

Excelling In the Olympic Context

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Abstract

I began working with my first Olympic athlete as a mental skills/performance enhancement consultant in 1973 and have had the good fortune of continuing to work with Olympic athletes and coaches through every summer and winter Olympic Games since that time. During my first 7 years of Olympic consulting I worked with a number of individual athletes representing different summer and winter sports. For the next 15 years I worked primarily with entire Olympic teams from a variety of individual and team sports. Some of that consulting continued for 12 to 14 consecutive years with both summer and winter Olympic teams. For the past 7 years, (through to the 2000 Sydney Summer Olympics, 2002 Salt Lake City Winter Olympics and leading into the Athens 2004 Summer Olympics), I returned to working with a limited number of individual athletes. Some of this more recent consulting work has been conducted almost exclusively over the Internet.

In this article I share some reflections on what I feel helps athletes and coaches excel within the Olympic context.

What are the greatest challenges you have faced in your life?

When you face challenges where the bar is raised, the stakes are higher, the scrutiny more diligent, the outcome more important than anything else you have ever done, up to that point in your life, you are essentially performing in an Olympic context.

As one seasoned professional NHL athlete said of his recent Olympic experience in Salt Lake City, “It doesn’t get any bigger than this”.

You have probably faced challenges in your life that felt very BIG, or overwhelming, or almost insurmountable at that time. How did you get through those challenges?

Ultimately, if you worked through those

challenges successfully, you probably did it by embracing a more positive vision or perspective, and by focusing on the step in front of you.

Few of us have actually experienced the enormous challenge of performing within an Olympic Games context, but most of us have had our Olympic moments. How well we handle those moments, and the extent to which we are able to embrace them, is often determined by two factors: how prepared we feel to accept those opportunities or challenges, and the extent to which we are able to remain positive and fully absorbed in the process of engaging ourselves in the experience or performance. Excelling in the Olympic context is almost entirely dependent on perspective and focus.

There are two main reasons we falter or fail to reach our goals in the Olympic context. One is that we fail to respect patterns that work for us. We do this by changing patterns that have worked well in the past, or by failing to change patterns that don't work. This results in sub optimal performance or performing below our capacity.

The second main reason for not reaching our goals in the Olympic context is failing to prepare ourselves to deal effectively with Olympic distractions. Every Olympic context is filled with distractions that can take us away from our best performance focus. Problems often surface when we allow ourselves to shift focus away from the performance process to concerns about outcomes and consequences of failure. Distractions in this context can take us places we don't want to go.

When facing challenges, sometimes we falter because we don't try hard enough but in the Olympic context, it is often that we try too hard. At the 2002 Olympics one of the world's best long track speed skaters, who was favored to win, faltered in both his Olympic races, finishing far off the podium. In a subsequent world cup race shortly after the Olympics he was back on track as a world leader. What was different? He returned familiar territory, and followed patterns of thinking, focusing and doing that work best for him... not too much and not too little. His beam was back on the ground.

The Olympic Context

When you enter the Olympic context, what do you think is the same and what is different from other events?

The performance demands at the Olympic Games are no different that the performance demands at any other major

competition, but everything that surrounds the performance is different.

Have you ever walked across a wooden beam that is lying on the ground, or along a train track? Imagine what it would be like to walk across that beam, or on that train track, if it was suspended between 2 buildings 100 stories in the air. The performance task is the same. If you can do it on the ground, why can't you do it with the beam suspended 100 stories in the air?

You probably can do it, if you believe you can and if you focus completely on putting one foot in front of the other. However, the consequences of failure are dramatically different. If you lose your balance or focus at that height, even momentarily, it can be a long hard fall.

This raising of the beam gives a little flavor of what some athletes might feel when walking in to perform within the Olympic context. The task is the same but the context and consequences are not.

When you have trained most of your life for this moment, and the expectations are high, and a billion people are watching, including everyone who is important to you, the consequences feel different.

When consequences are viewed as critically important, and you really want to perform well, it is essential that you focus fully on executing the task before you and on nothing else. This is not always an easy thing to do, unless you are supremely prepared mentally for that moment.

This requirement for full focus in critical situations does not only apply to performance excellence in sport. In heart surgery there are certain stitches that can kill a patient if they are not executed precisely in the

right spot, to right depth, within a short time frame. In space flight there are certain maneuvers that must be executed within a limited time frame, precisely as rehearsed, or there is a risk of total mission failure. In major business transactions, one final critical presentation, interaction or negotiation can make the difference between winning or losing a contract worth hundreds of millions or billions of dollars. These are all human performance situations where outcomes count, and the clarity of full focus is required for success. However, sport is the only performance arena where you have the additional element of having millions or billions of people watching your performance unfold, both live on site and on television.

Although the performance demands at the Olympic Games are basically the same as for any world cup event, the expectations, demands, media coverage and overall hype surrounding the Olympic event are dramatically heightened. In this respect, the Olympic environment is different from any other sporting event, including high profile professional championships.

In some sports, the hopes and dreams of their home nations, and sponsors, ride on the backs of these athletes. For example, at the 2002 Winter Olympics, when the powerful Swedish ice hockey team was unexpectedly eliminated after a very strong showing in the preliminary round, the Swedish media tore into the players, and described their loss as one of the most devastating events in Swedish history. On the other hand, Canadians were ecstatic when Team Canada won the gold medal after a poor showing in the preliminary round. More Canadians watched that gold medal game than any other televised event in the history of Canadian television (estimated at about 15 million viewers).

The Olympic Games are among the biggest media events in the history of the world and each Olympics seems to get a little larger.

At the 2000 Summer Olympics in Sydney, over 10,000 of the world's best athletes gathered together in the Athlete's Village for approximately three weeks. Over 12,000 accredited media people were also in attendance with the sole purpose of beaming this event to billions of interested people all over the world. Thousands of security personnel secured the Village and other venues to ensure the athletes' safety.

At the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City, over 3 billion people around the world watched the opening ceremonies. Two thousand and five hundred of the world's best winter sport athletes and over 15,000 security personnel were in attendance (including police, military & undercover security agents).

In the wake of the September 11th terrorist attacks on the United States, the presence of increased military security was evident in Salt Lake City, both in the air and on the ground. The only previous Olympics where I witnessed such clear evidence of a military presence was at the 1988 Summer Olympics in Seoul, South Korea. In Salt Lake City, security concerns were taken up a notch, for example, all of our athletes were issued individual pagers so they could all be contacted instantly in case of an emergency. A large number of emergency response teams were ready to be activated in case the need arose.

It is important that athletes and spectators in attendance recognize that these safeguards have been put in place for everyone's safety.

The Athlete's Villages have restricted access, for people and vehicles, with checkpoint after checkpoint to gain entry. The process is similar to airport security, but

much more extensive. Inside the Village, athletes are privy to a huge variety of interesting options - large and small cafeterias offering free delights, some for 24 hours a day, interactive games rooms also open 24 hours a day, discos, movie theaters, stores, video rooms, exercise rooms, computer terminals, e-mail centers, live television feed from all venues, and the list goes on. There is entertainment offered virtually every day and night by some of the world's top performing artists, along with cultural events, and high profile celebrities, politicians, actors and former great athletes like Muhammad Ali coming to mingle with the Olympic athletes. It is a very unique and stimulating environment.

Other difference in the Olympic context, include the sheer volume of people, the size of the crowds, travel time to and from venues, heavy traffic, lots of delays, a reduction in training time, the number of activities going on around you, and the possibility of increasing levels of noise in some residences when athletes representing certain sports are finished competing, while others have not yet started.

These are some of the reasons that focusing and refocusing skills, and the ability to deal with distractions, are so critical for athletes and their performance within the Olympic context.

When you are well prepared for the kinds of realities that you are likely to face in the Olympic context, they are not a big deal. You can plan for them, focus through them, and move on to do what you came here to do.

The Athlete's Village would be a great place to visit just to have a good time, if only you didn't have to compete. But athletes and coaches come here to fulfill a lifetime

dream. In order to perform your best as a competitor, one of the first things you have to do, after being at least momentarily stunned by the environment, or in awe of the people, or feeling somewhat intimidated, is to take control. This can begin with a simple step-PLAN YOUR DAY! How much do you want to do in a day? How much can you do and still respect your primary reason for being here?

When do you want to get up, eat, sleep, practice, rest, take a break, or find some quiet time for yourself? When do you want to make yourself available for media interviews and when do you want to restrict media access? When do you want to eat together as a team, and when do you want to eat on your own, or with a friend, family member, coach or couple of teammates?

In one Olympic context, a group of team sport athletes who were accustomed to eating as a team, reported that never eating together as an entire team at the Olympics took away from their sense of team unity and hurt their performance. This highlights the importance of respecting familiar patterns that have worked well for you in the past. Decide what you want to do each day, as a human being, and as an athlete, that will help you feel your best and perform your best.

When athletes and coaches do not perform to their potential at the Olympic Games, it is not because the performance demands are different, but because they have not prepared to deal effectively with the Olympic environment, the Olympic expectations, and the many distractions surrounding their performance. Those who do perform to their capacity, plan their own best path, commit themselves stay positive through the many challenges, and focus fully on executing their own best performance.

Almost every athlete competing at the Olympics Games has dreamed of winning a medal, maybe even a gold medal. This dream can drive the intensity of your training and the quality of your preparation. It gives you a daily reason for doing the quality work and mental preparation required to perform your best in this arena. So continue to dream your big dream, as long as it is helping you.

Anything is possible if you prepare well, draw positive energy from the Olympic context, and channel your focus into connecting totally with your performance.

Once you are at the Olympics readying yourself to compete, your performance outcome will be almost entirely dependent upon how well you maintain **your** own best performance focus. The simple goal is to connect fully with your performance, your game plan, or race plan - to the exclusion of everything else. Give everything you have that day. Focus fully on each little step. Your on site performance focus should rivet you to executing your best performance – step-by-step. Nothing else matters.

Three Phases of Preparation

There are three distinct, but interrelated phases of preparing yourself to be your best in the Olympic context, 1) the preparation phase leading up to the event, 2) the on site familiarization phase, which includes adapting to the new environment and dealing with multiple distractions, and 3) the on site performance phase.

There is also an important post-performance transition phase, which allows you to draw out lessons and move on in a positive way.

The Preparation Phase

Within a relatively short period of time you

will be in the midst of the excitement of competing at the Olympic Games. To perform your best, you must plan your preparation, and rest, so that you are at your best when it is time to compete. This means respecting the training and rest patterns that work for best for you. It also means preparing yourself to remain positive and to focus fully on the right things at the right time. Your goal in the final preparation phase is to do everything you can to ensure that you will be at your best physically, mentally, technically, and emotionally - without feeling overloaded.

It is best to fine tune what already works for you, rather than trying to make major overhauls in your training or performance program. Remember what got you to where you are right now. Keep doing the good things that have worked for you and work on making the small refinements that will make you even better.

Focus on quality training and quality rest. Avoid over-training. Trying to do too much within a limited time frame is a common error in the Olympic year that has led to many disappointing performances. Go in rested and ready, knowing that you can give your absolute best. Being well rested and mentally ready for the demands, is a critical part of excelling in the Olympic context.

The Familiarization Phase

The more familiar you are with the Olympic environment, the more comfortable, relaxed or "normal" you will feel within it. You can begin by visiting the Olympic Web site which is normally www.olympics.org/ for continued updates on facilities, competition venues, the Village, and so on. Request updated information from your national sport federation or Olympic Association if you have specific questions, requests, or concerns.

It can be very helpful to talk with former athletes, coaches, and sport psychology consultants who have been to previous Games. Ask them for details about what to expect, their own experiences, and their suggestions for preparing to perform your best in the Olympic context. I have often asked former Olympic athletes to come in to share their Olympic experiences with teams that I have been working with. This helped them to better prepare them for the Olympic challenge. It has always been an empowering experience for everyone involved.

Every Olympic venue and spirit is unique in certain ways, but there are many common challenges, distractions and opportunities that athletes and coaches can prepare themselves for in advance.

If you have been to a previous Olympic Games, be sure to draw out the important lessons from those experiences. Carefully reflect on what went well and what you can do differently to be better prepared and more focused for the upcoming Olympics?

It is a definite advantage to go to your Olympic venue to train or compete sometime in the year leading up to the Olympic Games. This is a real possibility in many sports.

Many of the athletes I have worked with, who have had personal best performances and won medals at the Olympics, have visited, trained on, and/or competed on their Olympic course, or in their Olympic arena before doing it under the lights within in the real Olympic Games.

It made them feel more in control, more comfortable, and more like this was their place. It also helped when they were away from that venue preparing themselves mentally to perform their best on that specific

course, or in that particular performance arena.

Once you do arrive on site for the Olympic Games, it is important to gradually familiarize or re-familiarize yourself with the various areas of the Athlete's Village, your practice venue, competition venue, and the transport system. Make sure you know where everything is that is important to you. Once you are settled into the Olympic Village, it is most important to become familiar and comfortable with your competition venue. Even if you have trained or competed in that venue prior to the Olympics, check it out carefully. Some changes in the course or venue may have been done for the Olympics. This was certainly true for the triathlon event at the Sydney Olympics. Due to the extensive number of people lining the entire triathlon course, large cement barriers were erected which dramatically narrowed the course in some sections. This resulted in a number of crashes in the bicycle portion of the race. It is best to be completely aware and prepared for these changes, rather than in despair. The more prepared you are for everything that you will face, the better you will feel and the better you will perform.

When it has been possible to gain access to competition venues, many athletes I worked with found it helpful to go there when no one else was around, to get the feel of the place, to feel good in that place, to walk through or think through their game plan, or race plan, or trace the steps they wanted to follow on their competition day(s). Some moved from the warm-up area into the performance arena, or got into their starting position, or imagined themselves performing the way they wanted to perform while actually being right there in the place where they would do it.

Anything that helps you feel more ready, more relaxed, more confident, or more in

control can enhance the quality of your performance.

The On site Performance Phase

The task that lies before you at the Olympic Games is the same task that you have performed many times before. The most important part of performing to your capacity within this context is to respect the patterns that have worked best for you in the past – during the lead-up time, on site at your venue, just before you compete and during your performance. Follow your normal pre-competition routine, do your normal warm-up. Focus totally on executing your performance - step by step - shift by shift - section by section. Have a plan to stay on track, and to get back on track if you start to drift away. Follow that plan.

To perform your best in this context, follow the same patterns that freed you to perform your best in previous events. Rest well. Carry a positive perspective. Give the intensity that is required. Connect totally with your task. Focus on what is within your control.

Just do your job, execute your performance, which you have done many times before. Plan your own path. Follow your pre-competition routine. Focus on staying connected. Take it step by step. Give everything you possibly can that day - no regrets. You are not asking yourself to do anything unreasonable - only to perform like you are capable of performing.

Many athletes I worked with who performed to their capacity in the Olympic context found that responding to the following two questions in their final preparation phase helped strengthen their confidence and direct their Olympic focus:

1. **WHY I CAN.** List the reasons why

you can achieve your goals in this event.

2. **HOW I WILL.** Outline how you will achieve your goals in this event. What do you have to focus on to achieve your goals?

The Post-Performance Phase

If you prepare the way I have suggested, when the Olympics are over, you will leave knowing that you prepared as well as you possibly could, given the constraints of your life. You will know that you gave everything you could in your event(s) - no regrets. If you have done that, you have won a personal victory. In the end, there are only three medals in each event, and all of the top athletes in the world are going after them.

You achieved one of your lifetime dreams just by representing your country, your family and yourself at the Olympic Games. Regardless of whether you achieve another higher level Olympic dream, at the conclusion of challenges of this magnitude, it is important to put things back into perspective. You know you have tried to do your best within a very unique and challenging context, regardless of your performance outcome. You know that you have grown greatly as a person and a performer through this pursuit.

It is a great accomplishment just to be competing with the best in the world at the Olympic Games. Very few people in the world ever reach this high skill level that you have attained, in any field or endeavor. The people who know you are proud of you for what you have done, for your many accomplishments and for how you have represented your family, your community and your country over the years. Think about the wonderful experiences, opportunities and accomplishments that you have

gained from committing yourself to this pursuit. Think about the friends you have made, and the many lessons you have learned on this journey. These are memories that you will carry with you for the rest of your life.

Take some well deserved time to rest and recover before moving forward to the many other exciting challenges that lie ahead.

Coaching Support

It is always an asset to have the support of great coaches in the preparation phase, familiarization phase, on site performance phase and post performance phase.

The truly great coaches I have worked with help athletes to continue to love doing what they are doing, and therein make excellence a realistic goal and the journey enjoyable.

Great coaches are genuinely committed to their athletes, and to doing what is best for them. They are also secure enough within themselves to respect and listen to the people they work with. They value input and act on good input. They listen to their athletes, assistant coaches and support staff. They respect their experience, opinions and potential. They believe in their athletes to the point that athletes can feel that belief in their gut. They care about their athletes as people and performers, and challenge athletes to keep pushing their limits and become their best. And they support athletes every step of the way, especially through the big challenges, difficult times, injuries and setbacks.

At the high performance level, virtually all coaches are highly competent with respect to their technical and tactical skills. What separates truly great coaches from the rest, is that, in addition to imparting their technical and tactical expertise, they have excellent people skills. They are masters at meaning-

ful communication and building respectful, trusting relationships.

Truly great coaches have mastered the art of coaching largely because they mastered their capacity to: **Listen, Respect, Challenge, Believe, Care and Support.** In the preparation and lead-up phase to the Olympic level events, listening, respecting and challenging athletes in positive ways is critically important. In the on site performance phase, demonstrating belief in each performer and supporting them in simple ways, become the central factors in facilitating excellence.

Great coaches give athletes reasons to believe in themselves, their team and their capacity. They seize opportunities to enhance confidence, and are careful to avoid speaking or acting in ways that undermine confidence. They challenge people to push their limits in positive ways rather than negative ways, which is very empowering.

In the Olympic context, coaches and support staff also face higher levels of stress, more demands, distractions that they are not accustomed to, higher expectations, and less control over their environment than normal. To be at their best when it counts most, coaches and support staff also benefit from having focus plans and distraction control plans. Coaches and support staff who are able to remain positive, calm, and confident, and project belief in their athletes, can be a great asset to their performance.

On the other hand, coaches and support staff who become negative, stressed, or unglued in this environment can, and do, have a detrimental effect on athlete and team performance. They become another distraction that athletes have to deal with.

When there are problems within a coaching context, it is rarely related to an absence of

technical knowledge. It is almost always a communication issue. Athletes, performers or team members feel an absence of listening, respect, positive challenge, belief, caring or support. When these kinds of feelings surface within athletes or teams, and are not properly addressed, declines in confidence, motivation and performance are not far behind.

Hopefully, most coaches, already have some of these great qualities, and are working on improving others. If you are an athlete preparing to compete in an Olympic context, regardless of what your situation is, it is important to talk with your coaches about what will help you perform your best at this particular event. What is the most important role your coach can fulfill in helping, or at least not hindering, your performance at this event. Be clear on what you want, and do not want, in the lead-up time and just before you compete. Are there specific things your coach can say or do to give you that little extra edge in confidence, or to help you deal with some distractions? Is there a helpful reminder that you might like to hear, to make sure you are focusing on the right things at the right time? Discuss these kinds of issues with your coach if you feel it might be feasible and helpful in your situation.

Implications and Applications

Performing in the Olympic Games is different than performing in other performance context. Expect to feel different when you enter this context. But know that you can perform to your capacity within it. Know that once you begin performing, playing or competing, everything else will fade away. Once again it will be familiar. It will be just you and your performance.

Much of what keeps athletes positive, focused and in control through their Olympic pursuit is relevant to performing, living or

dealing with many of life's biggest challenges. These challenges may lie in giving birth or dealing with the fear of death, in overcoming sickness or maintaining health, or in being your best when it counts most in relationships, parenting, teaching, coaching, your studies, profession, business, or any other performance domain.

Olympic contexts, in and out of sport, are highly charged, emotional events, because at that moment you feel like your life, mission, reputation, value, relationship, or worth is on the line, and the outcome really does matter.

Before entering these contexts, plan your path. The advantage of good planning and detailed mental preparation in any Olympic context is success.

With a plan to remain positive and deal effectively with distractions, you will conserve your energy, lighten your perspective and enhance your performance, and the performance of your team.

We all face challenges in life where the demands are increased, outcomes are very important, and our ability to remain positive, composed and focused is put to the test.

When entering these challenges, pause for a moment to think about what you want to do, how you want to do it, and why you want to do it.

Remember that small things can make a big difference when working through obstacles, or living within emotionally charged contexts. Anything that makes you feel good, happy, relaxed, confident or focused, inside or outside this context, can enhance your joy and performance. **Moving along this path is very much a step by step process. I wish you the best in this quest.**

Resources

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Available free on-line at <http://www.zoneofexcellence.com/>

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