

The Australian

Failure not an option

- by: Julie-Anne Davies
- From: The Australian
- August 13, 2008 12:00AM

YOU have to hope that Australian shooter Michael Diamond didn't read the newspapers back home after he finished fourth in the event he had in past Olympics made his own.

The reports all highlighted that he had "failed" to win his third Olympic gold in the final of the men's trap shooting.

Headlines including "Deadeye Diamond falls short" are the unfortunate reality of not living up to your own expectations, let alone those of the nation.

So far in these Games, Australia has had some highs, courtesy of the female swimmers, but as things stand, the medal count is down on expectations.

In the coming days, the AOC and the Australian sporting public will be praying for a few unexpected medals to revive the tally.

The brutal reality is that within a nano-second, four years of training can add up to a flight home wondering "what if".

The difference between fame and fourth, between a medal and oblivion, can come down to the blink of an eye, a dud gear in a boat or a zipper that won't do up.

Watching a clearly distraught Jessicah Schipper haul herself out of the pool and then have to front the world after her dramatic wardrobe malfunction in the 100m butterfly final was just one glimpse of the extreme pressure athletes are under.

You wouldn't have guessed she had just won an Olympic bronze medal as she stood, eyes filled with tears, but then again she hadn't trained relentlessly since coming fourth in this event in Athens four years ago for something as basic as a snagged zipper to bring her undone.

She said later: "I'm just running on a bit of stress and adrenalin at the moment. It's all catching up with me."

When Australian diving pair Robert Newbery and Matthew Helm could not quite manage a podium finish in the men's 10m platform diving on Monday afternoon, Newbery, who was competing in his last Olympics, admitted that losing by such a small margin was frustrating.

"It could have been a different result," Newbery said. "It wasn't. That's sport."

The campaign for gold medals took some body blows even before the Games began when it lost its two world champions from the track and field team, hurdler Jana Rawlinson and walker Nathan Deakes. Expecting the unexpected is everything, says the Australian Olympic team psychologist, Ruth Anderson.

It's her job at these Games to listen, counsel, console and get athletes back on track if they stray from their carefully planned pre-Olympic path.

"The key thing is athletes need to be able to manage the pressure, not ignore it," Anderson said.

"If they put in their best performance and they get a disappointing result, it is easier to deal with. If they get

distracted by external events and turn in a poor result, then it is much harder to manage."

So far, Anderson has been helping athletes on the small stuff - not obsessing over niggling injuries and not becoming distracted by the partisan Chinese crowds at unfamiliar venues.

She hasn't had to deal with any post-event meltdowns yet but Anderson said she was keeping her antennae trained for athletes who might need some emotional support.

Beijing has thrown up unusual challenges. Putting to one side the political and cultural issues that have dominated, Michael Diamond found himself shooting for his third gold medal in weather conditions which he described as shocking.

"The visibility was not all that great. It was dark, which made the targets look even smaller, in fact, but you know it is the same for everybody and the better guy handled it easier on the day," a subdued Diamond said later.

Grant Hackett's disappointment in his sixth placing in the 400m freestyle was written all over his face and broadcast back to the nation when he turned to look up at the scoreboard.

He had made no secret that he had come to Beijing hoping to knock off Ian Thorpe's record as Australia's top gold medal winner of all time. That dream is over and the 1500m beckons.

Other Australians to underachieve include cyclist Michael Rogers, who finished fifth in the men's road race, and veteran judoka Maria Pekli, who retired after missing a medal in the 57kg division.

When asked about Australia's sluggish start in these Games, chef de mission John Coates said: "So the only two that we were hoping for medal winners were certainly (Hackett) and Michael, but he did very, very well to come fourth in hot weather one day and then rain the next."

Coates was not critical of Diamond but conceded that the expectations were always there, especially when you've been on the winner's dais before.

"I think his was a wonderful, wonderful performance but he is an Olympic champion and you always keep your hopes up for those," Coates said.

Going into these Games, the Australian Olympic Committee was expecting 20 gold medals in Beijing, after taking 17 in Athens in 2004.
