

Q and A with Canada's Greatest Female Gymnast

By Carly Raab

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to enjoy the experience. That helped to relieve some of the pressure I had put on myself. I got nervous whenever I started to think about how this was the Olympic Games and this was all I had trained for and I only had one shot, but I calmed down and had fun once I just told myself to enjoy it.

Q: What mental factors were most important to you in achieving your Olympic success?

A: Staying calm and confident. Not acknowledging the pressure that automatically comes with the "Olympic Games" and just enjoying and taking pride in the fact that I was there instead of letting it overwhelm me.

Q: What do you wish you had been more mentally prepared for at the

Olympics?

A: Floor finals – In the last few years in the finals competitions they have removed the 30 second warm up, so you come right out of the warm up gym and compete right away, rather than getting to loosen up and get a feel for the competition apparatus like you do in normal competitions. I had never done that before so I didn't really know how to approach it. I kept thinking of that fact that I had to compete right away instead of just treating it like a normal floor routine.

Q: Describe your Olympic experience. How was competing at the Olympics different from other competitions? What were the high points and why?

A: There is this aura of excitement in

the gym that isn't there at every other meet, because it's the Olympic Games. You can feel it that this is the most prestigious competition you'll ever be a part of, and that can either be terrifying or exciting. I loved walking in to the arena and seeing the huge Olympic Rings above me, it gave me the biggest rush to know that I had actually made it there. It's also different because you have your whole country behind you, instead of normal competitions where the only people who know about it and who are cheering for you are your family and gymnastics fans. That was also a huge rush, and a big motivation as well, to know that the whole country is cheering for you. 🇩🇪

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By Carly Raab



Kate Richardson, Born June 27, 1984, is perhaps one of Canada's greatest gymnasts ever to compete. In a

gymnastic career that began when she was just three years old, Richardson has made a name for herself as one of the elite gymnasts in the world. In her career, Richardson has been a top-level competitor since the age of 10. She has competed at the national and international level since then and ultimately reached the pinnacle at the age of 16, and again at the age of 20 years old, when Richardson was selected to lead the Canadian Women's Gymnastic Team at the Olympic Games. She placed 15th all-around finish at the 2000 Olympic games, which gave her the all time highest ranking in artistic gymnastics for a Canadian, at a non-boycotted Olympics. Then in 2004, Richardson finished 18th in the all-around. Most remarkable, however, was her sixth-place showing on floor exercise, good enough to earn her Canada's first-ever event final berth in women's competition at a fully contested Olympic games. Currently, Richardson is a senior at UCLA and continues to succeed, as she has been apart of several national championship teams as a Bruin.

Carly Raab, sport consultant with the

Center for Sport Psychology and Performance Excellence, had an opportunity to talk with Richardson about how she incorporates mental training into her sport. The following is a question and answer segment with Kate Richardson (2-time Olympian).

Q: Kate, what formal and/or informal ways did you use sport psychology (mental training) in your preparations for the Olympics?

A: A lot of visualization, especially as we got closer to competition because the number of routines we did decreased. I kept the same visualizing routine before each one of my routines in training and then did the same in competition.

Q: When at the games, what did you do to help you remain focused in your practices and competitions?

I focused on a lot of little goals every day. I began to get overwhelmed with too much pressure and too many corrections on my mind, so I narrowed my focus to little improvements I wanted to make every day instead of wanting to make everything perfect at once. I thought of the one main thing I wanted to improve on each event every day before training and then focused on that.

Q: On the day of a competition, what mental routines do you use to help you reach an ideal performance state?

A: I make myself calm and confident before leaving for the arena - I talk to myself a lot about how I've done everything I can to be ready and I am prepared to compete, and how I've done my routines a thousand times already. Then right before I compete I always go through the same visualization routine that I do before every turn in practice so that I feel just like I do in practice.

Q: What did you think, say or do that helped you compete under pressure at the Olympics?

A: I told myself to enjoy it. I had put all the work in and I had no regrets up to that point so all I had left to do was



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An Interview with Kirsten Peterson, Ph.D.

By Karen Cogan, Ph.D.

So, what goes on inside athletes' heads as they prepare for one of the (if not THE) most important competition of their lives? Few sport psychology consultants have the opportunity to work with these high level athletes, coaches and teams on the road to the Olympics. Dr. Kirsten Peterson, a sport psychologist with the United States Olympic Committee, was in Athens for the 2004 Olympics and shares some of her perspectives and experiences in this interview.

Dr. Peterson has been a resident USOC sport psychology consultant at the Colorado Springs Olympic Training Center since 1996, where she works with athletes, teams and coaches who are in training at the Center and preparing for national and international competitions. In addition to her work in residence, she has had a long-term relationship as the sport psychology consultant with USA Wrestling. She has worked with men's wrestling since 1996 though only traveled with them for 2 years prior to the 2004 Olympics. She also began working with women's wrestling two years prior to the Games when it was designated as an Olympic sport. Her preference is to work with a sport at least 2 years, or more than one season prior to a major competition, such as the Olympics. In this way she can develop a foundation for mental skills training as well as establish a stable relationship with the team.

At the Athens Games, she provided services to the Wrestling team but also was available for drop in consulting and counseling with athletes, teams and coaches in other sports. The wrestling team did not compete until the end of the Olympics so her job was to maintain a positive training atmosphere in Athens as they neared their competition. She worked with athletes on honing some mental skills, but her main focus was on "putting out fires," and helping athletes deal with interpersonal issues, cutting weight, and competing in the heat of summer. Being at the games was overwhelming for some athletes and coaches, and her approach was to help them understand that their feelings and experiences were a normal part of competing in the Olympics. In addition, she consulted with coaches about their performance anxieties related to coaching well at the Olympics.

Dr. Peterson compared her work with coaches vs. athletes. She noted that they are all people, and much of her consulting work is the same with both groups. With athletes, Dr. Peterson focuses on helping them build mental skills, develop and implement coping strategies, recognize strengths, and become aware of when they are undermining their training and performances through "catastrophic" thinking. She educates them by normalizing anxiety for important competitions and improving per-

formance mental states. Key skills that she teaches are goal setting, time management, and the ability to stay focused (these are taught some time in advance of important competitions). She encourages athletes to stay consistent with their training programs by remaining focused on their goals. On competition days, she helps athletes focus on the process (what they need to do now, for this moment), develop their own tools for what is needed, and block out distractions as they gain success. She encourages athletes to pay attention to their intuitions and instincts about what they need to perform at their peak.

Coaches need more consulting and less skill building. For them, logistics and planning are key, and they are often looking for input, advice and an outside perspective. Although they do consult with her on a regular basis, they learn to manage their own issues in the moment. When this is challenging, Dr. Peterson helps coaches in ways similar to what she does with athletes. For example, there was one coach who was experiencing a high level of anxiety that was interfering with her performance. Dr. Peterson was able to implement some cognitive behavioral techniques for help with anxiety control, which assisted the coach in improving her performance.

Dr. Peterson noted that, in general, athletes are not prepared for the summer Olympics; she says, "It's huge." The media presence is a new phenomenon with which the athletes must learn to cope, and many of them have not had this degree of attention in the past. Also, families often ask their athletes for event tickets and generally want to be involved in their Olympic experiences. Although families are often well-meaning, they can be a distraction to the athlete so Dr. Peterson established an infrastructure to help address family needs. She designated a contact person (non-coach/non-athlete) who handled family requests for things like tickets. In addition, she was involved in developing a DVD on the top 10 lessons learned from past Olympic champions and what they did to prepare for the Olympics. This DVD was a focus of discussion as the athletes and coaches prepared for the Games. The threat of terrorism was a concern for the Athens Games. Although fortunately no incidences emerged, going into the games everyone was aware of the potential threat and preventative measures were taken. The athletes were aware of the possibility of terrorist acts, but in general had made peace with what could happen when they committed to representing the United States at the Games. Some athletes displayed a type of bravado with sentiments such as, "Let's just see what happens. They can't get us." Athletes were

also aware that spectators might express anti-American sentiments and the athletes would be subjected to crowd chanting (e.g., chant of "Osama Bin Laden" at soccer game.) Athletes practiced training under these conditions and developed skills to maintain their composure if this happened to them at the Games. To further help the athletes cope with anti-American sentiment, the USOC sponsored a program in which Janet Evans talked about sportspersonship and the need for Americans to maintain a respectful profile in the world.

Dr. Peterson worked with athletes individually and as teams to prepare for media interactions. They examined what questions might be asked and some possible responses they might give. One goal was to reassure the media that the athletes were ready to go despite the potential for terrorist threats. Another goal was to help athletes be mentally prepared for the types of media questions they might get so that they could answer them comfortably and confidently.

Finally, one of the challenges of the Olympics, or any other major competition, is dealing with the unexpected. Dr. Peterson had several unexpected issues arise that required her quick thinking and interventions. For example, one athlete, just prior to finals, needed to be distracted. He wanted to think about anything besides his sport, and she jumped in to help

him with that at the last minute. In addition, one athlete experienced a death of a close friend, and Dr. Peterson assisted that athlete in coping with the emotions related to this type of loss.

There is a lot that goes on behind the scenes in preparing an athlete for Olympic competition. Dr. Peterson worked years prior to the 2004 Olympics to prepare herself as well as the athletes and coaches with whom she worked for anything that might arise during the Games. Fortunately, none of the terrorist threats and anti-American reactions occurred, but she and the athletes were prepared to handle these challenges. The athletes established solid mental skills foundations prior to the Games and then focused on dealing with the unexpected as the competition neared. All athletes and coaches can adapt these ideas suggested by the very best to prepare for their particular sport and level of competition. 🌟