

## **PSYCHOLOGICAL PREPARATION IS KEY TO OLYMPIC PERFORMANCE** *Research documents factors influencing athlete, team and coach performance*

*“Being at the Olympics is like being a child in a candy store. You must figure out how to enjoy yourself and taste the candy, but not eat so much candy that you get sick.”*

CHAGRIN FALLS, Ohio – May 2012 – “This quote, from one of the most successful U.S. Olympians who has attended multiple Games and won numerous medals (most Gold), illustrates the challenge of Olympic coaches. They must get athletes in the best physical, technical and emotional condition of their lives while not overtraining them and manage a totally complex environment full of distractions,” said Daniel Gould, Ph.D., CC-AASP, Department of Kinesiology, Michigan State University.

This was a consistent finding over three Olympiads in a series of comprehensive research projects commissioned by the United States Olympic Commission (USOC) and executed by Dr. Gould, who is a Fellow and Past President of the Association for Applied Sport Psychology (AASP). The team of researchers conducted individual and focus group interviews and surveys examining factors associated with Olympic success and failure involving athletes and coaches. “We looked at a broad spectrum of physical, psychological and environmental factors associated with performance success,” said Dr. Gould, who is sharing the findings in clinics and psychological skills training workshops with American athletes and coaches, as well as international organizations.

### **Research provides valuable knowledge, strategies for preparing to perform well at the Olympics**

When the public watches the Olympic Games they can see the performance factors influencing an athlete’s outcome, however many other factors influencing performance take place behind-the-scenes. Research showed how the influence of such behind-the-scenes issues as a snoring roommate, attendance at the Opening Ceremonies, transportation snafus, and family concerns can play a major role in the final results.

The conclusions and solutions provide a lesson that can be applied to all levels of athletes, as well as non-athletes to apply in daily lives. Dr. Gould shared key lessons from the research:

- **Dealing with distractions**

One of the biggest performance detractors leading up to and at the Games is dealing with all types of distractions. These can range from athletes from less popular sports meeting some of the most visible athletes in the world in the Olympic village dining hall to traffic problems that disrupt an athlete’s normal training time. Other distractions include having a roommate that snores or having an event scheduled towards the end of the Games but living in a village where most athletes are finished competing and are in celebration mode.

Research showed that better athletes and teams, while optimistic, went in expecting some distractions and made a commitment that they would not let those distractions interfere with what they needed to do to optimally prepare for performance, and be prepared for the bureaucracy and intense media coverage.

- **Expect the unexpected**

While more successful performers went into the Olympics with a positive attitude and frame of mind, at the same time, they also anticipated some unexpected events, and when they did, would employ some already learned coping strategies (e.g., a wrestler steps out of bounds, takes a deep breathe, and refocuses on what he needs to do to make a certain move work, such as say the word “penetrate,” before returning to the center of the mat to resume action). Less successful athletes often had gone into the Games expecting everything to be perfect and when these issues arose they got distracted and lost some or all of their performance focus.

- **Develop and stick to your routine**

“We heard repeatedly from coaches and athletes that more successful athletes and teams set pre-performance physical and mental preparation routines. They did not feel that they had to mentally and physically prepare differently than if they had entered the first round of the competition against lesser opponents or were in the finals facing their archrival. This point was illustrated by one athlete who said *‘more than anything athletes need to have already a routine established and they need to stick to that routine and take refuge in that routine because at the Games, everything changes.’* Participants emphasized that it was especially important to avoid last minute changes – no easy task in an Olympic environment where a wide range of changes occur from one’s normal and competitive environment,” explained Dr. Gould.

- **Opening Ceremonies – energizing or energy zapping?**

“Deciding whether to attend Opening Ceremonies can be very a difficult decision for Olympic athletes if they are going to perform within 24 to 48 hours of those ceremonies. Our research revealed that it could be a wonderful, exhilarating experience and worked to motivate some athletes. Others, however, found all the standing around zapped their energy and resulted in lack luster performance. It should be discussed with the athletes, taking care to examine the potential positive versus negative consequences,” Dr. Gould added.

- **The influence of family and friends**

“A factor that we did not anticipate coming out of our research was the importance of the influence family and friends can have on athlete and team performance. For many athletes having their parents and friends at the Games is a tremendous source of enjoyment and a form of social support that helps them perform,” said Dr. Gould. However, for others, parents and friends can unknowingly serve as distractions, constantly asking questions about performance outcomes, next opponents or the ramifications of wins and losses.

As the issue was identified, a solution followed: provide some education or guidance so families and friends can understand what their roles are relative to helping their athlete perform his or her best at the Games. For example, suggestions included setting up a system for getting family and friends tickets, having a plan to deal with family and friend communication during the Games and informing parents that there will be times that their athlete will have opportunities to see them at the Games, but other times that the athlete will need to limit contact with them for performance enhancement reasons.

## A summary of findings

According to Dr. Gould, the most important findings coming out of the research provided lessons for coaches to consider relative to how they want their athletes to be feeling and focused in the time leading up to and during the Games. These include:

- Developing and maintaining a good attitude
- Being prepared to deal with distractions and unexpected events
- Expecting the unexpected
- Sticking with their routine
- Considering whether to attend Opening Ceremonies
- Dealing with the Olympic village
- Having a plan for dealing with family and friends
- Being ready to handle the media

Dr. Gould also indicates that many of these lessons can be applied to athletes competing at other levels, such as high school teams competing in regional or state championships, or for individuals performing in other highly evaluative and important situations. Examples of non-sport performance include a dancer performing a major recital, an executive giving a critical presentation, and a surgeon performing a very difficult medical procedure.

*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](http://www.appliedsportpsych.org).*

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