

Getting It On with the Media



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why the media are discouraged and in some cases, forbidden to contact athletes or coaches at their homes. Imagine the disruption if, while sitting down to Sunday dinner, two reporters show up at your door asking for an interview. This situation may not only cause frustration, but be a real problem if the reporter refuses to leave when asked to do so.

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.

PS44204-3/03

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Performance Excellence

Volume 5, Issue 1

CENTER FOR SPORT PSYCHOLOGY NEWSLETTER

Fall 2002

Sport Psychology Consulting at the Olympic Games: Lessons Learned

Karen D. Cogan, Ph.D.

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



Travis Mayer, 2002 Olympic Silver Medalist at the start.

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 variety of forms. Most of the time I consulted with them about a specific coaching question. For example, an athlete might be having difficulty staying focused through the end of the run or an athlete might become too easily frustrated and lose her concentration. I also

talked with the coaches about their own goals: Would they continue coaching this team after the Olympics or move on to some other type of work? Clearly, such



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

questions are personal in nature but often such concerns are what is most important and in need of resolution.

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

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having me as a more objective sounding board, though I have to admit I was personally invested in the athletes too.

3. Train like you compete and compete like you train. I emphasized the incorporation of competition simulations into the pre-Olympic training. A competition simulation is essentially a “pretend” competition. There are many levels of competition simulation, and the athletes used all of them. First, during summer training individual athletes would request a simulation. I would be at the start with them and set the stage. “OK, it’s the Olympics, and you are next up. You can hear the crowd yelling and cheering as the competitor before you takes his/her run. You can see all the Olympic banners and the crowds lining the side of the course. Now it’s your turn. You step into the gate. This is it, the Olympics, the moment you have waited for. Get your focus and take the run of your life.” The goal was to create pressure and give the athlete the chance to learn how to cope with it. The athlete had only one chance, and then we evaluated how he/she handled the run from a mental perspective. Second, we had a formal competition during training for all the athletes. The format was the same as an Olympic competition and there was timing and judging (from the coaches). Finally, during February 2001, the year before the Olympics, a complete Olympic simulation was set up by the coaches. The athletes went to the Olympic venue, stayed in the same accommodations they would have for the Olympics and spent a week acting as if it was the Olympics. They trained and competed on the exact schedule they were expected to keep during the games. This was a very stressful event for the athletes and coaches and an incredible opportunity to practice coping before competing in the actual Olympics. These simulations allowed athletes to bring training and competition closer together.

The coaches, also, learned from these simulation experiences. They learned how each athlete reacted to the stress and then knew better how to help them at the Games. And the coaches learned how to manage some of their own anxieties so that they did not negatively affect the athletes during major competitions.

But, even with the planning and expense that went into the Olympic simulation a year prior to the Games, there are some competitions 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



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

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 Olympics 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 are used to the media and have learned what to say and what not to say in interviews, but typically they do not have to field so many questions from so many media personalities. The media was everywhere, and we had to make decisions about when to say “no” to interview requests. Fortunately, during the summer camps I had worked with the 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 learned from the ultimate in sport competition; use them to make your performance the best it can be.

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



As Assistant Athletic Director and Administrator of Media Services at the University of North Texas, Eric Capper is responsible for helping athletes and coaches become 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.

Initially, when Capper meets with a freshman athlete or first-year coach, he outlines major guidelines for being an effective interviewee, which include: a) choosing words wisely, b) knowing the who, what, where, when, and why of interviewing, c) making a good first impression, and d) remembering you are always on the record. These guidelines help athletes and coaches make their interactions with the media less stressful and more productive.

Choosing Words Wisely

One way to provide an informative and confident interview is to choose your words wisely. Knowing exactly what you are going to say, calling reporters by their first names, anticipating questions, being careful about using terminology that the audience may not understand, avoiding saying “no comment,” not trashing another person, not pretending you know the answer when you

may not, and saying “thank you” are all ways athletes and coaches can sound informative, respectful and confident when giving interviews. There are many examples in the world of sport in which these guidelines were violated and a negative outcome resulted. For instance, when a basketball player diverges from his original message about a blowout loss and begins trashing his teammates, his relationships with these teammates will likely be negatively affected as will their future on-court performances.

Knowing the Who, What, Where, When, and Why of Interviewing

Knowing who you are talking to, what the purpose of the interview is, and in what environment the interview is taking place are very important points to remember when being interviewed. Capper believes as a whole, reporters are simply looking for a good story related to performance on the field, court or rink. However, each reporter’s approach is different and sometimes this variation in style can lead to misconceptions about the reporter’s motive. Every once in a while, Capper has to deal with writers looking for “billboard material.” In these instances, he has to meet with his athletes to warn them about being too open and honest for their own good. An example of this recently occurred when Phil Mickelson commented on Tiger Woods’ equipment. By openly poking fun at the inadequacy of Woods’ equipment the next day his quote was in every newspaper in America. Clearly novice, and even experienced, athletes need to be careful about what they say to the media.

Making a Good First Impression

Keeping your cool, not acting defensively, keeping yourself well groomed and dressed appropriately, and using physical animation are some guidelines student-athletes and new coaches can use to help make

a good impression when being interviewed. Obviously, these principles are more relevant for television interviews versus print or radio interviews, however, an individual’s look may guide a reporter’s approach to the interview. If an athlete looks sloppy or is dressed too casually, the interviewer may take a more relaxed approach and feel free to ask more personal and probing questions. In professional sports, most players dress in a suit and tie for every organized interview and on every road trip where there is a good chance reporters will want a word or two. Such an approach communicates to the reporters that the athlete is a professional and should be viewed with respect.

Remembering That You Are Always on the Record

It is important to listen to the question carefully, always think before you answer, speak only for your organization, and remember you are always on the record. Over time, reporters and athletes can develop a trust in which the athlete feels comfortable talking openly about his/her team and him/herself. But remember, a reporter’s job is to report what an athlete says, so in any conversation, anything an athlete says is fair game. Slowing the pace of the interview, commenting on a few, specific issues versus many issues at once, and reporting only what you think your school/organization would want you to say are effective strategies to facilitate a smooth interview. Although, you cannot take back a harmful comment that affects you and your team, you can always call another meeting with the media to clear up or add to any earlier comments.

Capper also stated it is important not to give out personal information to the media because others may want to take advantage of an athlete’s spotlight and use it for their own gain. Athletes and coaches are public figures so keeping some personal information separate is important to maintain a comfortable lifestyle. This is the reason

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