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Peak performance: The psychological edge in sport and performing arts

Faster, higher, *psychologically* stronger: Sport psychology at the London Olympic Games

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The pinnacle of sport performance for athletes and teams is to compete at the Olympic Games. Athletes invest years of effort in training, competition and developing expertise in the quest to achieve Olympic success. Competing against the best in the world can assist athletes to achieve peak performances, however if unprepared and unskilled it can be an overwhelming experience resulting in the inability to perform under the unique pressure of the Olympic Games environment.

The Olympic motto – *Citius, Altius, Fortius* – is Latin for faster, higher, stronger, and given the unique demands of competing against the rest of the world, it is imperative for athletes to go beyond physical and technical expertise to develop the psychological strength to excel. Providing athletes with the understanding of how to achieve their optimal state for competition, and equipping them with the psychological skills to perform, are two vital roles that sport psychologists play to enable athletes and teams to effectively cope with pressure and achieve peak performance.

Psychology services for the 2012 Australian Olympic Team

The 2012 Australian Olympic Team was supported by a team of sport psychologists across Australia as athletes prepared for and competed in the London Olympic Games. Sport psychology is becoming an integral part of sport science service delivery in the high performance sport industry, and is integrated into the medical services available to the Australian Olympic Team. All athletes on the Australian Olympic Team had access to psychological services at the Olympic Games in London, provided by either the Australian Headquarters Medical Team or as part of the sports science team working with individual sports. Psychologists on the Headquarters Medical Team coordinated and delivered psychological services for the Australian team both within the Athlete Village and at the Australian Recovery Centre.

The psychological services provided to the 2012 Australian Olympic athletes included individual consultation, mental health assessment, psychological debriefing, team consultation, training and competition support. Two new initiatives were introduced for London as part of Headquarters Psychology Services, involving psychological recovery and sleep. The area of psychological recovery has received increased attention in recent years due to the importance for athletes to maintain their optimum psychological state throughout the entire competition period. Being able to recover from, and deal effectively with, a performance allows the athlete to recover and prepare for the next performance. A crucial aspect of this recovery is sleep.

Extensive psychoeducational material was available to all athletes and staff on psychological recovery, relaxation and sleep, and teams also had access to facilitated relaxation exercises.

Athletes were encouraged to engage with psychology services throughout the Olympic preparation period. Services were available to athletes and sports through the State Academy and Institute of Sport system, alongside private practitioners throughout the country. The Australian Sports Commission made funding available to support access to psychology services if resources were not available to athletes directly through the sport. This funding provided the opportunity for all prospective Olympic team members to have access to psychological support to assist with all areas of Olympic preparation and debriefing. This included managing de-selection if athletes did not qualify for the Olympic team, preparation for performing at the Olympic Games, and accessing debriefing services on the return home from London.

Fundamental to the success of the delivery of psychology services at the London Olympics was the work in the years prior completed by sport psychologists across Australia with athletes and teams. Psychological skills would not hold strong under the pressure of Olympic competition if athletes had not consolidated these skills both on and off the sporting field before arriving in London.

Holistic sport psychology services for performance success

The mental skills approach has been the traditional foundation for the development of the sport psychology profession. While it is a useful approach and provides skills for competition performance, working on mental skills alone may sacrifice the opportunity to target lasting change across core areas of psychological functioning. A common mistake in mental skills training has been to focus on one isolated psychological strategy, without an understanding of how this fits into an athlete's overall psychological functioning (Hardy, Jones & Gould, 2006).

For example, teaching an athlete the skills to gain focus in competition will not be effective if a core anxiety issue remains unaddressed. If athletes are unable to understand their own individual psychological functioning, they will not be equipped with the self awareness to identify when change is required, or the skills to adapt under pressure. Increasingly in sport psychology literature, intervention models have indicated that general psychological factors significantly contribute to facilitating performance psychology skills in competition (Hardy, Jones & Gould, 2006). A diverse range of psychological factors

have been identified as contributing to the psychological state required to gain the ideal performance state, including emotional regulation, thought control, confidence, concentration and the ability to cope and adapt to the competition environment. Given the diversity of these factors, intervention requires a holistic approach, targeting aspects of general psychological functioning, alongside peak performance skills and the ability to cope with the demands of high performance competition (Hardy, Jones & Gould, 2006).

Many Australian sport psychology practitioners working at the elite level are therefore moving beyond the traditional mental skills approach and have embraced a holistic approach to service provision, equipping athletes with both the psychological understanding and skills to be able to self-regulate their cognitions, emotions and behaviours in any high performance environment. Utilising a range of evidence-based frameworks, including cognitive behavioural therapy, acceptance and commitment therapy and mindfulness amongst others, practitioners are providing psychological intervention that contributes to performance success alongside sustaining good mental health.

Psychological skills to perform

The only predictable factor for competing at the Olympic Games is that nothing is predictable at the Olympics Games! Athletes will not know how they will respond to the pressure of Olympic competition, or how they will manage the environment, until they are within it. Resilience and the ability to cope with adversity is an important skill to enable athletes to adapt to the Olympic Village and competition environment.

The Athletes Village is a large and exciting environment, full of distractions for athletes. While it can be used as a positive distraction, allowing athletes to switch off from ruminating about impending performance, it can also contribute to a lack of focus on preparation or influence anxiety levels if athletes don't have the skills to adapt to, or cope with, the environment. Excessive use of social media provides another potential negative distraction, not only taking focus away from performance preparation, but risking a negative interplay with performance expectation and self confidence. A myriad of other issues can arise for athletes prior to performance, including sleep difficulties, illness, minor injury, transport delays, or disruptions to training and performance preparation. It is important therefore that athletes not only possess psychological skills for performance but also develop coping strategies to manage the stressors that will prevent or disrupt optimal performance.

One of the most common statements provided by athletes when reflecting on participation at the Olympics is that they have never experienced the level of nerves that present in Olympic competition. Performance anxiety will be high for most athletes and they therefore require the ability to identify and regulate the emotions that have a potentially negative impact on the execution of skills during performance. What appears to be common among many medallists is not the absence of nerves but the ability to accept the experience of performance anxiety, and assertively deal with challenges arising in the environment to facilitate achieving their optimal state to perform. Therefore it is critical for athletes to be confident in their ability to identify

how they are responding within the environment, and to implement effective strategies to adapt and cope with whatever may present. Psychological awareness, alongside the ability to be assertive in implementing the correct strategies to gain their individual optimal psychological state, will place athletes in the position to achieve peak performance.

Given the complexity and demands of competing at the Olympic Games, a multitude of psychological factors contribute to athletes achieving a personal best performance in competition. For elite athletes, superior performance is associated with automatic functioning at the optimal level. Athletes state that they compete at their best when confidence is high and emotions are regulated. The focus of attention in this state is absorbed in the moment, allowing no awareness of external distractions, or internal self doubt and fears that can disrupt performance (Cohn, 1991; Singer, 2002). The primary goal for athletes therefore is to attain an optimal emotional, confident and focused state immediately prior to competing, and remain that way during competition. While executing the necessary physical and technical skills, the regulation of a range of psychological factors such as emotion, cognition, attentional focus, self expectancy and coping skills is required for a successful performance.

Sport psychologists work individually with athletes to increase their awareness of the ideal state relevant to their own performance, and assist them to develop the appropriate psychological skills and strategies to achieve this mental and emotional state for peak performance. A comprehensive intervention approach, targeting a range of psychological factors, will allow for the automatic execution of both the physical and psychological tasks required by athletes to achieve peak performance.

KEY AREAS FOR PERFORMANCE SUCCESS AT THE OLYMPIC GAMES

- Successful adaptation to the environment
- Self regulation of cognitions, emotions and behaviour
- Competition skills to perform
- Psychological recovery and wellbeing

Psychological recovery and wellbeing

Recovery is a crucial aspect of an athlete's ability to obtain the optimum performance state in competition. Athletes and teams are required to perform at the optimum physical and psychological state for up to two weeks of competition performance. Maximising psychological factors alongside physiological factors will therefore further enhance the recovery process. The key elements of effective psychological recovery include feelings of relaxation, re-establishing a sense of wellbeing, and a positive mood (Elbe & Kellmann, 2007). The psychological recovery process assists athletes to effectively recover from a performance and ensures performance standards can be maintained across the competition period.

There are three key steps in the psychological recovery process. Firstly it is important for athletes to actively deal with any thoughts or feelings associated with the competition performance to gain some distance from the experience. Secondly, athletes need to select and implement recovery strategies that will target individual responses to the stressors



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◀ associated with the competition environment. Finally, once the previous performance has been dealt with and the appropriate recovery strategies utilised, it is important for athletes to orientate thinking to the present (Beckman & Kellmann, 2004).

A range of strategies can be utilised to achieve the key elements of psychological recovery. It is important that athletes implement the strategies that will work best for both them as individuals and the unique requirements of their sport. A proactive approach to monitoring psychological wellbeing will ensure athletes are aware of, and respond appropriately to, any significant changes in mood, thoughts or behaviour and contribute to the maintenance of good mental health throughout the competition period. Psychological regulation is critical to recovery, as a win or a loss will generate strong emotions and it is important to deal with these emotions in a constructive way. The self regulation of thoughts, emotions and attention is required throughout competition to deal effectively with the previous performance and move on to the next. Coping effectively with the emotional highs and lows during a competition period will assist in establishing an emotional equilibrium.

Psychological debriefing and relaxation enables athletes to effectively understand, process and manage the competition experience. Psychological debriefing enhances mental and emotional recovery as it allows for the event to come to a conclusion in the athlete's mind so that recovery from the performance can proceed. It is important that athletes debrief from their performances in a consistent manner, regardless of a win or a loss. Debriefing will assist to assertively deal with information concerning the past performance and regulate emotion. Relaxation promotes recovery by reducing tension and promoting effective emotional management. It will also assist in promoting better sleep by lowering physical tension and calming the mind (Beckman & Kellmann, 2004; Elbe & Kellmann, 2007).

Conclusion

Sport psychology plays a critical role not only in the enhancement of performance for athletes, but in the development and maintenance of psychological wellbeing within the competition environment. There is increasing recognition in the sport community that supporting athlete mental health is a vital aspect of competition performance, and is as integral to success as the competition skills to perform. The profession of sport psychology provided a very meaningful contribution to sports science service delivery for the Australian Olympic Team at the 2012 London Olympics, to facilitate athlete wellbeing and maximise the psychological skills required to compete at the highest level of international competition.

Sport psychology needs to continue to develop as profession to ensure comprehensive, holistic and evidence-based psychology services are available for athletes and teams, providing the range of services required to achieve peak performance. Equipping athletes with an understanding of their psychological functioning, and building the ability to implement a range of psychological strategies in competition, enables athletes to both execute their skills and thrive under pressure as they strive to reach their performance potential.

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AN OLYMPIC ATHLETE'S PERSPECTIVE

Tommaso D'Orsogna

Australian Swim Team, London Olympics

Olympics is the pinnacle of my sport so, understandably, there is a lot of pressure surrounding the event. The fact that it only comes every four years adds further pressure on performance, as you may only ever have one chance at an Olympics and you only get one chance to get it right when you're there.

"What if I fail? What if I get too nervous? What if someone beats me?" are a few of the distracting questions that can come into your mind in the lead up to what is most likely the biggest event of your life.

Having the right mindset and the right support structure in place is imperative in attaining peak performance. You can't achieve peak performance if your focus is on 'not failing' as opposed to succeeding, you can't achieve peak performance if you are more concerned with others' performance over your own, and you can't achieve peak performance if you don't focus correctly.

In my experience, sport psychologists are there to facilitate this process. They help to help guide your thinking, put you in a positive and constructive mindset and avoid deconstructive thinking. In essence, they don't tell you what you should and shouldn't do – as an athlete you need to be able to walk the path, learn from your own experiences, and get to your goal at the end of the road – but you need someone there to point you in the right direction along the way. As an athlete, you just don't have the time to figure it all out by yourself and you don't have three or four chances to get it right, so a psychologist can provide the experience and the advice to help speed up that development.

There is no doubt that strong psychological skills are necessary for peak performance at an Olympics, or any other sporting event. At the Olympics, everybody is at peak physical condition, everybody is talented and everybody has worked hard to get there. But only a few truly achieve peak performance. Whether that is a lifetime best, a gold medal, a bronze medal, or whatever the outcome, the people that achieve peak performance are those that have prepared themselves psychologically, whether they are aware of it or not. They handled the pressure, the distractions and the nerves and maximised their outcome because of that. ■

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