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Psychological preparation of athletes for the Olympic context: The New Zealand Summer and Winter Olympic Teams

Ken Hodge

*Mental Skills Trainer for NZ Winter Olympic Team,
University of Otago, New Zealand*

&

Gary Hermansson

*Team Psychologist for NZ Summer Olympic Team,
NZ Olympic Committee, New Zealand*

Introduction

The Olympic Games are an unusual sporting experience for most athletes and an alien competition context for some (Greenleaf, Gould & Diefenbach, 2001; Hodge, 1993). The Olympics are 'unusual' because (i) they only occur every four years and (ii) they are a 'multisport' event. Most elite athletes quickly become familiar with the annual schedule of international events in their particular sport (e.g., rowing world cup regattas, skiing FIS World Cup race circuit) and adjust to the mental demands of such regular elite competition within their sporting discipline. The Olympics, on the other hand, only occur every four years and the Games are a 'multisport' event as opposed to a single sport event.

The four-year cycle offers few opportunities for most athletes to gain experience and 'acclimatise' to the unique mental challenges of the Olympic environment (Gould, 2001; McCann, 2000). Perhaps the key mental challenge is the 'multisport' (almost festival/circus) aspect of the Olympics which can be a distraction as well as serving to dilute the normal exclusive focus on the athlete's own sport. This multisport Olympic environment also generates a greater public profile, media coverage, sponsor

expectations, and public expectation. For many so-called minor sports (at least in New Zealand) the Olympics brings a substantially higher public profile and media coverage than these athletes typically experience. Because of these kinds of factors, the global profile of the Olympics is somewhat unique and the pressures associated with performing under such an intense 'gaze' can become a burden for many.

We do not propose to detail the specific mental skills training we provide for Olympic athletes in New Zealand (NZ); as we know from discussions with colleagues from other nations that there is little real variation in the 'basic' mental skills training offered around the world for Olympic athletes (Hodge, McKenzie & Hermansson, 2001). However, we would stress one specific piece of advice regarding mental skills consulting in the Olympic environment: a Mental Skills Trainer at the Games needs to master the art of being *'available and accessible, whilst not getting in the way'*. It is important to avoid unnecessary disruptions to athletes' normal daily training and competing routines and to minimise any potential stigma for athletes of appearing to be seeking help from the 'shrink'. Thus we recommend being readily available for informal chats with athletes in neutral venues such as the dining hall, Games transport/bus, team/TV room, training venues, etc. Often these informal chats ('teachable moments') are just as effective as a formal mental skills training session (see Giges & Petitpas, 2000; Gould, 2001; McCann, 2000 for detailed examples), and frequently they lead as needed to structured sessions in more controlled settings.

In saying this, it should also be noted that our experience suggests a progressive shift with elite athletes over recent years in their degree of mental skills sophistication and their orientation towards work in this domain. Most athletes at this level now have at least a basic understanding and integration of the standard repertoire of mental skills, having typically been exposed to them in their developing years, and there appears to have been a shift away from seeing work in this domain as mainly 'problem-focussed' towards it being 'opportunity-focussed'. When the second author went to his first major Games (Commonwealth Games in Kuala Lumpur in 1998), Team athletes often seemed awkward about the risk of being seen in his company because of its potential meaning and many were somewhat naïve about mental skills and their application; by contrast, at the Olympics in Athens he was regularly and often loudly 'propositioned' in public to set up an appointment time and the athletes overall had become much more familiar with the fundamental skills involved.

Excellent descriptions of Olympic mental skills training programs can be found in book chapters by Gould (2001) and McCann (2000). Rather than focusing on our version of an Olympic mental skills training program we will outline the common mental challenges that we have identified with NZ athletes and then outline one particular strategy (a 'One-Team/One-Spirit' vision/philosophy) that New Zealand Olympic Teams have employed over recent Games to help build a strong performance platform and within which we operate to serve these typical mental skills challenges.

Common Mental Skills Challenges at the Olympic Games

In our experience, beyond the mental skills needs that most elite athlete typically work on (e.g., confidence, motivation, concentration, controlling arousal/activation, coping with adversity), there are a number of mental challenges more common (or even unique) in the Olympic environment.

1. *Pre-Event Mental Preparation*. Many athletes need to take ‘ownership’ of their performance by working hard to fine-tune their ‘mental prep’ to suit the requirements and special demands of the Games environment. Much of this work revolves around helping athletes develop or modify existing ‘pre-race routines/plans’ that are created by them to provide a feeling of control over the situation, deal with stress, and give them confidence that they would perform up to their personal best (Hodge, 2004a). The most common difficulty in this regard at the Olympics is managing the shift that almost inevitably goes towards focussing intently on outcome/results thinking (Gould, 2001). Because the event is a culmination of years of training and because there is intense interest in results by everybody, athletes often struggle to stay focussed on performance objectives, even more so than usual. Whilst they often have some understanding of the shift that occurs within them, they typically find it hard to discipline their thinking back towards essential and more controllable performance issues.

2. *‘Games wobbles’*. Despite the added focus on fine-tuning mental preparation mentioned above, some athletes decide to radically change their routines and Pre-Event Mental Preparation because they are at the ‘Games’. Somehow the usual becomes doubted and there can be a loss of trust in the familiar (Gould, 2001). These athletes need to trust themselves and their routines, back their confidence, and stick to their normal training and competition procedures (Clarke, 2004; Gould, Eklund, & Jackson, 1993; Greenleaf et al., 2001).

3. *Stress management*. A common psychological issue at the Olympics is stress/anxiety management (Dugdale, Eklund, & Grove, 2002; Gould et al., 1993; Hodge, 1993). This work primarily focuses on the use of mental skills such as relaxation, centering, imagery, and positive self-talk. Performing at the Games can be a stressful experience for a number of reasons: (i) the time, effort, and money required for performances at this level can become a source of stress when the athlete begins to wonder if it is ‘all going to pay off’, (ii) worry about ‘life-after-sport’, win or lose at these Games what will I do next?, (iii) the incredible media coverage at the Games compared to the level of coverage that their sport may usually receive (Greenleaf et al., 2001), (iv) the ‘atmosphere’ of the Games -- representing their country, competing against the world’s best with the spotlight on your performance, (v) living in the village and dealing with the ‘artificial’ surroundings, (vi) organisation, transport and security hassles, (vii) dealing with injury, health, or fitness problems, (viii) dealing with the disappointment of a ‘poor’ performance in the first race/heat/event, (ix) coping with the disappointment of a ‘poor’ overall performance, and (x) interpersonal conflict with teammates, coaches or managers. Any combination of the above sources of stress can interfere with the athlete’s mental preparation, cause stress/anxiety, and undermine her/his confidence.

Particular issues of stress relate to living circumstances. Village accommodation invariably involves several athletes in the same room in relatively cramped conditions. This can make for difficulties sleeping, noise control, especially as the Games progress and some athletes finish their competitions, and tension that arise from lack of any real privacy.

Public expectations, increased media attention, and funding pressures place some Olympic athletes under enormous stress. For some athletes funding is strictly tied to their Games performance -- if athletes succeed at the Games they will secure funding for the next 1-2 years or until their next World Champs; if not their funding is withdrawn. This type of pressure is a 'double-edged sword'; it can provide motivation for training and competition, but it can also generate enormous pressure, stress and anxiety that, in turn, hinders performance.

4. *Interpersonal conflict.* At every Olympics there are inevitably a number of issues related to conflict arising between athletes and their teammates, coaches or managers (Gould, 2001). In any issue of conflict there are always two sides to the conflict and typically mistakes made by both parties. Often these conflicts develop from or are exacerbated by a lack of communication, lack of tolerance, and lack of empathy (Clarke, 2004). Coaches and managers need to be appointed early in the Olympic cycle by each sport so that the individual's concerned have time before the Games to 'get to know' their athletes (and the athletes get to know the coaches/managers), establish lines of communication, and develop working relationships.

More time should also be devoted to communication skills training for managers and coaches -- some managers and coaches are lacking in some aspects of effective communication with elite, international athletes and this can lead to mis-communication, mis-interpretation and inevitably conflict between managers/coaches and athletes. An important feature of New Zealand Games Team appointments of management and support staff over recent years has been a focus on 'adding value'. Whereas in the past such personnel might have been appointed for reasons associated with being a good servant to their sport, the emphasis now has shifted onto performance issues for management and support staff as well. There have been occasions where the NZ Olympic organisation has turned down a management staff appointment proposed by the sport because it was considered that the individual concerned was judged not to be up to the performance demands. Everyone has to be able to make a positive impact.

5. *'Psych' aspects of injury rehabilitation.* The issue of injury has clear psychological aspects (Williams & Scherzer, 2006); especially in the Olympic context when the four-year cycle offers a small window for participation opportunities. The injured athlete will typically have to cope with the emotions and stress that accompany the worry that an injury may hinder a top performance or worse still prevent them from competing at the biggest event of their sporting career -- one that they have trained and made sacrifices for over a number of years (Greenleaf et al., 2001).

A feature of mental skills and sport psychology work in such conditions, however, is the opportunity to work directly within multi-disciplinary teams involving medical staff, physiotherapists, massage therapists and chiropractors (Reid, Stewart, & Thorne, 2004). When such teams work well, the opportunity is there for athletes to benefit from an holistic and unified orientation, and for us the experience of working within a team of providers has been a valuable addition to the effectiveness of our own work.

6. *Second week 'blues'*. Many members of a Games 'team' (athletes; as well as coaches, managers, health team, etc.) will suffer to some extent from a phenomenon we have euphemistically labelled as *2nd Week Blues*. In our experience it is normal at most Olympics for athletes (and others) to get a little stressed and irritable after the first week living in the claustrophobic Games environment. A range of issues related to living inside the 'Games Bubble' can start to irritate athletes; for example, the cramped Village, bland bedrooms, lack of privacy, lack of spare/private time, monotonous food, and the tedious and intrusive security checkpoints. Such relatively minor issues tend to become amplified as the lead-up to competition occurs. There is usually a period of heightened tension as the competition gets closer and athletes taper and/or intensify towards 'the big moment'. Such issues can be especially frustrating for athletes who do not compete until the second week of the Games.

These somewhat unique challenges and others of a more regular kind tend to make up the domain of Games work for Mental Skills Trainers/Sport Psychologists, with this certainly being the case for us with various New Zealand Games Teams. Much of it is performance-focussed, but a lot of it can be regarded as performance-related. Establishing credibility and having ongoing exposure to athletes within the Games Team selection pool in the lead-up to the Games themselves is considered vital. The relative size of New Zealand (only 4 million people) and its sporting communities makes this possible and an advantage. Given that both of us have been to a number of pinnacle events (Commonwealth and Olympic Games) and work extensively within the local sporting environment has meant that issues of approachability, acceptance and credibility have been eased and attention at the Games can be more readily directed towards solutions than having to lay groundwork.

Our presence within Teams over the years has also meant that we have been able to both assess and contribute to the collective Team cultures as they have been developed and played out. For us, this is a significant proactive engagement as it helps set the conditions both for support and for constructive challenge of all within the Team and potentially makes our work more impactful and widespread.

This matter of team culture has been one that has received particular attention for New Zealand Olympic (and Commonwealth Games) Teams over recent years and will continue to be a feature of the lead-up to Beijing and beyond. There had been concern around the time of the Sydney Olympics that a considerable degree of fragmentation within the Team was becoming evident and that this was having a profound effect on levels of motivation, satisfaction and performance. In earlier times, the total New Zealand Olympic Team, usually relatively small in number, was announced at the same time, then

the Team gathered together at a single location within the country for outfitting and a farewell function before travelling as a single unit to the Games city. However, more recently, selections of separate sporting teams are announced progressively in the months leading up to the Games, athletes are scattered around the world training and competing, they are outfitted from afar, and they arrive at the Games venue from different directions at differing times (sometimes just immediately before their event). The prospect of athletes experiencing the Games as 'just another event' in the calendar of their own sporting code was seen as increasingly likely, thus undermining the uniqueness of the Olympics and losing the impact of being a part of a powerful single team entity -- with its own social support, enjoyment, motivational and performance potential.

Whilst recognising the realities involved in changing circumstances, it was considered by those responsible for building, shaping and managing the culture (ourselves included) that important elements were being lost and some opportunities not even tapped into that could help to provide a powerful foundation of identity, meaning, belonging and cohesion. It was thought that these elements and opportunities would in and of themselves provide a solid, motivation and inspirational platform for all concerned that would both greatly enhance levels of satisfaction and, most importantly in terms of purpose, performance. The Chef de Mission coming on board around that time who has taken the Games Teams forward and will continue through Beijing, caught hold of the notion and has been instrumental in building an organisational team with a shared vision for developing and taking that philosophy forward. This philosophy has been captured in the concept of 'One Team - One Spirit', which has become the guiding orientation both for preparation and application.

For our purposes, this philosophy has been helpful in creating a valuable support network as well as an environment where the challenge to perform remains strong. It also provides a more settled atmosphere within which our work can take place. The greatly enhanced social-psychological conditions have been important in themselves, but they have also helped to better underpin our work in relation to the kinds of psychological challenges previously identified.

Pursuing a 'One Team - One Spirit' Orientation in a Multisport Games Context

Whilst the national team is the unifying structure within which a country's separate sporting teams gather and perform, the group dynamics seen as crucial for athletes performing to the best of their abilities have typically been left totally in the hands of the separate sporting teams themselves. Such features as team unity and cohesion, motivation, goal setting and managing the pressures of competition (see, for example, Hodge, 2004a; Murphy, 1996; Orlick, 2000) have typically be seen as the responsibility of the coach(es), section manager(s) and athletes in the various sports. Any sense of overall national team unity and cohesion is usually an informal bi-product of the various sports coming together wearing a common uniform and performing under a nation's flag, along with the experiences of living closely together in the Olympic Village as a distinct entity for the period of the Games.

The concept of cohesion is recognised as an important dynamic for any sporting team (cf., Carron & Spinks, 1993; Carron, Bray & Eys, 2002; Carron, Coleman, Wheeler & Stevens, 2002; Hodge, 2004b; Syer, 1986). For example, Carron and Spinks (1993) stated that:

cohesion has been associated with a number of positive individual and group consequences. For example, with higher levels of cohesiveness, group performance is superior, task and social interactions and communication are enhanced, the group is more stable, and role acceptance and conformity to group norms increase. In addition, individual members experience less anxiety and greater self-esteem; show greater trust, feelings of security, and willingness to change; and more readily share responsibilities for group outcomes. (p. 8)

Even though circumstances increasingly seem to conspire to make the main focus of involvement on the separate sporting teams (e.g., swimming, hockey, skiing, curling), the organisational requirements of participating at the Olympics, the common uniform and flag, the living arrangements and the efforts made to distinguish the residential quarters by their national character means that being part of a national 'team' is very much a part of the experience of all who are involved. The extent to which this is evident can be seen by the efforts that teams often go to seeking to demonstrate their national identity. In Athens, for example, the Cuban Team had a massive banner of Fidel Castro hanging from several of their balconies, the Australians had surfing flags, green kayaks and blow-up kangaroos around their area, the English had red telephone boxes by their apartments and union jack painted golf carts, the Swiss had a giant fibreglass cow, the Netherlands ubiquitous orange bicycles, and other nations had their national flags as markers and symbols.

Given that this overall team membership will inevitably be part of the consciousness of all athletes and support staff, the degree to which it is a positive, unifying and inspirational experience is crucial for overall Team success. It could be argued that the same aspirations for cohesion, with all that this potentially brings (cf. Carron & Spinks, 1993; Hodge, 2004b; Syer, 1986), is as much a need in the overall team as it will be for each of its separate units (i.e., different sporting teams and support groups).

Under these circumstances, the development of overall national team cohesion could be seen as a valuable objective for any country participating in the Olympic Games, with the purpose of enhancing team members' satisfaction and performance. It was with this intention that the management personnel of the New Zealand Olympic Games Team (NZOC) made preparations for (Manchester 2002 – Commonwealth Games) Athens 2004, Torino 2006 (Melbourne 2006 – Commonwealth Games) and will be maintaining the emphasis for Beijing 2008 and Vancouver 2010.

The New Zealand Team Experience: 'One Team - One Spirit' Vision

This vision developed progressively from the Sydney Olympics in 2000 and to date has been most fully articulated and implemented for the Olympic Games in Athens in 2004. One of the cornerstones was in relation to national identity – drawing strength and meaning from knowing who we are as people of a particular nation and having a firm sense of belonging and communal strength. New Zealand is essentially a bicultural nation built on a Treaty between the indigenous Maori and European settlers (see King, 2003) and, even though the relationship between the peoples has not always been straightforward, by international comparisons there is a solid sense of partnership and unity. This relationship means that any Team culture based on strengths of NZ national identity needs to genuinely reflect bicultural dimensions, and in a way that is not tokenism. To do this sincerely meant bringing into the planning team cultural advisors from within Maoridom and giving them shared leadership in working on the Games planning and Team development. Following extensive consultations within Maoridom and within the NZOC organisation, this step was taken and a commitment was made to work in partnership towards Athens and beyond.

A number of tangible actions in terms of Team development (the 'One Team' component) were taken, in general and in regard to biculturalism, which will be outlined, but all the way along the emphasis has been on the underpinning values and ethos (the 'One Spirit' component) that such actions seek to reflect. The Athens Games Handbook (NZOC, 2004) for Team members set out the vision [both in English, as shown here, and in Maori translation] – this vision was also used with the Torino Winter Olympic Team:

One Team – One Spirit

Being part of the New Zealand Olympic Games Team is a commitment by everyone to create an environment that inspires, empowers, supports and recognises achievements, an environment that is enjoyable, where everyone wears the silver fern [national emblem] with pride. An environment where athletes can excel.

As well, the Maori tribal groups within New Zealand/Aotearoa [Maori name] collaborated to weave a feather cloak (a Kakahu), “To highlight the uniqueness of New Zealand, Maori culture has been woven into the core of our Olympic Games Team” (NZOC, 2004, p. 16). The cloak is only ever to be worn by the Team Flagbearer at each Olympics “[The] team kakahu is an exquisite work of art and will be seen as a mantle of leadership and spiritual protection. The cloak itself becomes empowered by the status and mana [standing] of the wearer and as a result the cloak’s mana will increase with each successive flag bearer” (p. 16). Efforts were made also to have each living NZ Team Flagbearer from prior Olympics wear the kakahu prior to it being placed on the shoulders of the chosen Flagbearer in Athens (Beatrice Faumuina – a Polynesian-descent Discus Thrower) and the chosen Flagbearer in Torino (Sean Becker – a European-descent curler).

Greenstone (Pounamu), a jade-like stone found in certain parts of the country's South Island, is a recognised treasure (a toanga) for Maori and for New Zealanders as a whole. It is regarded as precious – “It is... a stone with mana” and those who see it and wear it receive honor. Again, the Maori tribes provided a large piece of Pounamu for the Games Team as a ‘touchstone’ for connection, strength and individual/collective mana, and each team member was given an individually carved Pounamu pendant, which was personally handed to them at a ceremony upon their arrival into the Village in Athens and Torino.

The Team location in the Village, as with other nations, displayed the national flag, but also there were large hangings from apartment balconies with stylised ferns, and in Athens a traditionally carved wooden gateway (Waharoa) framed the entrance down to the Athletes' Lounge (known as ‘Middle Earth’ in recognition of the country's association with the filming of the *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy). Several other artefacts – cultural and kitch – were located around the Team location to create a sense of connection with home and a bond with each other.

New Zealand sporting teams have often been known internationally for performing the Haka – a Maori dance/chant that the nation's ‘All Blacks’ Rugby Team performs before international games, and most New Zealand young people travelling together in foreign countries finish up doing it (not always very well) as a kind of party item to signify that they are New Zealanders. Done well it is a dramatic collective statement of challenge, respect and honor. The Haka is also often performed as part of a greeting for people coming home and as such is a strong and moving experience of bonding and belonging.

Following on from the learning and practice of the Haka that teams had experienced separately in the lead-up period to the Games, it formed a distinctive statement of welcome and union for the Team in both Athens and Torino. As each unit arrived at the Village – no matter when they arrived (the Curling Team arrived in Torino at 1:30am) or how many there were – they were greeted by those already in residence by a Haka followed in traditional fashion by every person arriving being greeted individually by each Team member already there (by handshake, kiss on the cheek, or hongi – a nose-nose press favoured by Maori as a symbol of unity). A snowball dynamic occurred, with those who arrived then becoming part of the greeting party when new arrivals came. This ritual was a very symbolic statement of identity, support and unity – both for those arriving and reinforced each time for those doing the greeting. Towards the end this ritual (haka and individual greetings) involved around 150+ people in Athens, and it also attracted large crowds of people from other teams who got used to seeing NZ Team members gathering to greet and typically came running to watch and take photographs.

This sense of recognition of and pride in national identity was taken further in regard to Greek culture in Athens, partly as a mark of respect for that country, which New Zealand has strong historical links with due to World War II battles where New Zealand's young men helped fight for the liberation of Crete and the Greek mainland, and partly as a way of adding meaning to Team members' experiences, for performance motivation and strength and for heightening the meaning of the occasion of just being at

the Olympics in Greece. A large contingent of the Team joined with local Greek dignitaries at the Phaleron War Graves cemetery in Athens for a ceremony to mark the relationship between the two countries and to honour New Zealand's war dead, in particular an ex-NZ Olympian (George Cook – Los Angeles Games, 1932) who was buried there. At the ceremony an especially crafted Ceremonial Vessel (urn), made by a person of Maori/Greek descent whose father fought during the War, was buried within the proximity of where Cook was named.

As previously indicated, these particular actions were experienced as meaningful in themselves, they were bicultural in nature, in that as well as those things distinctly Maori the usual typically European organisational, communication and procedural activities took place, and for the authors as (social/individual) psychologists, they represented dynamics that created community strength and cohesion and as such helped to deal with some of the tensions that go with being at a pinnacle high profile event. In addition, these team-building activities helped to ease the way for us to be accessible to athletes and to work more effectively within and drawing on the Team culture.

Underpinning these more obvious and notable activities towards 'One Team - One Spirit', there were a number of other actions deliberately taken to cement the vision being worked towards in Athens, Torino, and beyond. The following formed part of these:

Section manager meetings. major gatherings of section managers were conducted in the lead-up period to each Games. Whilst the focus of these meetings was on information sharing and organisational preparations, considerable emphasis was given to processes designed to enhance a One Team - One Spirit experience. The sessions were typically facilitated by the Team Psychologist/Mental Skills Trainer and included structured activities designed to encourage participants to mix and get to know each other more fully by sharing details of their personal and sporting interests and involvements.

As well, at the first gathering, deliberate attention was given to the vision and ethos, and a discussion of the benefits and possible resistances were pursued. Initially there was some concern expressed about the overarching aim possibly detracting from individual team objectives and interests, but there has been an increasing acceptance of the value of the concept with each successive Games and a commitment to making the most of the unified orientation.

Team briefings. Throughout the 6-9 month period leading up to a Games athletes in their various sports teams are briefed on the planning and procedures. At these gatherings there is a similar emphasis on processes designed to promote a one-team culture. This includes participants getting to know each other beyond their narrow roles as athletes, with an emphasis on mixing ages and experience. Also, deliberate discussion is initiated about the vision and ethos and likely operations. In regard to the latter, special attention is given to the need for and value in people taking the initiative at the Games in meeting and getting to know other team members in situations where they might not actually know each other, and for experienced and well known athletes in particular to take the lead in this regard.

Web-based on-line community. In keeping with the principles underpinning a One Team - One Spirit philosophy, as well as recognising the realities of modern sporting involvement where athletes are often scattered around the world and where global technology is evolving, an initiative has been undertaken to create and operate a web-based on-line virtual community for NZ Games Teams. This was seen as an innovative idea with far-reaching potential. Since the first incarnation of this strategy in 2000, this aspect has grown steadily in status and use by athletes, coaches and team personnel. It is now the main format used for communicating detailed organisational material, as well as for providing resources to athletes and management staff – including material on mental skills issues and strategies. The web component, known as ‘Zeus’, has been franchised on to several other nations to assist in their organisational and preparation activities.

The website, which can be accessed from anywhere in the world (internet cafes as well as personal and office computers), has within it a number of tools that not only provide for information sharing, but also promote community/team development through active dialogue and ready contact for those registered as users of the site (password encrypted).

Other initiatives. A number of other minor initiatives were also pursued for promoting the cohesive orientation. In the regular NZOC newsletter, which runs through the lead-up period and during the Games, periodic attention is given to the vision and related practices. This was also an aspect of orientation sessions conducted as athletes arrived in the Village. A reminder is also given at these times for individuals to take the initiative in meeting and getting to know athletes in other sports in the team and an area of the main dining room is demarcated as a place to eat with and meet others as part of the ‘One Team - One Spirit’ concept. In the lead-up to competition, several social events are organised with an emphasis on getting to know athletes and support staff from other sports. The team motto, which appears on various signs around the New Zealand quarters in the Village is ‘*One-Team; Our-Team*’.

Outcomes

The main obvious effect for NZ Olympic teams from the focus outlined has been in terms of a clear and solid sense of team unity and togetherness. In terms of Carron and Spinks’ (1993) cohesiveness indicators, there has been a substantial increase in positive social interaction and communication, obvious team stability and acceptance of role responsibilities and a commitment to shared group norms. A heightened sense of trust and security with each other has developed in our Games’ Teams and athletes display a commitment to and enjoyment from being part of a unified team. In both 2004 and 2006 those athletes and support personnel who had been to other Olympics commented very favourably on these features in contrast to their experience at previous Games. The Athens Games were very successful for the New Zealand Team, both in terms of medal count and quality performances, but also in terms of satisfaction and enjoyment. Several athletes at both the Athens and Torino Games have publicly acknowledged the power of the One Team - One Spirit philosophy and experience in terms of their performance, but

also in terms of having a greater understanding of what being a New Zealander actually means.

The essentials outlined above were carried through to the 2006 Winter Olympics in Torino, where the first author was in the Team as a Mental Skills Trainer. Given the size of the Team things were on a smaller scale, but the vision was the same and the One Team - One Spirit actions and ethos were a central objective. The vision is dynamic and evolving and at present planning is proceeding for Beijing and beyond (Vancouver 2010) with the same fundamental principles driving things forward, along with recognising the context of Chinese culture and what this means (New Zealand has historical links with mainland China through Chinese immigration during a Gold rush era that occurred in the mid-1800s and through more recent immigration and business connections).

The challenge for now is to remain committed to this unifying orientation for future Games Teams. The groundwork has been laid and the challenge before us is to grow and develop this orientation, and seek the desired benefits both in terms of results (task) and social (people) processes. For us as the Mental Skills Trainer/Sport Psychologist, the philosophy is very compatible with support and with the challenges of performance, and our involvement with the vision in proactive ways has paid a substantial dividend within the Games context itself. The skill needs outlined earlier remain as challenges, but the One Team - One Spirit environment within which these challenges are met is one that assists the work that we do.

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