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The Psychology of Being an Olympic Favorite

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ABSTRACT

Athletes take on various roles at the Olympic Games. The role of being the favorite is particularly challenging for aspiring U.S. Olympians. Preparing effectively for the emotional roller coaster of the Olympics is very important for athletes who compete in the role of the favorite. Cognitive-behavioral interventions and mindfulness are excellent tools for the sport psychology consultant to equip the athletes to optimize their Olympic experience. Within this report, I will consider based on experiences working with American Olympic athletes, what the psychological challenges are of being an Olympic favorite.

Introduction

Service provision to Olympic athletes prior to and at the Olympic Games has a relatively long history in the field of applied sport psychology, perhaps starting with Richard Suinn's accreditation as a press photographer so he could continue to provide services to athletes at the Games (e.g. Suinn, 1985). In 1989 the Sport Psychologist published a special issue dedicated solely to sport psychology service provision to Olympic athletes prior to and at the Olympic Games (Roberts, 1989). In recent years, a number of consultants have further discussed their work with Olympic athletes, addressing such issues as long-term relationships (Haberl, 2003), ethical issues (Haberl & Peterson 2006), emotions at the Games (Pensgaard & Duda, 2003; Fink-Sisniega & Haberl, 2005) service delivery at the Games with individual (Gould, 2001; McCann, 2000) and team sports (Haberl 2001, 2006a), and service effectiveness (Orlick & Partington, 1987; Partington & Orlick, 1987; Haberl, 2005, 2006b).

In order to add to this current body of knowledge of Olympic sport psychology this article will focus on a specific situation an athlete or team might find itself at the Olympic Games, namely that of being the Olympic Favorite. Athletes take on various roles during

the Olympic Games, such as being the favorite, the underdog, the tourist or the surprise. The role of the favorite is quite different psychologically, than the other roles at the Olympic Games. As a consultant who has the privilege to work with U.S. athletes, I often find myself in a situation where my athletes need to prepare for the role of the favorite. Despite the fact that China is considered by some to be the front runner in winning the medal count in Beijing (Glendinning, 2007), the role of the favorite will be unavoidable for many U.S. athletes. This is partly because the U.S. won the medal count in Athens, partly because of the outstanding results in 2007 of many U.S. teams internationally (for example USA Swimming won a record number of medals at the World Championships in Melbourne in April 2007).

Thus, in the article I will address the role of the favorite, its challenges, benefits and pitfalls in the prism of the Olympic Games and at the Olympic trials. I will also address how my training and service philosophy guides and determines my consulting approach in working with an athlete and/or team who find themselves in this role in the unique Olympic environment.

The Olympic Games and the Olympic Environment

The Olympic Games are frequently the culmination of an athlete's career. The chance to compete and excel at the Games comes around only every four years. Often much is riding on this one performance. It can be a chance of a lifetime in an athlete's career, a chance to excel at the highest level. It can be an opportunity to justify years of hard work for this one moment of glory in the international spot light, an opportunity to get lots of media attention. A chance to perhaps reap big financial rewards in sports, which, at least in the U.S., often get little to no recognition in the years preceding the Olympic Games. In short, the Games are a chance for fame, fortune and great personal achievement and satisfaction. However, while much is a stake, competing your best at the Games is by no means a given. While athletes do achieve personal best performances at the Games (Haberl, 2001) it can be nevertheless quite challenging (Gould, Eklund, & Jackson 1992a, 1992b). There are differences between athletes who meet expectations successfully and the one's who don't (Gould et al. 1998, 1999, 2002). Successful athletes and teams attribute their performances to mental preparation, team cohesion, distraction control, and sophisticated planning and optimal physical preparation (Gould et al. 1998, 1999, 2002). One important area to plan for as a US athletes is the role of being a favorite at the Games. American athletes are expected to win, whether they like it or not. The US is a perennial summer sport powerhouse and despite China having the home field advantage, many US athletes will be in the role of the favorite. The role expectations of being the favorite can put considerable pressure on the athletes to perform. Olympic Gold Medalist Nikki Stone, described the role of being the favorite as "nerve-racking" (Stone, 2003). This potentially performance impairing emotional experience can be persistent, or surprise the athlete immediately prior and during competition, as the following comment from snowboarding gold medalist and Olympic favorite Shaun White illustrates: "I think we all could sense the pressure. I'm just dropping in, and it hit me: I'm at the Olympics. I wasn't even looking at the halfpipe. I was looking at the crowd, going, 'Wow.' (Zeigler, 2006). White struggled in his first run, then came back to win the gold medal. It's

important for the Olympic favorite to prepare for this pressure. The psychological definition of pressure in the dictionary is “a constraining influence upon the mind or will” (American Heritage College Dictinary, 1993). This “constraining influence on the mind” has the potential to impact performance in a rather negative way. When athletes perform at their best, there is no “constraining influence on the mind” because the mind is so focused on the task at hand that there is no room for self-consciousness, no room left in the field of attention for self-criticism and judgment (Csikszentmihaly, 1990; Jackson, 1992). The felt experience of pressure as the Olympic favorite can make it challenging to achieve such an ideal performance state at the Games.

Service Philosophy

I am trained as a counseling psychologist and I work within a cognitive-behavioral framework. Within this framework, I am strongly influenced by the notion of psychological barriers and their impact on performance (Giges, 2000). Also, the 2500 year old Buddhist concept of mindfulness which has received a lot of scientific attention in psychology in the last 15 years strongly guides my work. Hence I am very concerned with how athletes think, feel and act in the here and now, in competition. I am very concerned with where their mind is at (and how aware they are of where their mind is at). The overall objective is to equip the athletes with the psychological tools to maximize their chances to perform as close as possible to their potential in the Olympic Games. All the psychological work with the athlete has a performance focus, since almost everything in the athletes live has the potential to impact their performance at the Games in a positive or negative manner. In my applied work I do not make a distinction between educational and counseling issues. Simply put, everything is a performance issue. The goal is to give the athletes as many tools as possible, so they can be as close as possible to an ideal performance state, despite being in this challenging environment. This doesn’t mean an athlete needs to be in the zone to perform well at the Olympics. As Ken Ravizza has pointed out frequently, more often than not, it will be a question of compensating and adjusting, while still striving for that elusive state (Ravizza & Hanson, 1995).

The Importance of Awareness

Working from this service philosophy, I view awareness as the key meta-skills for performance. Nothing effective happens without awareness. If, as an athlete, I am not aware of where my mind is at, I am much more likely to be locked into an automatic, absentminded reaction. If I am not aware that I lack confidence, I can’t do anything about it. I can’t chose an appropriate response, if I am not aware that I am overcome by nerves, I can’t work with the emotions effectively. I will be ruled by them, led down a path of automatic reactions, rather than a mindful response. If I am not aware of the pressure I experience as the potential favorite at the Olympic Games, I can’t do anything about it. Thus, awareness is a key component in preparing the athlete to effectively manage the role of being the favorite at the Games. Open-ended questions, such as “How do you see your role?” and “What do you think the psychological impact that role has on your performance?” are an excellent way to begin to canvas this territory. Such Socratic questioning provides a great starting point to see where the athletes are at and how well

they understand the potential ramification of their role perceptions. People in general often aren't very good predictors of how they will feel in the future (Gilbert, 2006). Assuming that athletes are no different in this regard, it is important to raise awareness to the potential emotional roller coaster ride that awaits them at the Olympics. Athletes often fail to take the possibility of experiencing unpleasant emotions at the Games into account. Examples of other athletes, in the form of stories, videos, quotes, etc. are an excellent tool here in beginning the process of normalizing the experience and preparing the athlete for the full spectrum of emotions and thoughts that might arise. Here is an example from Olympic Champion Maurice Greene that nicely illustrates the emotional roller coaster ride that an athlete can experience prior to his performance at the Games: "I was messed up, man. My nerves were all over the place. I tried to drink a glass of water, and my hand was shaking." (Layden, 2000, p. 46). Being willing to accept the roller coaster as opposed to falling into the trap of experiential avoidance will go a long way in preparing the athlete to cope effectively with such negative emotions at the Games. Experiential avoidance, such as not wanting to have negative emotions, not wanting to have negative thoughts (such as "what if I won't do well at the Games?") can easily lead to having exactly these experiences at the most inopportune time and affect performance in a detrimental way (see Gardner & Moore, 2006, and Eifert & Forseyth, 2005, for an in-depth discussion of experiential avoidance).

Another useful awareness exercise is asking the athlete to think about the advantages and disadvantages of being the favorite as opposed to being the underdog by using the cognitive-behavioral technique of doing a cost-benefit analysis (Burns, 2006). Advantages of being the favorite may be being more confident, feeling that you have a psychological edge, a sense of being able to break other teams/athletes psychologically, getting them to give up, or having the referee(s) and judge(s) in your corner. Disadvantages may be that you think you have a target on your back, you play with something to lose, you are crippled by the pressure you experience, the other team is free to play their best, they have nothing to lose, the other team will bring their A-Game and be extra motivated to knock you off your pedestal, you may also get lazy and complacent, not give 100 %, be unfocused, or the referees might not cut you any slack, and everybody expects you to come out on top. A major disadvantage for the favorite is often the perception of increased pressure due to heightened outcome expectations. This perceived disadvantage brings up the fundamental question when working from a cognitive-behavioral framework that I want to address with the athletes: What causes pressure of Olympic proportion? What causes pressure that impairs performance? What causes pressure that makes the athlete to go all "Olympicky" as Shaun White put it (Willoughby, 2006, p. D-01)? What is it that "constrains the mind"? Is it the situation, being in the role of the favorite? Or is it the thoughts, the beliefs, the perceptions about being in the role of the favorite? Certainly from a cognitive perspective the answer is clear: Almost always, it is not the fact that the team, or the athletes might be the favorite, but rather it is the beliefs, the thoughts, the inferences about that role, that lead to the experience of pressure, that lead to the "constraining influence upon the mind." In soccer player Tiffany Milbrett's experience of the women's world cup we can see the "constraining influence" of the pressure of the favorite at work in a very negative way, resulting in the athlete feeling exhausted:

"The tournament was probably more intense than anything we had to handle in our lives. Being the U.S. team and having all that pressure, we were all exhausted. I don't think as much physically as mentally. I was surprised by how tired I thought China was too. China didn't attack the way they can. We didn't attack the way we can. A lot has to do with the fact that we were wiped out. Touches on the ball weren't there. Technique was breaking down. You just have to fight through it. You just have to battle. I don't think the team consciously held back. But so much was at stake. And because you didn't have the energy you normally would have, you didn't take any risks." (Milbrett in Longman, 2000, p.229).

For women's soccer, the world cup, particularly on home turf, has similar ramifications as the Olympics, it is another competition that comes around only every four years. The cognitive model postulates that it is not the fact that the athlete or the team is in the role of the favorite, but rather the athlete or the team's interpretation of that role, the perception of that role, the thought about that role that directly lead to behaviors and emotions which can impact performance. The thoughts about being the favorite, the interpretation of that situation can lead to behavioral and emotional responses that can range from cocky, complacent and unfocused on one end of the spectrum to too nervous, timid, too narrowly focused, inhibited and perhaps exhausted on the other hand of the spectrum. And in that broad spectrum of behavioral and emotional experiences we can also find a confident, optimistic, composed, optimally focused, flexible and highly determined athlete that can excel in the role of the favorite. The goal is to find that middle ground and thinking makes it so. Relishing the role of the favorite, maximizing its advantages and minimizing the disadvantages is intricately linked to being aware of and to a certain extent in charge of one's own thinking, of one's own beliefs, interpretations and evaluations of the role of the favorite. Thus, thinking effectively plays a crucial role in handling the situation of the favorite well. This being the case then, what thoughts, what beliefs and inferences will lead to the experience of pressure, what thoughts lead to feeling "exhausted"? Two categories of thoughts are of relevance here while working from a cognitive perspective: Automatic thoughts and then more firmly entrenched beliefs (Burns, 2006). Both can be culprits in experiencing unhelpful pressure. Speed skater Chad Hedricks, a multiple medal favorite at the 2006 Winter Olympic Games in Torino provides a wonderful example of random automatic thoughts that the favorite can experience: ``We've been here too long. You come here 12 days (before the competition) and now you start to think about things you don't need to think about. It was a battle before the race. All (kinds of) thoughts going through my head. I was thinking about things I'd never thought about, like, `Is my skate sharp enough?' Just dumb stuff.'' (Hedrick, in Reid, February 12, 2006). Soccer player Brandi Chastain, in her account of her own experience of the world cup final provides an example of the beliefs that can land the favorite in trouble: "We walked through the shadowy tunnel at Giant's Stadium in New Jersey for the opening game and stepped out into the bright sunlight. A huge roar burst from the capacity crowd. The flashing of thousands of cameras exploded before our eyes, and the smell of fresh-cut grass was heavy in the air. It was all finally happening. As I stood there, arm in arm with Kristine Lilly, I was flooded by a rush of anxiety. Oh my God, I have to perform, I realized. I was paralyzed with thoughts I had never had before on a soccer field. What if I can't hold up my end? What if I don't live up to the

expectations of my teammates, or myself? I was overwhelmed by the enormity of the game, the culmination of all the planning, training, and waiting. There was even talk that if the U.S. Team didn't win the tournament, the event would be a failure and not live up to its promise to prove women's soccer was worthy of attention. I actually began to shake." (Chastain, 2004, p. 175)

Thoughts of not living up to expectations (one's own, one's coaches, one's country etc.) thoughts of being a failure in the absence of success on the playing field, thoughts of having to perform are examples of beliefs that most likely will get in the way of an adaptive performance focus. Such troubling beliefs for the favorite often fall in a number of categories, such as perfectionism, achievement addiction, low frustration tolerance and the superman/superwomen syndrome. Perfectionism – the belief that you can't make any mistakes is a particularly dangerous territory for the Olympic favorite. Perfectionism when looked at as a multidimensional construct (Flett & Hewitt, 2002), is a two sided sword for Olympic Athletes, one side cuts the athlete, impairing performance, one side drives the athlete aiding performance. The side that cuts the athlete is the one that says you can't make mistakes. This side of the sword is overly concerned with worrying about screwing up and thus becoming a failure. The side of perfectionism that drives the athletes is the one where the athletes set high standards, are organized and highly conscientious and not overly concerned about making mistakes. Olympic gold medalist often score high in adaptive perfectionism and low in the maladaptive sides (Gould, Dieffenbach & Moffet, 2002). That said, the Olympic environment of being the favorite, though, with the tempting promise of fame and fortune, can easily trigger a latent tendency to worry about making mistakes, which can quickly become a slippery performance slope. Achievement addiction, the belief that your worth as a person depends on how successful you are is another trap Olympic favorites' can find themselves ensnared in. When you whole sense of self is on the line, on the biggest stage of the world, it can become very difficult to perform your best. Low frustration tolerance, not being able to tolerate discomfort, uncertainty and changing conditions with a measure of equanimity, is another belief system that easily can get the Olympic favorite into trouble. The Olympic environment, almost invariably, will present the athletes with all kinds of discomforts. They can run the gamut from bad calls from referees, changing wind and light conditions, noisy, disrespectful spectators, crowded conditions in the village, stressed out support staff, and the media, always looking for the next scandal. Transportation to and from venues, to and from the village deserves particular mention here. The in-official motto for the Olympic experience may well be "hurry up and wait", whether it is for buses, in traffic, or making it through security lines. Having low frustration tolerance in such situations is an unnecessary waste of energy and often disrupts focus and undermines team cohesion. The Superman/superwomen syndrome, the belief that you always have to be on top of things, that you should show and experience no negative emotions can get the athlete in trouble as well, when they are in an environment that often acts as a catalyst for a roller coaster of emotions. Chad Hedrick, the speedskater quoted above is a wonderful example of an athlete who managed to avoid this trap well. Although a self-described supremely confident athlete, he found himself being overcome by emotions right before his first race in Torino. Working with his sport psychology consultant, and spending time in the supportive, unconditional embrace of his

family, perhaps allowed him to process and experience these emotions, let them run their course and successfully refocus on the process of competing (Reid, 2006).

A belief closely related to achievement addiction and the superman/women syndrome that often puts undue pressure on the favorite is the notion of "defending the title". From my perspective, this puts the athlete into a defensive frame of mind that is not conducive to performance. Obviously it is helpful first to check and see how the athlete experiences the belief. There will be the rare exception that can draw energy from such a belief. However, often it leads to "playing to lose, rather than playing to win". Assuming the athlete doesn't find the thought helpful, the cognitive approach offers an excellent way to work with such a belief. Looking at the belief logically, it is safe to say that the belief isn't logical. It implies that the athlete already has something, "owns" something, and that this something can be taken away. However, this is not logically consistent. Nobody has won a medal at the Beijing games just yet. You can't lose something you don't have, such as an Olympic Gold medal. But you can certainly gain it. And it is much more conducive to performance to focus on "gaining something vs. losing something". And for the folks who have won medals in the Athens Olympics (or previous Games), those medals are theirs for the rest of their lives. Once you are an Olympic Champion, you always will be an Olympic Champion. Unless you lose the medals through a positive doping test, as the sad case of Marion Jones recently demonstrated. So you can't defend a medal and thus have nothing to lose, but everything to gain. Psychologically, this shift in perspective, this shift in thinking can make a big difference in the experience of pressure.

In order to work effectively with such automatic thoughts and such entrenched and distracting beliefs, athletes need to be aware of them first and foremost. Again, this is why awareness is such a key skill and an integral part of the cognitive approach. Preferably, this awareness of thoughts and emotions happens in the moment of their arising in the mind. This is not an easy task, and requires the deliberate practice and cultivation of awareness. An excellent, so thoroughly underutilized, way to formerly practice awareness is mindfulness meditation (Kabat-Zinn, 1990, 1994, 2005). Mindfulness meditation, generally defined in the western psychological literature as "paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, and doing it non-judgmentally" (Kabat-Zinn, 1994) is an excellent training tool for awareness and concentration. Mindfulness meditation is both a set of techniques and a way of being (Kabat-Zinn, 2005). Mindfulness trains the ability to aim, sustain and regain attention in a formal way (Siegel, 2007). Knowing where your mind is at, and having the ability to put it where you want it to be, is a crucial skill from my perspective when it comes to performing well as the favorite at the Olympic Games. There are so many distractions at the Games that can disrupt focus that take the mind away. They run the gamut from external distractions such as the media (at least twice as many journalists as athletes will attend the Beijing Games), the excitement of the Olympic Village and opening ceremonies, agents and sponsors who want to capitalize on the economic and marketing opportunities, fabulous sponsor parties (e.g. a favorite is the Sports Illustrated Party with Swimsuit models), to extended families and friends wanting to spend time with the athletes. Then, of course, there are the internal distractions in the form of automatic thoughts and beliefs already mentioned. All of these can easily lead to the athlete being drowned in a sea of distractions that the pageantry and

the hype of the Games create, particularly for the favorite. Even an athlete not easily prey to internal distractions will still have to cope with this potentially very distracting environment and plan for it. The mind of the athlete can easily be hijacked at the Games.

Clearly, having detailed distraction plans, expecting the unexpected, sticking to routines and controlling the controllables are key elements of an athlete's preparation for the Olympic Games (Gould et al. 1998, 1999, 2002). All of these steps to manage distractions require awareness. Once I have awareness of my thoughts as an athlete, once I become aware of the distraction, I can work with my thoughts, I can work on bringing attention back to where I want it to be. Mindfulness and the cognitive-behavioral toolbox offer two different, and in my mind complimentary, technologies to work with the distracted, and pressured mind of the favorite at the Olympics. With mindfulness the athlete works on changing the relationship to thoughts (Kabat-Zinn, 2005). With the cognitive-behavioral approach the athlete works on changing thinking itself (Burns, 2006). Both approaches allow the athlete to detect and remove internal barriers to optimal performance. Both approaches are very effective in providing the athlete with the toolbox to effectively self-regulate the roller coaster of competitive emotions the favorite can experience at the Olympic Games. Both require practice and effort way ahead of the Games themselves, way ahead of Olympic Trials.

Olympic Trials and the Favorite

A special competitive scenario for American athletes who are the favorites is Olympic Trials. In some sports, such as swimming and track & field, winning trials can be more difficult than winning an Olympic Gold Medal, simple because of the depth of the competition at the national scene and the fact that countries are limited in the number of athletes that they can bring to the Games. So, for example, in swimming, the US can only bring two athletes per discipline, yet for many swimming disciplines there are four or more athletes that could contend for medals internationally. Such a scenario very often puts the favorite in a challenging position, and the experience of pressure at trials can be greater than at the Games themselves. Besides competing with the thought of "having something to lose" discussed above, what often comes up here in the mind of the athlete is what Karen Horney (1950) termed the "Tyranny of the Shoulds": "I am the number one in the world, I am the world record holder, I am the favorite to win Gold at the Games, I should win Olympic trials". The "tyranny of the Shoulds" is often very detrimental to performance. It represents a self-imposed rule, a self-imposed demand of how the world should be that clashes frequently with the actual reality of the situation. It leads the athletes to an almost constant evaluation to see if the rule is being met by reality. If this reality checking fails to satisfy the demand of how the world should be (it almost always does), it tends to disrupt the athletes concentration and greatly challenges the ability of staying in the moment. The "should" paints the perception of a natural law. But there are no natural laws in the psychological realm of competition, no law that says that the favorite "should" win. It's an easy trap to fall into for the favorite. This makes it all the more important for the athlete to understand how the mind works. Again, awareness is the key skill. Once the athlete becomes aware of the mind being distracted by the "shoulds", the athlete can begin the process of distancing from the thought. If that

is not sufficient the athlete can take steps to see through the illusion drawing on a variety of cognitive techniques. Simply asking the question “Does it help me to think this way” can go a long way in allowing the athlete to let go of the pressure inducing should. Recognizing the inherent cognitive distortion in the “should” statement is another effective technique. Actively disputing the “should”, changing it to a ‘want to’ is another one (Burns, 2006). So changing the demand, the self-imposed rule into a preference can make a big difference: I am the favorite, I am in great position to do well and win trials, I really want to win it. In order to do that I will focus on the process and adjust to anything that comes up”. Clearly making the distinction between outcome, performance and process goals and becoming very good at focusing completely on the process during the competition itself is a further step along this line of argument and an effective skill. Furthermore, using both coping and mastery imagery can help the athlete in preparing for such a scenario as well. Using coping imagery, the athlete can rehearse becoming aware of the “tyranny of the shoulds”, then work on letting go, and changing the demand to a “want to” and conclude by seeing himself/herself compete effectively at trials. It takes a disciplined mind to do that, one trained in thinking effectively. A mind that knows where it is at, that is aware, that has the ability to constantly, and consistently recognize distractions. A mind that can bring focus back to the task at hand, to the present moment.

Summary

When returning Olympian’s are asked what they would do differently in their preparation if they would have a second chance to compete at the Games, they mention doing more sport psychology, more mental preparation, planning better, particularly for the distractions, resting more, spending more time on stress management, working more on being a cohesive team and not overtrain (Gould et al. 1998, 1999, 2002). Many Olympians don’t get a second chance to prepare optimally for the Games and certainly they don’t often get a second chance to be the favorite. Since there might only be one chance for the athlete to compete at the Games, detailed planning and optimal preparation, physiologically and psychologically, matter greatly for aspiring Olympians, specifically if they find themselves in the role of the favorite. Both, mindfulness and cognitive-behavioral interventions offer a rich toolbox that the athletes and the sport psychology consultants can utilize in their preparation for the Games. The meditative traditions offer a very helpful metaphor when it comes to managing the emotional rollercoaster of the Olympic Games: While you can’t control how high the waves are, you can learn to surf them (Kabat-Zinn 1994). This metaphor is very apt for the Olympic experience of the favorite. The favored Olympians may not control how high the emotional waves will be at the Games, but with the right preparation they can put themselves in excellent position to surf those waves with great skill and thus give themselves the best chance to perform to their potential, in this amazing competitive event.

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