procedures for Paralympic classification to minimize the impact of impairments on the sport disciplines. According to the International Paralympic Council (IPC), sport opportunities are offered to athletes that have a primary impairment that belongs to one of the following “eligible” impairment types: impaired muscle power, impaired passive range of movement, limb deficiency, leg length difference, short stature, hypertonia, ataxia, athetosis, vision impairment and intellectual impairment. While some sports include athletes of all impairment types (e.g., athletics, swimming), other sports are limited to one impairment type (e.g., goalball, boccia) or a specific range of impairment types (e.g., equestrian, cycling). A comprehensive explanation of the current classification criteria and procedures can be found on the IPC [website](#).

Despite significant health benefits associated with moderate physical activities, there is also an increased risk of negative outcomes when training and competing at a more intense level (i.e., international elite level). The strain on health and well-being is well captured in the 60-minute documentary, “[The Prize of Gold](#),” which captures the mental and physical struggles of a number of

Swedish Olympic athletes with overuse injuries, overtraining syndrome, burnout, depression, anxiety and eating disorders on the path to [Olympic glory](#). Consequently, as noted by Van de Vliet, participation in elite sport is associated with risk of injury, which is also true for Paralympic athletes. Van de Vliet argues that the Paralympic movement should also consider the psychological components of disabled sports besides sport medicine care. As a practical example, research on athletic identity has demonstrated that although many athletes with a disability view themselves as committed and serious athletes, they typically feel that the public does not view them as legitimate athletes (Van de Vliet, 2012). Not being viewed as a serious athlete is a potential example of need thwarting, as it threatens the need for competency. When working with a Paralympian, invariably one might communicate views on the athletic ability and performance of disabled sport sometimes unconsciously compared with the norms of able-bodied athletes. Communication around this theme has the potential to nourish or deprive the need for competency in the Paralympian.

The purpose of this article is primarily to discuss psychological issues within the Paralympic context. Despite some obvious visual differences, everyone is foremost a human being and then an athlete. In any context, it is possible to focus on either diversity or uniformity within the community of human beings. This is also true within the community of elite level Olympic and Paralympic athletes. We would like to argue that the notion of difference, particularly in light of a physical impairment, is often automatically interpreted as less capable and less valuable to some degree. In this context, we want to strongly emphasize that our mindset to different and how we approach different will determine the majority of responses in how we interact with people who are different. As a case in point, impaired athletes are often exposed to people that offer them unnecessary and unwanted help in society. Although well-intentioned, these acts of kindness unfortunately are often counter-productive as they can reinforce or lead to feelings of inferiority in the helped person. Awareness about this subtle mechanism is important in the context of providing psychosocial support to Paralympic athletes for coaches, staff and sport psychologists. We suggest moving beyond a black and white categorization of good or bad when it comes to differences. Treating differences as shades of grey will facilitate more creative solutions outside of traditional boundaries in terms of supporting well-being and performance in the Paralympic athlete.

To challenge our attitudes, beliefs and stereotypes about being different, we suggest a brief imagery exercise. First, picture yourself in the shoes of a competitive female elite level athlete, then shift to a male, then shift to being black and then white, and finally shift from being an able-bodied athlete to a disabled athlete.

What images and thoughts do you have regarding a person in a wheelchair, or a person with an amputated limb or a blind person? How do you think that your image will influence the way you may interact with disabled individuals? Figure 2 is a playful way to challenge and think beyond our stereotypical images of a person in a wheelchair.



Figure 2: Think pink, yellow, black and white, queer, going left of going right. Challenge your stereotypical image of a person in a wheelchair.

Dieffenbach and Statler (2012) pointed out that it is unfortunate that the mindset of disability is often seen as a cue for different or special needs in the sporting context. This mindset from able-bodied individuals will mirror and often impact the disabled individuals. The following story also supports that notion outside of the sporting context. A wheelchair athlete once told us that a lot of people in the street questioned how difficult it must be to get up from the streets to the side walk since the curbstone is always so high. He nicely pointed out that he focuses and looks for the easiest way to cross the streets, avoiding areas with the highest curbstones. Fortunately, the London 2012 Paralympic Games had a significant impact on British society. Research ahead of the Closing Ceremony found that one in three U.K. adults changed their attitude toward people with disabilities. As stated, during the Closing Ceremony – the Paralympic Games is about ability, not disability – to highlight what people can do instead of what they can't. Perhaps more strikingly, Paralympians also meet negative attitudes toward disabilities among themselves. Attitudes toward disabled categories was surveyed with the U.S. team (N=138) competing at the 1992 Paralympic Games, and included their perceptions of five disability classifications set by the IPC at the time of publication (amputation, cerebral palsy, paraplegia/quadruplegia, visual impairment, and les autres: other impairments that do not fit the other categories). The authors found that out of the five groupings, the least preferred groups were cerebral palsy and visual impairment. Amputation (71–92% preferred by other groups), followed by les autres and paraplegia/quadruplegia, were judged to be the more desirable groups (68–74% preferred).

Martin (2012) briefly reviewed and described how Paralympians could prepare for the Sochi 2014 Olympic Winter Games based on mental skill use. One case included the perception that travel was stressful. More specifically, a wheelchair athlete reported that flying from England to the Games was the biggest source of stress leading up to the Paralympic Games. The athlete's concerns included boarding the plane first, getting off last, transferring from wheelchair to flight seat, bathroom access and personal care aid (Martin, 2012). This story can be embedded in the concept of autonomy versus dependence. Moreover, for many disabled elite athletes, participation requires the use of advanced and high specification state-of-the-art assistive and enabling technology, yet the athlete is not independent from the technology they employ.

Perhaps most sadly, in terms of relatedness, there are too many instances of disabled people having been met and treated in society which have resulted in feelings of exclusion and being an outsider. A wheelchair athlete at the age of 36 pointed out that each time he meets with people in authority, they talk above his head to his personal assistant, which triggers a feeling of inferiority in him. Another blind athlete suffered from a limited social life, perceiving the visual impairment to be a barrier in making friends.

As we noted above, research with a focus on the psychology of the Paralympian is limited. Based on this limitation, Dieffenbach and Statler (2012) explored the current understanding of the similarities and uniqueness between Olympic and Paralympic athletes. They arrived at the conclusion that the athletes are more similar than different. More specifically, some studies found both similarities and differences between elite able-bodied and disabled athletes. Overall, research indicates that the psychological needs and characteristics of Paralympians have not been found to differ significantly from those of their Olympic counterparts. Most notably, reasons for participating and the mental approach necessary for pursuing elite competition found among athletes with disabilities are analogous to the findings in able-bodied sport literature (Dieffenbach & Statler, 2012).

Recently, Jefferies and colleagues (2012) published the first systematic review of the psychosocial literature on the well-being of a Paralympian. They reviewed 16 papers and concluded that, relative to the research into the biomechanical aspects of a Paralympian, the psychosocial research remains limited and diffuse. Seven psychosocial themes emerged from the 16 papers:

1. participation, motivations and goals;
2. mental imagery;
3. stress and coping;
4. personality;
5. attitudes towards other disabled athlete groups;
6. knowledge and attitudes towards doping; and
7. transitions to retirement.

According to their research, athletes engage in Paralympic sport for accomplishment and prowess. In addition, it is worthwhile to note that the reviewed studies describe the close friendships that were developed as a result of participation, and that demonstrating competency to others was a strong motive for taking part (Jefferies, Gallagher & Dunne, 2012).



Despite previous research indicating more similarities than differences between able-bodied and disabled athletes, as we saw in some of the examples discussed, the very nature of performing at an elite level with a disability requires some understanding of potential challenges unique to disabled sport (Dieffenbach & Statler, 2012). Based on our applied experience, let us look at four more areas of differences that we believe are unique, important and impact the psychology and performance of Paralympians. First, we will contrast classification with perceived competence, autonomy and relatedness within the frame work of Self-determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Second, we will briefly discuss the older age in the population of Paralympians. Third, we will offer our thoughts on acceptance of the disability as it relates to resilience and finally we will address the role of the guide/support person.

Classification

Classification, as previously noted, is an important and integral part of Paralympic sport and mainly creates classes of athletes with similar disabilities to ensure that competition is fair and equal. In some disciplines (for example cross-country skiing), a weighting system is also used so that athletes with greater disabilities can compete against athletes with lesser disabilities. The classification process is becoming more clear and robust, but the system will constantly present challenges in terms of misclassification and the difficulty of operating in the “grey zone” of functionality. These issues often lead to frustration within the Paralympic community, as there is a perception (and reality) that some individuals have gained a performance advantage due to an incorrect or “lenient” classification. For athletes and coaches, this often leads to a performance distraction similar to being suspicious about some athletes competing with illegal performance enhancing drugs (i.e., steroids or epo) in able-bodied settings. Misclassification can be the root of much frustration and anger among athletes, as well as coaches and other staff. Losing to a competitor who should be in a higher class can be very upsetting (Martin, 2012). Despite improvements in the classification process and given its nature, this will undoubtedly continue to be an issue within Paralympic sport. Thus, there will always be a need to help athletes and coaches deal with frustrations around the classification process both before and after competitions.

Additionally, within the Paralympic community, classification is linked to different attitudes. The categories of visually impaired athletes, athletes with cerebral palsy or cognitive impairment are the least desirable categories. This perhaps mirrors the general attitude in society. We still experience a negative stigma towards mental disorders or abnormalities. Further, attitudes within the Paralympic community concerning the origin of impairment often differ. Specifically, individuals who have acquired disabilities (through accidents for example) are often viewed differently than those with congenital/genetic impairments. Indeed in our experiences, the psychology of these two different groups needs to be considered when working with individuals with disabilities. For example, the life experience of an individual who has had an impairment since birth will differ from an individual that may have been injured as either a former elite able-bodied athlete or non-active sport participant with a potential trauma and post-traumatic stress-syndrome in their history (Crawford, Gayman & Tracey, 2014). How fast a former able-bodied person will transfer into becoming a Paralympian will also relate to acceptance, as will be discussed later. Furthermore, re-injury or change in their disability can often lead to concerns with regards to being “re-classed” into a different Paralympic class and perhaps more importantly, the impact this may have on their quality

of life after sports. Ethically, this is often not considered and may be worthy of serious consideration in some cases.

Age

Disabled athletes are often significantly older as compared to Olympic athletes on average, and consequently they are at different stages of life development. Thus, a younger sport psychologist may find a somewhat greater challenge to support, build rapport and gain trust with significantly older athletes with arguable greater life experience and more adversity. This can also be true for younger coaches who transfer into Paralympic sports from able-bodied sports without previous experience of coaching impaired athletes. Due to the older demographic, issues such as financial pressure, family and relationship challenges are often greater for disabled high performance athletes, compared to that of younger able-bodied athletes. There is no doubt that the age demographic of Paralympic athletes is changing (even over the past two Paralympic cycles, we have noticed a reduction in the typical age of disabled athletes); however, there will still be many disabled athletes who are older than their coaches. Another area of understanding is an appreciation of the fact that an impaired athlete may require more time to get ready for competition due to an increased dependency on support equipment, technical support and personal assistance. This suggests that pre-performance routines will be substantially longer in time among Paralympic athletes as compared to Olympic athletes. Time management is usually related to thoughts, emotions and behavior that will be addressed by coaches and sport psychologists.

Another related area of concern that negatively impacts performance and the sport experience for athletes with disabilities is the lack of qualified coaches (Dieffenbach & Statler, 2012; McMaster, Culver, & Werthner, 2012). In fact, the majority of coaches reported limited exposure to and minimal training with athletes with disabilities prior to working with this population. It was noted that limited coaching experience with and knowledge of athletes with disabilities have consistently been identified as factors having detrimental effects on performance. For example, “coach transfer” from stand-up basketball, curling, tennis, table tennis, skiing to the sitting version of these sports seems to include challenges, including elements of psychology. Interestingly, an experienced elite coach, who after several years of coaching able-bodied athletes started to coach disabled athletes, shared with us how that specific experience challenged his coaching and facilitated his performance as a coach with able-bodied athletes.

Acceptance and Resilience

Acceptance within Acceptance Commitment Therapy (ACT) is essential to the psychological strength (flexibility) of individuals. We believe that this is also true for Paralympians in terms of acceptance of the disability and the current life situation. In fact, a review of amputees in sports stated that sport participation helped the athletes to accept their disability and to improve their quality of life, self-esteem and overall motor skills (Bragaru et al., 2011). Frequently humor, with a dose of morbidity regarding their life situation, is evident from the athletes themselves – such behavior could be viewed as a defusion technique within the ACT context. Defusion is a technical term in ACT that expresses the notion of “creating a mental distance” to your negative automatic thoughts that you often tend to get stuck with in a loop (i.e., “fused” with dysfunctional thoughts). Again, in our experience, those individuals who have learned to accept the reality of their



disability are often the ones that are more resilient in terms of dealing with the challenges of executing in high performance environments. Thus, the role of a psychologist within a Paralympic setting may often relate to helping athletes come to terms with being a disabled individual in an able-bodied world.

However, there is also a potential flip side of disability in terms of mental toughness or resilience: due to their experience of adversity, are Paralympians mentally tougher, stronger and more resilient than able-bodied competitors? Can Olympic athletes learn from Paralympic athletes? Resilience is becoming a growing topic in research and professional practice. The growth through adversity hypothesis (Haidt, 2006) suggests that having to cope with adverse events could allow an individual to learn strategies that enable them to adapt more effectively with environmental and situational demands. If applied to a sporting context, it could be suggested that athletes having to overcome adversity, in particular physical disability, may exhibit different psychological skills profiles to athletes who have not experienced a similar life event. However, not everyone that experiences adversity will grow stronger from it. Adversity can be too much to handle and could take a psychological toll, as is evident by people who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. For adversity to be beneficial, it probably needs to happen to the right person (e.g., somebody who is characterized by high hope and optimism), at the right time in that person's life (late adolescence to early adulthood) and to the right degree.

Role of Guide/Personal Support

In many instances, disabled athletes are often either assisted by or compete with an able-bodied support person. A question we have often considered is, "What is the role of the support person for a disabled athlete - is the individual considered an athlete?" In many cases, the support person also acts as a personal assistant in everyday life and 24/7 during Paralympic Games. This intense dyadic relationship can be quite demanding for both, and could potentially cause intrapersonal conflict and consequently performance issues. For instance, a completely blind athlete will develop a close relationship based on trust with her/his personal guide. In some events, such as track & field, cross country and cycling, the athlete and guide compete together and both have to finish the race to receive potential awards during the medal ceremony. It is a fine balancing act to develop an athlete-guide relationship that allows for healthy interdependency, in contrast to a relationship where the athlete is dependent on the guide. The role is further lacking clarity, since the guides rarely view themselves as athletes (at least not within the Paralympic context). Awareness of these issues becomes particularly important for coaches and sport psychologists in preparation and during pinnacle events. Time spent together in these intense dynamic relationships increases along with the demands to perform as a dyad. In fact, it is sometimes the guide/personal assistant that approaches the sport psychologist to request support for the athlete. It should further be noted that sport psychologists and coaches can easily forget about the guide/personal assistant and her/his psychological needs in this context, which is unfortunate as the guide is an integral part of the performance of the impaired athlete.

On a final note, it should be acknowledged that two white, middle class, academic, heterosexual male authors, happily married with children, and no disabilities easily could fall into the trap of saying to someone of a different socio-economic, gender or disability grouping, that we fully

understand your situation. We will make our best effort to understand each unique situation and convey that we understand, while constantly reminding ourselves that the athlete is the expert on living and competing with a disability. To avoid this trap of a lack of understanding, awareness and empathy that we all can easily fall prey to when working with disabled athletes, we must keep coming back to a personal sense of humility and gratitude for working in the Paralympic setting.

On a deeply personal note, while it never felt appropriate to share this story before, it is fitting in the context of this article to mention that one of the authors lost his younger brother at the age of 19 due to an inherited severe muscular disease, Duchenne's. Duchenne is a muscular dystrophy and survival beyond age 20 is rare. My brother spent his last ten years in a wheelchair with a steady decline in physical capability. At the time of his passing in 1989, the following poem was written in his honor and published in his obituary:

*"Such an amazing mental strength
What a sunshine in a situation that for most people would be unsustainable
Such a great belief in life with such limitations
That is just the way he was our beloved Per until he passed away in his sleep
It is so empty after you have gone away."*

This article is therefore dedicated to him, our "sunshine".

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Jessica Long of the United States competes in the Women's 400m Freestyle - S8 Final on day 2 of the London 2012 Paralympic Games at Aquatics Centre on August 31, 2012 in London, England. (Photo by Clive Rose/Getty Images)

So You'd Like a Sport Psychology Consultant to Work With Your Team? Three Key Lessons Learned from Olympic Teams

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I first started working for the United States Olympic Committee's (USOC) sport psychology department in 1988, and I've been working with the organization full time since 1991. Over this quarter-century, I've watched sport psychology grow from an esoteric concept into a vital service used by the majority of Team USA. I've gotten used to working with Olympic athletes who went on to become national team coaches and are now sophisticated consumers of sport psychology. These coaches and their teams are very easy to work with, as the coaches already know exactly how sport psychology services can be used. On the other hand, as sport psychology becomes better known, there are an increasing number of coaches who are newly interested in sport psychology, but have never actually worked with a sport psychology consultant. For these coaches, there are often concerns and questions about the process of bringing a sport psychology consultant in to work with their team. In this article, I'll discuss three keys that make a big difference in helping a sport psychology consultant make a positive impact on coaches and their teams.

First key: Hire the right sport psychology consultant.

The single most important decision a coach will make about bringing in a sport psychology consultant is selecting the consultant. Even a perfect team environment can't help the wrong consultant, but the right consultant can prove effective even in a very difficult team environment. Of course, the "right" sport psychology consultant will be different for each coach and each team, and the definition of a good fit can vary dramatically. There is a very wide range for defining a good fit, but here are some good rules of thumb for selecting the appropriate candidate:

- 1. Look for people with the proper training and credentials.** The field of sport psychology combines expertise from two areas: traditional psychology and sport science. The Association for Applied Sport Psychology (AASP), the world's largest sport psychology organization, has a listing of certified sport psychology consultants with graduate coursework, supervision, and training in both sport sciences and psychology. The USOC has worked with AASP and the American Psychological Association (APA) to develop its own USOC-endorsed sport psychology registry. The USOC Registry is used by the USOC staff sport psychologists to identify consultants for coaches and athletes around the country.

Both AASP and APA have annual conferences where the latest developments in applied sport psychology are presented. Make sure that the consultant you select is connected with other professionals in the field and invests the time to keep up with the latest knowledge. Unfortunately, some individuals claim to be sport psychologists or mental training experts with little to no formal training in sport psychology - without proper credentials, these



individuals are not qualified to provide services. As a coach, it makes sense to ensure your consultant is trained in sport psychology and continues to develop their skills by attending conferences and workshops on the latest science in performance psychology.

2. **Determine if the sport psychology consultant has a model of high performance.** As a coach, it can be very helpful to understand what the consultant believes will lead to great performances and what leads to performance problems. This can be discussed on a phone call or through an introductory talk with your team. A well-trained sport psychology consultant will be able to explain these ideas simply and with connections to published research to support these ideas.

Be very careful if the consultant uses phrases like “secret,” “proprietary,” or “unique in the field.” Sport psychology is a science, not a magic act. Think about how you choose other professionals who impact your life. Would you want a pediatrician to have secret medicine that no one else would prescribe to your child? Would a dentist who tells you “I pull your wisdom teeth in a different way than anyone in the world,” make you feel more or less confident? Your consultant’s model of high performance should be based on sound science recognized by the field. The best science-based consultants can be uniquely talented at applying the science, but they don’t create a new science!

3. **Charisma is not enough.** Many coaches believe they need a “motivational speaker” to “fire up” their team. While the ability to motivate and entertain a group of athletes is a very useful skill, it’s a very small part of what a sport psychologist might offer. Some terrific and charismatic speakers are actually pretty bad at the less exciting but more important work of analyzing specific performance challenges and consulting with individual coaches and athletes to help develop solutions to the challenges. While it isn’t a bad idea for a coach to ask a potential consultant to explain their sport psychology philosophy, the question and answer period after the talk may be the best measure of potential effectiveness. Speaking of questions and answers...
4. **Ratio of questions to answers.** Effective sport psychology consultants know that they must understand the specifics of your team, your athletes, and your coaching staff to be effective. A good consultant will begin a relationship by spending far more time asking questions than giving answers. You and your team are unique, and if a consultant starts the relationship by telling all about his or her accomplishments and how those methods will work for the team, the consultant may not be listening to your unique challenges. Certainly, the effective consultant must get to answers eventually, but a capable consultant usually begins with a lot of questions.

Second key: Once you choose a consultant, help them succeed with you.

I’m always struck by coaches who are very hesitant about bringing in a sport psychology consultant, who then often completely turn over the mental aspect of their team to the consultant. Early



in my career, I was pleased - and complimented - when a coach trusted me enough to let me have free reign to do whatever I thought best. Later, I realized that any impact I could have would be much greater if I became a working partner with the coach. I learned that I wouldn't truly succeed unless the coach helped me succeed. Over the years, I have discovered some things a coach can do that are a tremendous benefit to the sport psychology consultant:

1. **Let her know what you want, and what you don't want.** Even if you have never worked with a consultant before, it is helpful to have a discussion about the coach's vision for the program. What would help you? What are you worried about? Are there things you definitely don't want your consultants to do? How much time, access, and availability do you want? If the consultant has worked with other teams, it may help to ask her what she has found works best to build a good working relationship with the coach.
2. **Figure out how to stay connected to the mental work being done.** It can be tempting to let the sport psychology consultant take care of the mental side of things and for you to focus on the physical, technical, and tactical aspects of your sport. I have learned that it is important for the consultant to have a communication system in place that can give coaches critical information they need on the mental aspects of their team. It can be as simple as having the coach sit in on group sessions and sometimes sitting in on sessions between the consultant and an individual athlete. Hearing consultant and athlete talk about performance using specific language can help the coach weave the same language into their discussions with the athletes. If time or other factors prevent a coach from occasionally sitting in, one of the things I do is encourage athletes to talk to the coach about the work we are doing.
3. **Have clarity about how confidentiality will work.** Even though sport psychology is very different from the work of a typical psychologist, one of the most useful tools of psychology is confidentiality. There are some times and some topics when an athlete will not speak unless they know that the conversation will not be repeated. On the other hand, there are times when a coach would benefit a great deal from information that the athlete might share only with a sport psychology consultant.

The "conflict" between the benefits of confidentiality versus the benefits of sharing information can be managed in many ways to protect everyone's interest. Especially in sport, where the work is often literally on display, coaches, athletes, and consultants benefit from a clear understanding of how information will be shared. These discussions are best addressed at the beginning of a consulting relationship.

For an example of how this might play out, take the common occurrence of an athlete telling the sport psychologist that he or she gets very anxious before a competition. Sometimes pre-competition anxiety can get so bad that athletes can barely track what their coach is saying before the start. The sport psychologist will often work on skills to help manage and reduce the anxiety, but it may also be useful for the coach to know when the athlete is anxious. In these situations, when a sport psychologist knows something that could help a



coach do a better job coaching, a sport psychologist usually strongly encourages the athlete to begin talking to the coach about these issues. If an athlete agrees this would help, but is afraid or unable to do this, the sport psychologist can ask the athlete if it would help to schedule a meeting for the athlete to talk about the issue together with the coach and sport psychologist. Alternatively, the athlete may ask a sport psychologist to meet with the coach separately about the issue. In these situations, confidentiality creates an environment where the athlete can develop new skills to deal with issues that are otherwise never discussed. Frequently, these skills give athletes the confidence to work on these issues directly with coaches, which helps coaches be better at their jobs.

4. **Learn more about the mental game of your athletes, not less.** I believe that bringing in a sport psychology consultant is very important and helps coaches get even more engaged – not less engaged - in the mental side of performance. If you develop a true working partnership with your consultant, this increased knowledge about the mental lives of your athletes happens fairly easily. I have found that a coach who communicates the desire for the consultant to stay involved and learn as much as possible, really helps the consultant succeed. In addition, most athletes quickly learn that it is ok to talk to the coach more about their mental game, and this is a big factor in improving performances.

Third Key: Help the consultant succeed with your team.

Over the years, I have found the greatest success with teams that have coaches who strongly encourage their athletes to work on improving their mental game. Athletes generally respect and trust their coaches' judgment on the value of sport science and support services. Even when a coach has no personal experience or background in sport psychology, there are a number of very important steps a coach can take to help the consultant succeed with your team.

1. **Sell the importance to your team.** In the dark ages when I began doing this work, I had coaches tell their team: "If you are having problems, you should talk to Sean, and it might help." That introduction helped insure that working with the sport psychologist meant that something was "wrong with you." These days that hardly ever happens, but many athletes might mistakenly believe that sport psychology is only for when things are going wrong.

One of the best introductions to sport psychology I have ever heard was given by a coach who was a former long-time professional and Hall of Fame player. He introduced the consultant to his team by saying, "I almost washed out of the pros at the beginning, but I made it to the Hall of Fame by realizing the mental part of our game is the most important and by realizing it was my responsibility to get as strong mentally as I was skilled on the field. We brought this consultant in because I believe that working with him can extend your career and help you be better. I expect any player of mine who wants to get better to do this mental work!" As you can imagine, the consultant had plenty of business from that team. Starting off well usually means that the coach has helped make that happen.



2. **Warn the consultant about the minefields on the team.** Every team has specific team challenges, certain athletes who require a specific approach, and certain areas that everyone talks about but nobody ever addresses. As a coach, hopefully you are aware of all the potential obstacles that can trip up an unknowing consultant. Giving the consultant a map on how to cross dangerous ground is very helpful for the first few days of contact to prevent a major miscalculation that requires effort or time to correct.
3. **Give the consultant enough time.** In today's busy world, time is our most valuable resource. A truth of sport psychology consulting is that it takes time for a consultant to make an impact. It takes time to collect data and to let athletes get comfortable. It takes time to conduct individual and group sessions. Although I am a big believer in keeping sport psychology services as a voluntary option, I am also quite comfortable with scheduling brief individual meetings at the very beginning with all athletes so that athletes get comfortable with the consultant. I have found that 15- or 30-minute individual meetings can serve the purpose of beginning a working relationship, and can be a valuable door-opener for athletes who wouldn't be comfortable talking in a group session. Group sessions can also be a useful introduction, and can save time overall. However you structure the introduction, you need to give time and space for athletes and the consultant to get to know each other. If you don't schedule it early, some key opportunities will be lost.
4. **Bring the consultant to practice and competitions.** A good sport psychologist needs to see athletes in action to really understand how best to be an asset to the team. If a consultant never attends practice or competitions, they have to rely on the athlete's self-report of what happened. It is far more efficient for a consultant to be there to see the good, the bad, and the ugly of a team in action. There is much that can be learned by attending training sessions, but there are some things that can only be understood by attending competitions in which pressure produces new behaviors. When I work with sports at the USOC, I will often attend five or six competitions a year. Witnessing a team either working together perfectly or breaking down provides vital information that enables consultants to do their work. In addition, when a consultant is on the road with your team, they become integrated with the rest of your coaching and performance staff.

I recently worked with a very successful coach who said, "I really see the difference that sport psychology makes, but I was always a little cautious about introducing it when things were going pretty well. In the past, I used to wait for problems before bringing in a consultant. Now, I see that this is just something we need to do all the time. And when things are going well, this work can help take us from good to great results." I am very pleased to see that coaches at all levels are embracing sport psychology, but understand that it can be intimidating to start the process of actually working with a consultant. Since coaches are the key to making sport psychology successful, I hope more coaches understand that by following the guidelines in this article, the process of bringing in a consultant can be straightforward and quickly useful for them. Please feel free to reach out to the USOC Sport Psychology staff to help you begin this process for your team.



Flourishing at the Olympic Training Center: On the Road to Success at the Olympic Games

Peter Haberl, Senior Sport Psychologist, United States Olympic Committee
Artur Poczwardowski, University of Denver

The road to the Olympic and Paralympic Games can be long, windy and full of obstacles. The Olympic Training Centers (OTC) in Colorado Springs, Chula Vista, and Lake Placid are a stop for many athletes on this journey – either as a resident athlete, a facility-use athlete, or as temporary visitor (i.e., training camp). As athletes make use of the services, such as training, housing, nutrition, sports medicine, or sports performance, the OTC acts as a pit stop that has the potential to accelerate or decelerate the journey of the athlete.

As both a summer and winter Paralympic gold medalist, Alana Nichols is a perfect example. Nichols won a gold medal in wheelchair basketball (Beijing 2008) and alpine skiing (Vancouver 2010). She injured herself in a training run the year before the Sochi 2014 Olympic Winter Games. In 2013, she spent a considerable amount of time at the training center, where she rehabilitated her shoulder to prepare for the Sochi Games. In a media interview prior to the Games, she praised the United States Olympic Committee's (USOC) sports medicine team for the care she received and expressed how important her stay at the CSOTC was for mentally and physically preparing to contend for medals at the Games. Nichols went on to medal in Sochi and is an example of an athlete who thrived in the training center environment – making the most out of the pit stop.

Moreover, another example of an athlete who utilized the training center to his advantage is the most successful Olympian in history – Michael Phelps. Phelps is a regular visitor at the Colorado Springs OTC. He makes use not only of the altitude, but also of the solitude the training center provides this most sought-after Olympian. Here is how Phelps puts it in his autobiography:

“The point of these excursions to Colorado Springs was twofold: Swimming at altitude helps build endurance. And being at the USOC base makes you focus completely on swimming, because there is nothing else to do. It’s a place with absolutely no distractions. You swim, you eat, you sleep. Literally, that’s all there is to do. Bob likes it that way. He has a captive audience (p. 163).”

A training center is a considerable investment for the USOC. Every athlete who comes through the training center doors dreams of competing in the Games and representing his or her country. Just like the training centers, every athlete who comes through the doors represents a substantial investment for the USOC and the National Governing Bodies (NGB). Furthermore, every athlete invests time and energy in his or her dreams on this journey to the Games. The athletes who flourish at the training center, like Phelps and Nichols did, will have optimized their investments, and invested wisely in their dreams.



So, what allows an athlete to flourish at the training center and optimize their investment? What allows an athlete to successfully transition to the training center from their prior stage in life to make the most of his or her time there? What internal characteristics did flourishers bring to the table and what external factors allowed them to thrive at the training center? The USOC sport psychology team partnered with the University of Denver to look at this question empirically. We conducted in-depth interviews with six current or former resident athletes and gathered quantitative data to learn what they did to successfully transition to the training center and maximize their time at the OTC. Competing at the Games was the benchmark for “flourish,” having medaled was an extra bonus. All six athletes competed at the Games, most of them multiple times, all finished in the top-10 in their fields and three of them became Olympic gold medalists. Three overarching themes emerged from the qualitative and quantitative data that contributed to successfully transitioning and subsequently thriving at the OTC: adaptive personal characteristics of the athletes, the utilization of CSOTC resources by the athletes, and the right athlete-environment fit (figure 1).

Let us briefly look at each element of the triangle of flourishing separately before taking a closer look at the role of the coach in this process of adaptation to the training center.

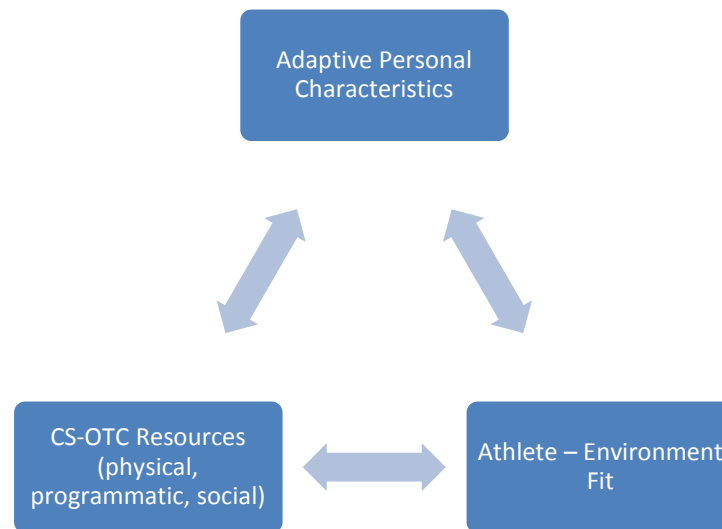
Adaptive Personal Characteristics

The athletes brought some personal qualities and prior experiences to the table that helped them flourish at the training center. Previous successful transition experiences were helpful, as was previous positive exposure to the training center (i.e., developmental camps). If the athlete had gone through transition experiences and had positive exposure to the OTC, it eased this initial transition. The athletes then experienced on-going athletic growth on their journey captured by changes in training, improved performance in training, and an improved awareness of self and body. The athletes paid particular attention to proper recovery after training and after injury. They displayed a success-focused mindset characterized by a focused purpose, and a sense of determination, confidence and competitiveness. One gold medalist in the study put it succinctly: his purpose was to be “the best wrestler in the country and the best wrestler in the world.” They utilized specific success-focused tools, such as a penchant for hard work, a focus on their own performance and an engagement in activities outside of their sport to provide balance and perspective. Continued athletic success while at the training center also helped them to develop.

The Utilization of Colorado Springs OTC Resources

First and foremost, the Olympic training center is a physical place – a place where athletes can train in state-of-the-art facilities, live in the dorms, and receive the proper care and attention in areas of nutrition, sports medicine, and sport psychology. The athletes who thrived at the training center made use of the physical, social and programmatic resources (i.e., “Sport psychology was the biggest thing that I needed at the training center, especially leading up to the Games”). Here is how one Olympic gold medalist put it, “I think being here really helped me, because it’s just a really simple environment. Having the science here and the support and the connection was a huge benefit that the OTC provided me back then.” A sense of home was fostered by the training center staff (“[felt like] one of your parents being there”) by the national team coach, and by the friend-



*Figure 1*

ships built with other athletes – both within and outside of his or her own sport. The relationships built in this multi-sport environment were motivational for the athletes and contributed to a sense of “home,” which was further captured in the athlete-environment fit below. “But what you had to do was to look at your teammates as your family, and we did things together, and we watched out for one another, and we pushed and cared about one another...”

Athlete-environment Fit

For the athletes who thrived, there was a reciprocated fit and a match in mutual expectations between them and the OTC environment. The athletes felt supported by the environment and also felt that they contributed to the success and reputation of the training center. Probably the best way to describe the ideal athlete-environment fit was the athletes’ sense of the training center as “home”- as a safe, protected space and a launching pad for their dreams (“The OTC was like an extension of being at home.” And, “It was just a really great recipe for success. I knew that always if I needed something, I could go ask and they would be really helpful. So I never felt stressed.”) There was a perception of a lack of barriers, a sense of a comfortable setting and being in an ideal training environment. The athletes were excited about the resources available to them at the OTC - including training facilities, housing, sports medicine, and sport performance.

There was also a match in perceived mutual expectations. For example, the athletes shared the dream with the USOC and NGBs of competing successfully at the Games. They shared the expectations of constant improvement and being the best in the world while competing internationally and representing their country. There was an alignment between the personal aspirations of the athletes and the USOC mission. Furthermore, the athletes saw themselves as ambassadors of the OTC. A great example of the athlete-environment fit as well as the utilization of the physical,

programmatic, and social resources provided by the OTC is captured by India's first-ever Olympic gold medalist Abhinov Bindra. Bindra trained in Colorado for a number of years before he went on to win his gold medal at the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games and described his experience of the training center in his autobiography "A shot at History". Although a foreigner, Bindra said he never felt like an outsider at the training center:

"The Olympic centre was not ostentatious, but it was slick. From sports medicine to mental training, everything was catered for. This was an integrated approach to greatness...Great athletes littered the corridors...Their vitality stunned me and more importantly, infected me through a sort of osmotic effect. Watch, copy, learn, imbibe. If you train with them, and beat them, the discovery is beautiful and immediate: I can be great, too."

One last important element in the athlete-environment fit was the coach-athlete relationship, which was crucial for all athletes in the study. For all the athletes studied, the role of the coach was pivotal in helping the athlete transition and flourish at the OTC. As one athlete put it, "For the most part, it was my coach who was my mentor not only in sport, but also in life."

The Role of the Coach

As the above remark indicates, there is probably not a more important relationship for an OTC athlete to cultivate than the relationship with the coach. A humanistic coach with a holistic philosophy of athlete development impacted the athlete not only in the early transition, but also in the thriving stage. From a temporal perspective, the coach can support the athlete at the various stages of the transition process. In the beginning of the process, when the athlete first transitions to the OTC, it is helpful to check in with the athlete and get a sense of their transition experience. Have they had prior positive transition experiences, such as going to high school, college, or the military? What was it like for them to move up to a new level of competition? How did they adapt to such prior transition experiences? Have they had a prior positive experience with the Olympic training center, such as having been a participant in a developmental camp?

Prior positive exposure to the training center was helpful to the athletes in the study as it created a sense of familiarity and a sense of the possibility that lies ahead. The coach can further optimize his or her role in the transition process by taking steps to get to know the athletes – by understanding the personal histories and their personal story and by maintaining that connection throughout the athletes' time at the Center. A simple conversation about the career outlook of the athlete can get this process started in this early stage as well. What are the goals of the athletes? What are their Olympic dreams? What do they hope to get out of this journey they are on? In such a conversation, the coach can get a sense of how hopeful and confident the athletes are about the opportunity that lies ahead and how aware they are of the inevitable road blocks. In this context of challenges ahead, it will be helpful for the coach to get a sense of the maturity level of the athlete. Have the athletes faced adversity in their prior journey, such as performance setbacks or plateaus, injuries, significant losses, or has it all been smooth sailing up to this point? Adversity will inevitably be part of the athlete's journey and, while we would rather avoid it, research and theorizing in psychology shows that it may well be a key ingredient in flourishing if handled the right way.



In the first few weeks on campus, the coach can assist the athlete to establish a good fit with the environment. The coach can spend personal time with the athlete, such as sharing a meal, discussing goals, Olympic and life dreams, or the transition experience in general. The coach can connect the athlete to the programmatic resources being offered. For example, they can collaborate with sport psychology to continue to develop and nurture the success-focused tools and mindset displayed by the athletes in our study. The development of such psychological skills – just like the development of athletic skills – will be a multi-year process. Monitoring improvement, setting challenges, and encouraging a life-sport balance would be further steps the coach can take to facilitate the process of thriving at the OTC. The relationship with the coach will often last many years and have a deep impact on the athlete, not just during their time at the OTC, but also for the rest of their lives. We have quoted Michael Phelps on his perception of the training center in the beginning of this article. Given his relationship with his life-long coach Bob Bowman and the important role of the relationship between coach and athlete in thriving at the OTC on the road to the Olympic Games, it is fitting to end the article with a few more quotes on how Phelps describes the impact Bob Bowman had on him:

“He had trained me, punished me, motivated me, inspired me, and proven to me the connection between hard work and success. Bob has long been one of the very few people in my life to tell me the unadulterated truth, even when I didn’t want to listen. Perhaps most important, especially when I didn’t want to hear it (p. 5)...Bob is not only coach and mentor but so much more...Bob was always there for me (p.13)...He was my coach, yes. But he was also much, much more. A friend, yes, but still more than that. Bob had changed not only how I swam but who I was as a person (p. 115)...”

While not every athlete who spends time at the training center will go on to win Olympic gold medals, every athlete has the chance to flourish in this environment. The coach can be a great catalyst in this process. As one outcome of the study, the research team prepared a checklist that the resident coach can use to guide his or her efforts to positively impact the developmental trajectory of the athlete at the OTC. Please find a coach checklist and an athlete checklist as a resource to this article (Resource 1 and 2).



General view of the visitor center at the United States Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs, Colorado. (Photo by Justin Edmonds/Getty Images)

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Head coach Mike Krzyzewski of the USA Basketball National team (R), talks with head coach Chris Collins of Northwestern University during a USA basketball training session at Quest MultiSport Complex on August 15, 2014 in Chicago, Illinois. (Photo by Jonathan Daniel/Getty Images)

Resource 1:***Athlete Checklist - THRIVING AT THE OLYMPIC TRAINING CENTER******Your Checklist for Getting the Most out of Training at the Olympic Training Center***

“But what you had to do was to look at your teammates as your family, and we did things together, and we watched out for one another, and we pushed and cared about one another...That was how I handled being away from home and living in a different environment.”

“When I walked into the gym, I want everybody to realize that there is nothing anybody can do today that was going to be better than the things that I could do.”

“You just need to have something going on outside of your sport, because I think it creates a healthy balance.”

Using Your PAST experience

You can heavily borrow from your life and sport lessons – did you know that? Please, list the number of times that you have experienced the following and start thinking about answers to the questions provided:

_____ A time that you had to adapt to a new environment (e.g., moved to new city/school, moved away to college).

What helped you to adjust quickly and thrive in this new place?

_____ A time that you moved up to a new level of competition (e.g., got ‘called up’ to a better team, national to international competition, etc.)

What helped you to match the competition quickly?

_____ Had a chance to practice at a training center away from home/club (e.g., junior camps, clinics, etc.)

What helped you to get the most out of this experience?

_____ Had to overcome adversity in your athletic career

What and who helped you get through it?



Optimizing Your PRESENT experience

Start thinking about answers to the questions or directions provided to get the most out of your time at the Olympic Training Center.

Describe what got you here (e.g., determination, hard work, confidence, resilience) - be aware of your strengths

Athletes who successfully adapt to the OTC use many resources on site. Check the boxes and list the name of at least one person in each of the following departments:

Coaches for your sport.	Name: _____	Bldg./Room # _____
Nutrition.	Name: _____	Bldg./Room # _____
Sports Medicine.	Name: _____	Bldg./Room # _____
Sport Psychology.	Name: _____	Bldg./Room # _____
Physiology/Sport Sciences.	Name: _____	Bldg./Room # _____
Strength and Conditioning.	Name: _____	Bldg./Room # _____
Sport Technology.	Name: _____	Bldg./Room # _____
Recovery.	Name: _____	Bldg./Room # _____
Athlete Services Staff:	Name: _____	Bldg./Room # _____
OTC Staff:	Name: _____	Bldg./Room # _____
Dining Room Staff:	Name: _____	Bldg./Room # _____
Veteran Resident Athlete (Mentor)	Name: _____	Bldg./Room # _____

Successful athletes also find ways to enjoy life outside of the OTC from time to time. Describe what you would like to do outside of the OTC during your time as a resident-athlete that allows you to develop and grow.



A Checklist to Thriving at the OTC - Check all that apply to you:

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Previous Successful Transitional Experiences | <input type="checkbox"/> Engaging in Activities Beyond Sport |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Positive Previous Exposure to OTC | <input type="checkbox"/> Working Hard |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Improved Performance in Training | <input type="checkbox"/> Continued Athletic Success |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Improved Awareness of Self and Body | <input type="checkbox"/> Excitement about Resources |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Attention to Recovery and/or Secure Recovery from Injury | <input type="checkbox"/> Perceiving OTC as Ideal Training Environment |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Competitiveness | <input type="checkbox"/> Perceiving OTC as Comfortable Setting |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Confidence | <input type="checkbox"/> Training Focus on International Competition |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Determination | <input type="checkbox"/> Expectation that Your Performance Will Improve |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Focused Purpose | <input type="checkbox"/> Positive Coach-Athlete Relationship |

Charting Your FUTURE experience

What does it mean for you to be a successful resident athlete training at the OTC?

What do you want your reputation to be while training at the OTC?

What excites you most when you think about your future as a resident athlete here?

How do your athletic dreams line up with the mission of the USOC?

“You really have to stay on top of recovery and any of those overuse injuries, so sports medicine was a daily thing for me.”

“I pictured it as I’m going to build a bridge, and no matter what it takes, I’m going to get to the other side.”

“So I have a lot of confidence in saying that I think I got the most out of myself, as an athlete, as a person, being here at the program.”



Resource 2:***Coach's Checklist - THRIVING AT THE OLYMPIC TRAINING CENTER******Coach's Checklist for Helping Resident-Athletes Get the Most out of Training at the Olympic Training Center***

What relationship during an athlete's career has the potential to most positively impact their progress in their sport?

"I think my coach and I have a very good relationship. So in the Olympics it helped me out a lot and that was important to me from the very beginning."

"For the most part it was my coach who was my mentor not only in sport but also in life."

". . . probably the biggest people who ended up being my influence were my coaches."

Athletes who become residents at the Olympic Training Center need time to adapt to their new environment. As a coach, your athletes may rely on you to assist them in this process. You can greatly influence how your athletes handle the trials and tribulations that come with moving to the Olympic Training Center by helping them throughout the various elements of transition to the OTC. A good start is to go over the "OTC Transition Educational Checklist for Athletes" together with an athlete who has recently arrived. Here are some additional suggestions:

Building on the Athlete's PAST Experience

A successful transition to the OTC begins well before the athlete sets foot on campus. Examples of characteristics of successful transitioners to the OTC include:

- Previous Successful Transition Experiences (e.g., going to college, going to the military, etc.)
- Previous Positive Exposure to the OTC (e.g., camps, clinics, etc.)
- Positive Outlook on Career (e.g., athlete seems hopeful, confident, but also aware of the road that lies ahead)

Maturity (e.g., age, sport experience) – It can be enhanced, made up for, or both through the coach's role as described in this checklist or sport psychology services.



***Optimizing the Athlete PRESENT experience
(INITIAL STAGES -- First 2-4 weeks)***

In the first few weeks of the athlete being a resident, it is particularly important to establish a “Good Fit” between the athlete and their environment. The coach can help the athlete establish a good fit by doing the following:

- Spend Personal Time with the Athlete (e.g., touring the campus with the athlete, having lunch together)
- Develop Mutual Goals with the Athlete for Training and Performance
- Develop an Action Plan for Potential Barriers to Success (e.g., injuries, emergencies, other challenges)
- Encourage Holistic Athlete Development (i.e., athletically, academically, socially) with an emphasis on a Success Focused Mindset (e.g. achievement motivation, coachability, confidence, optimism, grit, etc)
- Facilitate Team Cohesion (e.g., develop a mentor system; offer extra-curricular team building activities)

***Optimizing the Athlete PRESENT experience
(ONGOING [THRIVING] STAGES -- 4 weeks +)***

Once the athlete has been accustomed to the OTC, it is important that they maintain motivation and feel as if progress towards their overall goals has been made. As a coach, you can help your athlete(s) during this stage by:

- Continue to Collaborate with Athletic Service Staff on behalf of the Athlete
- Provide Regular and Achievable Challenges for Each Athlete (Team + Individual)
- Document and Reward Improvements (i.e., athletically, academically, vocationally, socially)
- Encourage the Athlete to seek Sport-Life Balance (i.e., time that is focused on sport is balanced with time not focused on sports)
- Encourage the athlete in collaboration with sport psychology to continue to nurture a Success Focused Mindset
- Encourage Athletes to Become Involved with OTC Operations (e.g., as a mentor to new athletes, seeking campus work)



The transition to any new environment can be difficult. Oftentimes, it takes time and support to make the transition effectively. The coach plays a major role in a successful transition to the OTC for new resident athletes. When support is given to the athlete, and they have a chance to contribute to the development of their own experiences, it drives them to stay motivated to achieve their goals.

Again, please, borrow extensively from “OTC Transition Educational Checklist for Athlete.”

“I knew with the coaching staff that was here and the athletes in the program that I was going to get better. I just knew that there was no way I could not get better.”

“You had a coach who was invested not only in our performance, but in also making sure that we were citizens and he was also a good role model and citizen for the Olympic Training Center.”



Michael Bradley of the United States speaks to the media during training at Sao Paulo FC on June 28, 2014 in Sao Paulo, Brazil. (Photo by Kevin C. Cox/Getty Images)

Mind-Body Training for Performing Under Pressure

Lindsay Thornton, Senior Sport Psychophysiologicalist, United States Olympic Committee

In the Spring (Vol. 25 Issue 2) issue of Olympic Coach, I introduced the concept of psychophysiology training at the United States Olympic Committee (USOC), and this article will elaborate on the application of training in preparation for performing at big events, such as the Olympic Games. As a brief reminder from last article: Psychophysiology is a branch of psychology that centers upon the physiological bases of psychological processes, or in lay terms, what happens in the body and brain when we experience emotions and thoughts. The work in psychophysiology is guided by the Psychophysiological Principal, which states:

"Every change in the physiological state is accompanied by an appropriate change in the mental and emotional state, conscious or unconscious, and conversely, every change in the mental and emotional state, conscious or unconscious, is accompanied by an appropriate change in the physiological state." (Green et al., 1970, p. 3)

Athletes often experience pressure as they compete in qualifiers and sanctioned events leading up to, and at the Olympic Trials and Games. One interpretation of pressure is a change in the perceived importance of the outcome of an event. The key in that phrase is the change in the perception. This change may lead athletes to modify or introduce new thoughts and emotions (and experience different physiological reactions) into their precompetitive routine. The downstream effects may be noticed first, for example in a pounding heartbeat, and the upstream effects may follow, with the athlete making sense of what the change in the heartbeat might mean - nervous, excited, ready? More thoughts flow from this interpretation, and part of psychophysiology training includes better understanding the effects of thoughts and emotions on the body, and to practice the redirection and/or regulation of both. Upstream changes, namely those that originate from the brain and the mind, can flow downstream and the athlete can experience changes in physiology from thoughts or emotions. With biofeedback and neurofeedback technology, we can measure this interaction between the mind and body, with the goal of creating awareness and teaching athletes to more effectively regulate the two.

The purpose of training is to first help create awareness of internal processes that one does not typically exert conscious control over, and then to provide feedback in a manner that an individual can learn to self-regulate or gain more refined control over these internal processes. (Zaichkowsky & Fuchs, 1988). The activity of the body (sympathetic/parasympathetic activation in the autonomic nervous system) and brain (neuroelectric processing/cognition/emotions) is measured by sensors applied to the surface of the skin or scalp, and shown on a computer screen. The information is

presented to the athlete in real time, and the athlete can see how her efforts to self-regulate are influencing her psychophysiological state. Data is presented in numbers and with bars that grow or shrink with successful efforts. Over time, with training, the athlete learns what the desired state feels like, and with the goal of entering this state on command, under simulated pressure.

The goal of biofeedback training begins with identifying suboptimal psychophysiological functioning and learned situational responses, then feedback is used for developing strategies to self-regulate to a more optimal response. The ultimate goal of biofeedback is for the strategy learned during training to be successfully implemented in the relevant performance situation without the assistance of the technologically generated feedback (Blumentstein, Bar Eli & Tenenbaum, 1997). Athletes have the opportunity to train their self-regulation skills in years leading to Games, whereby the refinement in mental skills parallels the refinement in physical skills.

One of the strengths of using objective data is that for those athletes who are aware of the connection between the mind and body, the equipment provides real-time quantification of their state. For those athletes who may not have experienced upstream activity spilling downstream (or vice versa) affecting their performance, the technology helps illustrate that self-regulation skills can be assessed and developed. With equipment, athletes also learn that their self-regulation skills have boundaries. For example, athletes occasionally try too hard to focus and the counterproductive effects of their over-effort appear immediately on the screen with the success rate going down, or when athletes are tired at the end of a training session or at the end of a week of training, they can see that their skills are attenuated, much like at the end of a strength session they might expect a reduction in their maximum capacity. The goal is to be able to effectively work with oneself in one's current state. Ideally, athletes will feel that they are in their optimal mind-body state for big performances. However if they are not, then they will have had experience working with themselves and know that they can still approximate the ideal state from their practice.

Skills emphasized in training are selected based on an objective assessment in combination with the athlete's stated goals, and generally fall into focusing, quieting, brief, and deep relaxation categories.

Assessment and Training Plans

Athletes generally begin training with a standardized assessment (Wilson & Somers, 2011). Measurements of brainwaves, heart rate, heart rate variability (the distance between heartbeats in milliseconds), respiration, muscle tension, finger temperature, and sweat response are taken. A baseline state is recorded first, then various tasks are introduced. Some tasks involve competition, performing against the clock and reaction time, others for example aim to produce a stress response by asking the athlete to quickly count backwards out loud. Between each task there is a recovery period. Each physiological measurement is examined to see what type of change there is from baseline to competitive/stress task, then to see if there is a return to the baseline state when the task has been completed and the recovery period has begun. An imagery task is used, and repeated with the NBC Olympic theme song audio or the National Anthem, in order to

elicit an emotional response. Athletes tend to have at least one system that changes under the competitive/stress tasks. This is the "most responsive" system and often an efficient place to begin training so long as it is relevant to the athlete's performance. As an example, an athlete might hold his breath during effort or clench her jaw while concentrating, the heart rate average might jump up more than ten beats per minute when a task starts and not settle down in spite of the athlete performing well and the task being fairly simple, or finger temperature might not return to the baseline values in the recovery period. These responses give insight into what systems could be wired to respond to challenge/stress states in athletes and would benefit from increased awareness and self-regulation skills: lack of awareness of breath holding in certain sports can have negative performance effects; excessive jaw tension can be a sign of misplaced effort; sustained elevated heart rate can have energy consequences over the course of a long or physically intense competition; poor blood flow (as expressed in low peripheral temperature) can be relevant to under-recovery.

The objective data collected from the athlete is used in combination with his subjective report of what types of self-regulation skills would be most relevant to performance and that he would like to work on, and a training plan is created. Training sessions last from 30 to 90 minutes depending on how many training objectives the athlete has and whether the athlete is acquiring or refining skills. When athletes are at the Colorado Springs or Chula Vista training centers, they typically have training from one to three times per week. They often travel for weeks at a time, and when they return, they resume training. Self-regulation skills involving heart rate, respiration, muscle tension, peripheral temperature, and sweat response can be reinforced when athletes are on the road. They typically learn to self-regulate quickly with the aid of biofeedback, and can replicate the state without the assistance of technology with practice (or with apps on their phones, or heart rate monitors they already use for training). We work to identify aspects of their routines already being used in their sport that could serve as a reminder to use their self-regulation skills. When they approach the start line, they do a quick muscle scan to release excess tension, typically starting with the forehead-jaw-shoulders and moving down the body. When the whistle blows or there is a stoppage in play, they count through one breath cycle and extend their exhale to emphasize heart rate deceleration. When athletes return to one of the training centers they can confirm that they have maintained their self-regulation ability during their next biofeedback session. Visual and audio feedback is gradually withdrawn during training to the point where the athlete herself will confirm when she has achieved the target state by relying on internal cues rather than external feedback, in order to reinforce the maintenance/refinement of the self-regulation skills.

Replicating neurofeedback training without equipment has proven to be more difficult. There are a few first-generation consumer grade neurofeedback products on the market. With the evolution of technology, neurofeedback training may be something that athletes can do on the road. Athletes can also engage in other types of attentional or quieting practices, often with the support of their sport psychologist. They can use audio guides or guide themselves through sessions. Keeping notes of observations of progress can support training goals, and can be reviewed at the next session with the sport psychologist. In my experience at the USOC, athletes who have a daily practice tend to acquire and maintain their neurofeedback goals rather quickly as evidenced by their self-regulation skills staying stable in spite of periods away from neurofeedback training. Athletes who deliberately use their self-regulation skills in their sport training (including strength and cardio sessions) have multiple daily opportunities to "practice" working with the mind and the brain.



Focusing

Neurofeedback training typically begins with focus training. During focus training, slow speed brain waves are recorded and shown on the screen in real time. The athlete's goal is to first become aware of what having slow waves in the attentional networks feels like, and then to reduce the amount of slow wave activity to create a more focused state. With practice, athletes can begin to estimate the amount of slow wave activity present before they begin training, and after each discreet training block in the session. Their awareness of and regulation over the conceptual "focusing" dial in their brain becomes more and more refined. My colleague Peter Haberl is careful to distinguish between thinking about focusing and actually creating a focused state in the brain. This delineation is brought to life with neurofeedback training. When an athlete first begins training, she generally has a good idea of what a focused state feels like and can enter a focused state with effort. As training progresses, the goal is for the athlete to be able to enter a certain level of focused state with an efficient amount of effort, and to be able to maintain that state for an amount of time that is relevant to her sport. Just as strength training is modified for sport demands and individual athlete needs, the intensity and duration of focus training are always matched to simulate sport demands. Much of the success of the biofeedback or neurofeedback training is thought to be due to its integration into sport demands (Wilson, Thompson, Thompson & Pepper, 2011). Focusing demands for cycling are different from focusing demands in shooting disciplines, for example, and athletes from these sports have different neurofeedback training programs to support their needs.

As competitions approach, training is modified to simulate competitive demands as much as possible. Athletes often become aware that they become competitive with themselves in a training session, and pay attention to the statistics recorded in every training block through the session. This becomes an opportunity to be aware of an outcome orientation, the potential distraction of focusing on score prior to/during the focusing training block, and the athlete's reaction to meeting or falling short of his expectations. Focus training includes the basic self-regulation of neuroelectric activity in the selected area of the cortex, as well as the awareness of and regulation of the mind. Simulating competition in psychophysiology training allows athletes to explore responses of the brain and mind that might occur before, during or after competing, and to demonstrate to themselves that they have the self-regulation skills to effectively work with these responses. They can also begin to learn their habits and know what will likely occur, as well as begin to rehearse handling a range of unexpected-but-possible events.

Quieting

Using excessive self-talk or self-instruction during well learned skills (those skills that athletes are showcasing on the biggest stage at the Games) can interfere with technical performance. This has been demonstrated in studies with shooting athletes, and is commonly reported in athletes when they describe "over thinking" or the "paralysis-by-analysis" phenomena. Simply telling an athlete to "not think" might be effective for some, but it can leave the athlete vulnerable to a wide range of thoughts that are irrelevant to performance - namely, how to create the absence of thought. Basic education in motor skill learning and the development of automaticity is reviewed with athletes.

Given the thousands of repetitions they have done at this point in their career, they are very likely at the final stage of motor skill learning, and skills are largely executed automatically, requiring little conscious processing (Fitts & Posner, 1967). When athletes prepare to perform, they can get in their own way by priming their conscious brain, for example, with thoughts about the outcome of their performance, and what that will mean. Anxiety or arousal can increase to the point that skills that are typically executed under automatic processing become performed through conscious and deliberate processing. These thoughts and/or change in arousal state can continue through to the skill execution state, and have varying effects on performance (Baumeister, 1984).

With neurofeedback training, athletes can come to understand that there is often a certain emotional tone to the type of thinking that does not enhance performance - it might be doubt or nervousness that leads to the brain doing extra checks, or exerting more mental effort than is needed in order to meet the desire to feel that one is working hard. This can be measured with a sensor on the head that captures the EEG output from a selected area of the cortex. When an athlete realizes that thought can still occur, but certain types of thoughts are unlikely to support success, he can practice identifying the occurrence of this state then quiet and redirect his mind toward more useful states and/or concrete cues. Similar to focusing, quieting can be practiced with increasing pressure simulation to mimic what might be experienced at competitions.

Brief and Deep Recovery/Relaxation

Athletes are taught techniques that can be used for brief or deep recovery and relaxation. Brief recovery/relaxation is often compared to pressing the reset button on purpose in training or competition. Deep relaxation is used for creating a longer lasting recovery state outside of real time sport demands. Athletes often have some idea of how to create the physical sensations of relaxation: they can reduce resting tension in their muscles, slow down the breathing rate, lower their heart rate and anchor their mind in these physical sensations. Specific times where an athlete feels she can have a brief recovery during performance are identified, and routines are practiced to create this state. By regulating breathing, athletes learn to control their heart rate and with inter-beat interval data from the biofeedback equipment, we can confirm that the parasympathetic system becomes more active.

With muscle sensors, athletes can differentiate somewhat low (less than ten microvolts of tension) to very low (under three microvolts of tension) resting tension in selected muscles, and replicate this state. Research (from non-sport domains) indicates that giving muscles microbreaks by reducing resting tension is an effective way to decrease the risk of repetitive strain injuries.

Athletes practice engaging in deep (longer) recovery sessions during psychophysiology training, ranging from five to twenty minutes at a time. They are encouraged to replicate this training at home and during travel. Deeper relaxation sessions are often scheduled as training demands intensify to promote recovery throughout the day.

Cognitive/mental aspects of recovery and relaxation are emphasized along with physical aspects. Athletes identify with the concept that the body cannot be “on” for the whole competition day, or that if it is then energy is likely not being used efficiently. They often take time between warm up and

competing, or throughout the competition day to have physical rest. Engagement in cognitive and mental recovery are sometimes more difficult, with the excitement that surrounds big events, the pressures of performance expectations, the availability of competitor performance data, the ease of access to social media, demands of family, friends, fans, sponsors, and so forth. Athletes learn to regulate their attention, typically using physical sensations of the breath or of muscle relaxation, or at times the monotony of counting to anchor the mind in a setting with minimal distractions, like our psychophysiology training space, and gradually practice these skills with performance relevant distractions. Brief cognitive recovery typically takes the form of giving the brain a break from the attentional demands of sport, by doing something else that is less taxing on the attention networks in the brain. Mental recovery can be practiced with the idea of letting go of the performance that just took place. Neurofeedback training can reinforce this to teach the athlete what it feels like to decrease faster processing speeds, when it is previously confirmed that these speeds are associated with rumination or non-productive busyness. Routines can be created around this by creating a short window of time for analysis – if appropriate - and useful for ongoing performance, letting go of the last effort, resetting with a mental and physical routine and redirecting oneself to the next effort.

Optimal Health

In some cases, the goal of training is to optimize health to enhance sport performance. Athletes can be genetically predisposed to certain patterns or acquire them through injuries. As an example, after injuries, athletes can end up with excessive muscle tension at rest. This can result from immobilization or repeated bracing due to pain. Muscle tension can restrict blood flow and slow recovery. By identifying areas of excessive tension and learning relaxation techniques, athletes can reinforce a state conducive to healing. Similar to the general population, some athletes are prone to headaches. Tension headaches and certain types of migraines occur in conjunction with stress. Anticipation of a big competition, international travel, adapting to a new setting can often be enough to trigger a headache or migraine at inopportune times in the days before or of competition. In some cases tension headaches can be prevented with muscle relaxation training, and some migraines can be prevented by regular peripheral temperature training, whereby the athlete's goal is to raise finger temperature (finger temperature is raised by creating improved blood flow, transporting heat to the periphery) (Nestoriuc et al., 2008). In some cases, biofeedback and neurofeedback can be used to promote optimal health, minimizing or removing health-related barriers to performance in competition.

Biofeedback and neurofeedback are used to assess and reinforce self-regulation skills. After an assessment to better understand the athlete has been completed, his individual patterns, the requirement of his sport demands, and his stated goals for training are considered in tailoring a plan to utilize his strengths and bolster his weaknesses in the areas of self-regulation skills. Technology allows the athlete to see in real time how the brain and body work together with simple graphs and figures. The psychophysiological responses that are detrimental to performance are quantified, and clear feedback as to the direction and degree of change is provided. Athletes learn that they still have the ability to self-regulate when they are tired/nervous/excited/frustrated and can practice to use these skills under pressure simulations, such that they have the belief in their ability to employ them in the heat of competition.

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The USOC is pleased to recognize the following coaches who were selected as the 2013 USOC National Coaches of the Year in their respective categories. Congratulations



Kathleen Johnson, National Developmental Coach of the Year

Johnston led the Southeast Junior High Performance Triathlon Team to the 2013 USA Triathlon Developmental Team Championship title. Under her guidance, three athletes earned top-three finishes at the 2013 USAT Junior Elite National Championship, and two athletes finished in the top three of the 2013 USAT Junior Elite rankings. Johnston was named the U.S. head coach for the 2013 Pan American Triathlon Confederation Junior Championships and International Triathlon Union Junior Elite World Championships, as well as co-head coach for the USAT Junior Elite Women's Camp. As the southeast regional athlete development coordinator for USAT, she also held clinics for coaches and parents in the Nashville area, launched the Southeast Junior Elite program and directed the Tennessee chapter of Team in Training.



Gordon Uehling III, National Doc Counsilman Science and Technology

Uehling was invited to speak at the 2013 International Tennis Federation World Coaching Conference in Cancun, Mexico, to present his advancements in balance control and slip-step technology. Using video analysis and CourtSense TV, Uehling trained more than 500 junior athletes each week at the CourtSense tennis school in New Jersey. The technology helped players improve their technique by using split-step light coupled with neuro- and biofeedback. His work was featured in the August 2013 issue of Men's Journal and on the Tennis Channel, which highlighted his mentorship of Olympian Christine McHale. He is currently working with the U.S. Tennis Association to create a pilot program for PlaySight, a revolutionary technology that would allow coaches and players to make line calls.



Erik Flora, National Olympic Coach of the Year

As head coach of the Alaska Pacific University Nordic Ski Club, Flora directed four cross-country athletes from the 13-member U.S. team that competed at the 2013 World Championships, including 2013 team sprint world champion Kikkan Randall. The win marked the first world championship gold medal in cross-country skiing for the U.S., and the first medal of any color in a team event. Under Flora's guidance, Randall and Holly Brooks also led the U.S. women's team to its first relay podium finish in world cup history, and Randall became the first American woman to finish in the top-three of the overall FIS Cross-Country World Cup standings. Flora also aided other top U.S. skiers to breakthrough results in 2013, including Sadie Bjorsen, Erik Bjornsen and overall SuperTour champion Rosie Brennan. For his success, he was recognized as the 2013 U.S. Ski and Snowboard Association Coach of the Year and the 2013 USSA International Cross-Country Coach of the Year.



Adam Bleakney, Paralympic National Coach of the Year

A four-time Paralympian, Bleakney helped U.S. athletes earn 13 medals at the 2013 International Paralympic Committee World Athletics Championships in Lyon, France. As head coach for the University of Illinois wheelchair track & field program, Bleakney played a key role in developing world champions Tatyana McFadden and Raymond Martin. At the 2013 World Championships, McFadden led the U.S. medal haul with a historic six gold medals, while Martin – the 2013 USOC Paralympic SportsMan of the Year – became the first man to win five world titles. Overall, Bleakney coached nine athletes on the U.S. world team, including men's 800-meter champion Josh George and women's 200 bronze medalist Chelsea McClammer. Following the world championships, Bleakney aided McFadden in becoming the first to win the marathon grand slam with victories at 2013 London, Boston, Chicago and New York City marathons.



Benny Roman, National Volunteer Coach of the Year

After being selected by USA Boxing to serve as a training camp coach, Roman joined the coaching staff for the 2013 Continental Championships, women's junior and youth world championships and the 2013 SportAccord World Combat Games, in which he aided American athletes to 26 medals (12 golds, five silvers, nine bronzes). In addition to his coaching role at the Atlas Cops N' Kids gym in Brooklyn, New York, Roman aided Christina Cruz to a national title and Edgar Berlanga to silver medals at the 2013 Junior World Team Open and 2013 Junior National Championships.

On the cover: Clint Dempsey (L) and Tim Howard of the United States look on during the National Anthem during the 2014 FIFA World Cup Brazil Group G match between Ghana and the United States at Estadio das Dunas on June 16, 2014 in Natal, Brazil.

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