Getting It On with the Media

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Overall, Capper aspires to ensure that all coaches and athletes not only feel comfortable in front of a camera, microphone, or pad of paper, but also feel in control so they effectively communicate their message. Capper believes that following these guidelines can help athletes and coaches be effective interviewees.

Sport Psychology Consulting at the Olympic Games: Lessons Learned

Participating in the Olympics is the ultimate competition for many athletes. I never made it to the Olympics as an athlete, but as a sport psychologist. I was fortunate to have the opportunity to work with the U.S. Freestyle Mogul team at the 2002 Salt Lake City Olympics.

Athletes’ and coaches’ emotions and reactions to the Olympics cover both ends of the spectrum. On one end, there are exciting achievements, the rush of receiving a medal on the award stand, and even better, hearing your national anthem. On the other end, there are intense disappointments when goals are not met after years of training and preparation. There are many lessons to be learned at the Olympic games concerning how to mentally prepare for big competitions and cope with the variety of emotions athletes and coaches often experience. Here are some of these “Olympic” lessons that might help you in your coaching and sport performances.

1. Make mental skills a consistent part of athletic training programs (and start early!). I began consulting with the Mogul team in November 1999, over two years prior to the Olympics itself. This was completely intentional. During my first meeting with the team, I outlined how the athletes and coaches could begin mentally preparing for the Olympics. With the coaches, we developed a two-year plan for the athletes to learn and practice their mental skills (relaxation training, mental imagery, Olympic competition simulation, pre-performance plans) so they would be mentally prepared by the Games. During every trip with them, we reviewed the Olympic timeline, discussed what they were doing to reach their goals, and made adjustments when necessary. We would never expect an athlete to go into a high-level competition without years of physical preparation. Likewise, we did not expect the skiers to learn and master mental skills in the few weeks or even few months prior to such a competition. By the time we arrived at the Olympics, the athletes had solid mental skills and plans in place. My role then became one of helping them maintain their plans and handling crises that arose.

2. Sport psychology is for athletes AND coaches. As I became involved with the skiers, my first contact was with the coaches. These coaches knew they could personally benefit from understanding the mental side of sport and were not shy about asking for my input. It was not uncommon for the Mogul coaches to say, “I’m signing up for a session with Karen. I need my hour to learn from her too.” My work with the coaches took on a two-year plan for the athletes to learn and practice their mental skills (relaxation training, mental imagery, Olympic competition simulation, pre-performance plans) so they would be mentally prepared by the Games. During every trip with them, we reviewed the Olympic timeline, discussed what they were doing to reach their goals, and made adjustments when necessary. We would never expect an athlete to go into a high-level competition without years of physical preparation. Likewise, we did not expect the skiers to learn and master mental skills in the few weeks or even few months prior to such a competition. By the time we arrived at the Olympics, the athletes had solid mental skills and plans in place. My role then became one of helping them maintain their plans and handling crises that arose.

At the Olympics, the focus is on the athletes, but behind the scenes, the coaches experienced their own stress. In Salt Lake City, every coach pulled me aside at some point and asked for input on how to handle the challenges of coaching at the Olympics. The coaches realized that they, as well as the athletes, needed mental strategies for coping with the competition and disappointments. The team sent 8 athletes to the games and only two of them came home with medals. Thus, the coaches, who felt some personal responsibility for those performances, had to help the 6 who did not reach their goals cope with their disappointment. The coaches seemed to appreciate this help and were willing to give me feedback on how this type of support could benefit them in the future.

Karen D. Cogan, Ph.D.

Dr. Cogan at the competition start area where she would work with the skiers prior to their runs.

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I emphasized the incorporation of major competitions. Some of their own anxieties so that they did know better how to help them at the Games. Each athlete reacted to the stress and then coped before competing in the actual event. These simulations allowed athletes and coaches to develop media plans so that each had considered beforehand how they would handle media requests. Family and friends are a tremendous source of support for athletes especially during high-level competition, but they can also become a distraction. Family and friends want time with the athletes or may want the athletes to help them get tickets to the events. Again, prior to the games we developed plans for dealing with family and friends so that the athletes could remain focused on training and competition. Typically, a close member of the athlete’s family was designated as the contact person and all requests went through that person so the athletes could stay out of the loop.

The competitions with which you are involved may not reach the level of the Olympics, but the same mental skills and preparation can help you compete or coach to your potential. These are the lessons I learned from the ultimate in sport competition; use them to make your performance the best it can be.

Shannon Bahrke, 2002 Olympic Silver Medalist preparing for her run.

Dr. Cogan continues her work with the U.S. Mogul Ski Team

But, even with the planning and expense that went into the Olympic simulation a year before the Games, there were a few things that you can never really simulate. The Olympics is one of them. So...

4. Prepare for the unexpected. No matter what you do, the Olympics (and other high-level competitions) are different from everything else. There is always some unexpected issue that arises. So, I emphasized expecting the unexpected. I used every opportunity to drive that point home. For example, the team trained in Chile the summer before the Olympics. The accommodations were much less than expected—no heat or hot water (or even running water sometimes) in the rooms, no phones, TV or access to email. The first few days there were many complaints, but then we took a new approach. What if the heat shuts off in the rooms while you are at the Olympics? How are you going to cope with that? What if something else completely unexpected happens and you have to adjust? Here is an OPPORTUNITY to adjust and keep your focus on your training. You will likely face something similar at the Games so figure out how to deal with it now. And sure enough, all sorts of unexpected things happened at the Games that required adjustment. Fortunately, the athletes and coaches had some preparation for this.

5. Manage distractions. At any competition there are distractions, but the Olympics are another story. The media was probably the biggest distraction. These athletes and coaches became comfortable interacting with the media. Capper’s main duties are to set up media interviews, prepare athletes and coaches for their interviews, and prepare the media for interviewing athletes and coaches. He also updates statistics and player biographies, meets with athletes to give them information on who will be interviewing them and what that reporter will be looking for (e.g., on or off the field behavior), and contacts media members from out of town to let them know when players and coaches will be available. In addition to these important tasks, he has a special job every year: educating first year student-athletes and new coaches on what to expect during an interview, how to handle reporters from print, radio and/or television, and how to be aware not just of what one says, but how one carries and presents oneself when being interviewed. Capper knows that if coaches and athletes abide by certain guidelines, they will be more successful in their interaction with the media.

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