
AFTER THE OLYMPIC GAMES, ATHLETES DETERMINE WHAT'S NEXT
New research helps guide athletes and coaches during post-Olympic times

CHAGRIN FALLS, Ohio – May 2012 – For athletes who have spent years preparing for their moment at the Olympic Games, life after the big event can be a time of uncertainty.

While some athletes will walk away with a Gold Medal, others try to recover from falling short of their dream. Regardless of the outcome, each athlete experiences a transition as they try to determine what to do next with their life.

“Many Olympians suffer a post-Olympic let down after the Games,” said Sean McCann, Ph.D., CC-AASP, Senior Sport Psychologist with the United States Olympic Committee (USOC) and Past President of the Association for Applied Sport Psychology (AASP). “It is difficult adjusting to life after the Olympic Games.”

Though some athletes do have lucrative endorsement deals waiting, many more who have devoted the same amount of time and energy into pursuing their sports careers do not.

Those who fare best are the ones who have a new focus that will challenge them. It may be a new sport, a new career or plans to attend college. The key is for the athletes to keep focused and goal-oriented. Those who have the most difficulty adjusting are the athletes who wait until after the Olympic Games to think about their future.

According to Dr. McCann, whether or not an athlete returns home with a medal has relatively little impact on post-Games adjustment. “The most difficult situation is if an athlete is a medal favorite and does not succeed,” said Dr. McCann. “The reality that talent and opportunity don’t guarantee success has led some athletes to lose hope and have difficulty moving on. The best advice is to wait some time before making a decision to quit the sport until the pain of losing is less of a factor in making an important decision.”

It’s often helpful to look at choices that other athletes have made and the successes that followed when considering future opportunities.

Research addresses importance of post-Olympic debriefing

“Our research has shown that it is a wise decision to build in an Olympic debriefing and focusing/refocusing time after the Games for both coaches and athletes,” said Daniel Gould, Ph.D., CC-AASP, Department of Kinesiology, Michigan State University. Dr. Gould, who is a Fellow and Past President of AASP, and a team of researchers conducted individual and focus group interviews and surveys examining factors associated with Olympic success and failure involving athletes and coaches.

As a result of the research, Dr. Gould has recommended meetings between individual athletes, teams, coaches and support staff members, as well as federation officials, within a month or two after the Games. “The purpose of this meeting is to debrief everyone and record the lessons learned from their Olympic experience. What went right? What were the keys they felt helped them prepare? In addition, have them list factors that interfered with their performance? Finally, ask them to identify what they would do differently if they could relive their experience,” said Dr. Gould.

These debriefing sessions are not meant to focus solely on athletes who do not perform well. “Some Gold Medalists have reported a loss of direction several months after reaching the pinnacle of their athletic careers. They focused so much on achieving their Olympic goal that they never gave sufficient thought to what is next, from both an athletic and personal perspective,” said Dr. Gould.

For those who succeeded as well as those who fell short of expectations, they may not be ready to process the Olympic experience until a few weeks after the Games.

Because of the increased focus on post-Olympic experiences and new research supplied by Dr. Gould and his colleagues, the role in the field of sport psychology and professional consulting continues to be important, even after the Games have concluded.

The Association for Applied Sport Psychology (AASP) promotes ethical practice, science and advocacy in the field of sport and exercise psychology. Founded in 1986, AASP is an international, multidisciplinary, professional organization that offers certification to qualified professionals in the field of sport and exercise psychology. With more than 1,500 members in 39 countries, AASP is a worldwide leader, sharing research and resources with the public via its website, www.appliedsportpsych.org

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