Factors Affecting Olympic Performance: Perceptions of Athletes and Coaches from More and Less Successful Teams

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This study was designed to examine if mental skills and strategies such as high confidence, commitment, and the use of cooperative routines, as well as previously unexamined physical, social, and environmental factors affect Olympic performance. Athletes and coaches from 8 Atlanta US Olympic teams were interviewed. Four teams met/exceeded performance expectations and 4 teams failed to perform up to performance predictions. Focus group interviews were conducted with 2 to 4 athletes from each team. Individual interviews were conducted with 1 or 2 coaches from each team. Each interview was recorded, transcribed, and analyzed by three trained investigators using hierarchical content analyses. Differences existed between teams that met/exceeded performance expectations and teams that failed. Teams that met/exceeded expectations participated in resident training programs, experienced crowd and family or friend support, utilized mental preparation, and were highly focused and...
committed. Teams that failed to meet expectations experienced planning and team cohesion problems, lacked experience, faced travel problems, experienced coaching problems, and encountered problems related to focus and commitment. Results indicated that achievement of peak performance at the Olympic Games is a complex and delicate process influenced by a variety of psychological, physical, social, and organizational factors.

The Olympic environment is thought to be an important factor influencing the performance of Olympic athletes and coaches. Following the 1996 Summer Games in Atlanta, coaches and athletes were consistent in saying that the Olympics differ from all other competitions (J. Page, USOC Assistant Deputy Director of Programs, personal communication, August 14, 1996; S. McCann, USOC Director of Sport Psychology, personal communication, September 8, 1996). Some teams and coaches thrived in the Olympic environment, whereas other teams struggled and failed to live up to pre-Olympic performance expectations. Examining the reasons for these performance differences is the focus of this study.

Not only are positive and negative factors that influence peak performance important to athletes and coaches, they are also important to sport psychology researchers. Table 1 summarizes psychology of peak performance literature relevant to the present study. Williams and Krane (1998), for example, in examining literature on the characteristics of peak performance, found that certain mental skills and psychological attributes have been associated with superior athletic performance. These included having a well-developed competitive routine and plan, high levels of motivation and commitment, coping skills for dealing with distractions and unexpected events, heightened concentration, high levels of self-confidence, self-regulation of arousal, goal setting, and visualization/imagery. These psychological skills and attributes, then, might be expected to discriminate between more and less successful Olympians.

In a study highly relevant to the present investigation, Orlick and Partington (1988) assessed the mental control and readiness of Canadian athletes from the 1984 Olympic Games. Both interview and survey techniques were employed in the study. The findings of the study revealed that mental readiness was a significant factor influencing final Olympic performance placement. Among the mental readiness factors noted by athletes with superior Olympic performance were the ability to focus attention and control performance imagery. In addition, total commitment to the pursuit of excellence, quality training including goal setting, competition simulation and imagery, mental preparation for competition including a detailed competition plan, and having a plan for dealing with distractions were common factors found with the successful athletes. Those Olympic athletes that did not perform up to their potential reported not being prepared to deal with the distractions that they faced. Additionally, factors found to interfere with performance included changing things that worked, late team selection, and the inability to focus after distractions. The authors concluded that the mental aspect of performance is essential for high achievement in important events such as the Olympic Games. Interestingly, the authors cited the athletes as important resources of information with regard to their mental preparation.
Following up on the Orlick and Partington (1988) study, Gould and colleagues (Gould, Eklund, & Jackson, 1992a; 1992b) conducted a series of studies examining the mental factors and preparation techniques associated with Olympic wrestling excellence. All 20 members of the 1988 U.S. Olympic team were interviewed and reported that prior to their all-time best performance, they experienced positive expectancies, optimal arousal states, and heightened effort and commitment. The use of systematic mental preparation strategies, including preparation routines, tactical strategies focus, and motivational strategies aided in the achievement of those optimal thought and emotional patterns. In contrast, during their worst Olympic performance, the wrestlers reported experiences of negative feeling states, non-adherence to preparation routines, and negative, irrelevant, or irregular patterns of thought. These results are consistent with many of the findings from Orlick and Partington’s (1988) research with Canadian Olympic athletes and suggest that mental skills play a crucial role in high level athletic performance.

Similarly, studies examining the experiences of national champion figure skaters, most of whom were U.S. Olympians, support the importance of mental skills for Olympic performance (Gould, Finch, & Jackson, 1993; Gould, Jackson, & Finch 1993a; 1993b). Skaters indicated using several mental skills as mechanisms for dealing with stress, including rational thinking and self-talk, positive focus and orientation, social support, time management and prioritization, pre-competition mental preparation and anxiety management, a training hard and smart orientation, isolation and deflection, and ignoring stressors. Sources of stress for the skaters included relationship issues, expectations and pressure to perform, psychological and physical demands, environmental demands, and life direction concerns. Skaters recommended taking risks and not being afraid to grow, filtering feedback and advice, avoiding the trap of feeling the need to be perfect, and seeking and utilizing social support as ways to deal with the stress of being a national champion figure skater. The results of these studies again suggest the importance of the role that mental skills play in high level performance and in dealing with the stressors associated with elite sport.

Thus, the consistency and intuitive appeal of these research findings has lead many researchers and practitioners to conclude that some optimal combination of mental states is associated with superior performance and that effective performers have developed mental skills which help them attain these states. Clearly, mental skills are important in producing superior athletic performance. In addition to the important role mental skills play in enhancing performance, other physical, environmental, and social factors are thought to influence Olympic performance as well. For example, Woodman and Hardy (1998) have found that organizational stressors (e.g., sport organization politics, poor administration and planning) can disrupt the peak performance environment and athlete functioning. To date, however, no studies have been conducted to look at coaches’ and athletes’ perceptions of the physical, psychological, environmental, and social factors that influence peak Olympic performance. A need exists to look at this issue from a broad perspective. Thus, the purpose of this study was to identify and examine physical, psychological, environmental, and social factors perceived by athletes and coaches to have positively and/or negatively affected performance at the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games.
## Table 1  Summary of Peak Performance Literature

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authors</th>
<th>Factors associated with peak performance</th>
<th>Factors associated with poor performance</th>
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<tr>
<td>Williams &amp; Krane (1998)</td>
<td>• well developed competitive routine and plan</td>
<td>• not prepared to deal with distractions</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• high levels of motivation and commitment</td>
<td>• changing things that worked</td>
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<td>• coping skills for dealing with distractions and unexpected events</td>
<td>• late team selection</td>
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<td>• heightened concentration</td>
<td>• inability to re-focus after distractions</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• high levels of self-confidence</td>
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<td>• self-regulation of arousal</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• visualization/imagery</td>
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<td>Orlick &amp; Partington (1988)</td>
<td>• mental readiness</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• ability to focus attention</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• ability to control performance imagery</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• total commitment to pursuit of excellence</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• high quality training, including goal setting, competitions simulation, mental imagery, detailed</td>
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<td></td>
<td>competition plans, and plans for dealing with distractions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Authors</td>
<td>Positive Expectancies</td>
<td>Negative Feeling States</td>
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| Gould, Eklund, & Jackson (1992a, 1992b) | • positive expectancies  
• optimal arousal states  
• heightened effort and commitment  
• use of systematic mental preparation  
strategies including preparation routines, tactical strategies focus, and motivational strategies | • negative feeling states  
• non-adherence to preparation routines  
• negative, irrelevant, or irregular patterns of thought | | |
| Gould, Finch, & Jackson (1993), Gould, Jackson, & Finch (1993a, 1993b) | • stress management strategies including rational  
thinking and self-talk, positive focus and orientation, social support, time management and prioritization, pre-competition, mental preparation, anxiety management, training hard and smart, isolation, ignoring stressors | | • sources of stress included relationship issues, expectations and pressure to perform, psychological and physical demands, environmental demands, and life direction concerns | |
| Woodman & Hardy (1998) | | | • organizational stressors, including sport organization politics, poor administration and planning | |
Method

Participants

The USOC was very interested in understanding why, during Olympic competition, some teams meet or exceed performance expectations, whereas others fail to accomplish performance goals. USOC officials were, therefore, consulted to help identify the most appropriate teams to interview. The goal in the selection of teams was to balance the number of men’s and women’s teams and to secure four teams that met or exceeded National Governing Body (NGB) performance expectations and four teams that failed to meet NGB expectations. As a result, interviews were conducted with coaches and athletes from four men’s teams and four women’s teams, and four teams that met or exceeded NGB expectations and four teams that failed to meet the expectations. To protect participant confidentiality, team names will not be used in presenting findings.

The athlete focus groups and coach interviews in the present study were part of a larger project examining factors that influenced athlete and coach performance in the unique Atlanta Olympic Games environment (Gould, Guinan, Greenleaf, Medbery, Strickland, Lauer, Chung & Peterson, 1998). In addition to the athlete focus groups and coach interviews, the larger project also included a mass survey of all 1996 U.S. Olympians and Olympic coaches and individual telephone interviews with Olympians.

Head coaches of the selected teams were contacted first and asked to participate in the investigation. All 10 coaches agreed to participate in the investigation, representing the eight individual teams. Two teams were represented by two coaches because head-coaching responsibilities were shared and did not follow the traditional “one-head-coach” format. In total, 7 male and 3 female coaches were interviewed. Coaches had varying levels of coaching experience. Three coaches had coached at previous Olympics, four at previous Olympic festivals, eight at previous Pan Am Games, and two at previous World Championships.

Several Olympians from each team were contacted by phone and asked to participate in the investigation. These athletes were selected based on their availability and proximity to a training site or competitive venue where the focus groups were to be held. At least three athletes agreed to participate in each interview, however on several occasions, only two athletes reported to the interview session. Thus, the focus groups ranged in size from two to four athletes. A total of 11 male and 12 female athletes participated in the focus group interviews. Athletes had varying levels of previous competitive experience. Eight athletes had competed in previous Olympics, 12 at previous Olympic festivals, 17 at Pan Am Games, and 8 at World or Junior World Championships.

Interviewer

The interviews were conducted by a female with a PhD in exercise and sport psychology. The interviewer was trained in qualitative research methodology, had four years of experience as a collegiate athlete, nine years experience as a collegiate coach and assistant athletic director, served on the NCAA National Field Hockey Committee, and had participated in all but one of the selected sports.
**Procedure**

Based on recommendations of USOC staff, teams of interest were identified and coaches of the selected teams were contacted first and asked to participate in the investigation. Coaches and NGB officials provided input on the availability of athletes, phone numbers, potential dates and events when several 1996 Olympians would be together, and pertinent information regarding the athletes. Interviews were scheduled at various spots around the country, coinciding with events in which several 1996 Olympians were scheduled to be together.

The coaches were interviewed individually, whereas following procedures recommended by Morgan (1993), the athletes were interviewed in focus groups consisting of 2 to 4 participants. Focus group methodology for the athlete interviews was chosen for several reasons. First, the focus group format was used to gain an in-depth understanding of the athletes’ perceptions of the factors that positively and negatively influenced their performance at the 1996 Olympics. As a qualitative research methodology, focus groups are well suited for obtaining in-depth participant responses (Morgan, 1993). Second, focus group methodology allowed for athletes to share information that can be lost in paper and pencil measures. Third, using focus groups allowed the investigator to probe and request additional clarity in responses. Finally, the focus group interviews allowed for purposeful sampling of teams that were of specific interest to the USOC. Coaches were individually interviewed in order to gain a greater understanding of factors that impacted athletes’ performance at the 1996 Olympic Games. The coach interviews served as a data source used in triangulating the findings of the focus group interviews.

The interviewer explained the purpose of the investigation, the format of the interview, and the contents of the informed consent form. Prior to starting the athlete interviews, the athletes were encouraged to share their own perspective, whether it supported or provided a different perspective from that already mentioned by other teammates.

The investigator followed a structured interview guide, but was free to proceed in the direction dictated by the natural flow of the conversation. The interview guide, based on previous peak performance literature and interviews with USOC staff, included questions designed to gain insights into the factors that influenced performance at the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta. Specifically, the questions focused on the following: (a) the comparison of Olympic competition to other competitions, (b) perceptions of actual performance compared to expected performance, (c) factors that positively influenced performance, (d) factors that negatively influenced performance, (e) perceived obstacles to performance, and (f) advice for future Olympic athletes and coaches. When appropriate, athletes and coaches were asked to reflect on and distinguish between the preparation period prior the Olympics and the actual Olympic experience. Responses were paraphrased to ensure proper interpretation and probed to ensure adequate understanding and detail of information. In general, the participants were enthusiastic and animated in their responses to the opportunity to “share” their stories.

The focus group and individual interviews lasted approximately 60 to 105 minutes, and were audiotaped for subsequent transcription. The athlete interviews were also videotaped to allow the co-investigators to view them at a later date.
Viewing the videotapes provided the co-investigators a first-hand view of the sessions and an understanding of the “whole” experience, including tone and body language and, thus a more accurate understanding of the written transcripts. Following the structured questioning, the participants were given the opportunity to share any additional information they thought would contribute to understanding the factors that positively or negatively impacted their performance at the 1996 Olympic Games. Upon completion of the interview, the participants were thanked for their participation and later sent a follow-up letter of appreciation.

Analysis

All interviews were tape recorded and content analyzed by three of the investigators following procedures recommended by Miles and Huberman (1994) and successfully employed in previous qualitative studies (Gould, Eklund & Jackson, 1993; Gould, Jackson, & Finch, 1993a; 1993b). Specifically, each investigator studied the videotapes of the interviews and read and reread the transcripts. Themes (quotes or paraphrased quotes representing a meaningful point or thought) were individually identified and consensually validated in group meetings with the three investigators. They were then organized into patterns of like responses in the data (e.g., all the hoopla in the village, too many village activities) and a summary label for the category was determined (village distractions). Coach and athlete responses were then summarized and a profile of each team was comprised. In addition, a composite profile, in the form of narrative description, was developed for the four teams that met performance expectations at the Games and the four teams that did not. The overall differences between those teams that met expectations and those that did not were noted.

Results

The Individual Team Profiles demonstrate not only the positive and negative factors acting on the athletes but the importance of looking at how the factors interact to create the performance environment. Therefore, the results include a profile of each individual team as well as a summary of the positive and negative factors influencing performance across all eight teams. Overall, the results suggest that there was no one factor or magic formula that determined Olympic performance. Instead, there were many factors contributing to the ultimate performance.

Individual Team Profiles

These findings can best be understood by first examining individual team profiles and then looking for patterns across teams. A number of individual team differences were evident relative to factors influencing performance.

Teams that Failed to Meet Performance Expectations

Team A. This team was unable to meet NGB performance expectations of medaling in Atlanta. Although they met their pre-set performance goal, their opponents surpassed performance expectations and they were unable to adjust their performance. Looking back on the experience, the athletes felt they were capable of more, including medaling.
The one positive factor identified by the participants was the physical conditioning of the team that resulted from an excellent physical training plan. It is noteworthy that the coaches and athletes failed to identify any additional positive factors, focusing the discussion more on the negative factors affecting performance.

Numerous negative factors were identified. Although the participants felt they were in excellent physical condition, it became evident that too much emphasis was placed on the mechanical and physical aspects of performance (e.g., physiological conditioning and state of the art equipment), while the “human” aspect of performance and mental training were ignored. For example, it was felt that the athletes were overtrained and not provided with sufficient rest and recovery from the high intensity training. Finally, the athletes met their performance standard “goals” set by the coaches for the Games, but the coaches and athletes were so “locked” into these goals that they had difficulty adjusting to better than expected performances by other teams in Atlanta. As one athlete noted, “. . . where you aim is where you’re gonna hit.”

Team cohesion problems plagued the team. This resulted from several factors: (a) a number of athletes expected to make the team did not, making it difficult to gel as a unit; (b) the selection of the athletes was so close to the Olympic performance that the selected athletes were not able to adjust to the unexpected team combination (physically or mentally); and (c) there was a lack of free flowing communication between the players and coaches. In addition, it was felt that the trials took place too close to the Olympic Games and the NGB staff put too much importance on the trials. This forced the athletes to attempt to “peak twice” with insufficient time to recover between the peaks.

Lastly, a factor that was reported to have both positive and negative effects was staying outside the Olympic Village. Staying outside of the Village allowed the athletes to focus their efforts on performance without interruptions, but it also prevented them from feeling the spirit and excitement of being “part of the Games.”

Team B. This team also had a very disappointing Olympics as winning a gold medal was thought to be realistic based on previous performances and in looking back on the competition. However, they did not win any type of medal at the Atlanta Games and performed below their capabilities.

In retrospect, the respondents reported several positive factors that facilitated performance to some degree at the Games. Specifically, they felt funding from the USOC helped them greatly in training together and having the necessary competitions needed to be ready to perform well at the Games. Despite the noted lack of help from the NGB and ACOG, it was also felt that support staff (e.g., video/scout expert, USOC staff, etc.) had a positive impact on their performance. The sport psychology consultant was said to have been somewhat helpful but could have been more helpful if he/she had more knowledge of the particular sport.

At the Games themselves, it was reported that the Village was excellent, as they had everything they needed, including a sense of protection. Though the Opening Ceremonies were perceived to be somewhat disorganized, they were motivating and facilitated a sense of team U.S.A. spirit. As noted by one player, participation in Opening Ceremonies signifies that you “have arrived.”

Several negative factors were reported by the participants and seemed much more salient than the previously mentioned positive factors. Chief among these negative factors was coaching problems that dominated the focus group interview with the athletes. In particular, the athletes were very critical of the coach’s lack of
Olympic experience, lack of in-depth understanding of the game, lack of follow-through on mental skills training, and inability to handle pressure and avoid distractions at the Games. The coach had no credibility with the athletes and was perceived as failing to follow through on important aspects of training.

Team selection was another factor perceived to have a negative impact on performance. It was felt that the selection process was too drawn out and too close to the Games themselves. In addition, the athletes expressed frustration over their difficulties in addressing the needs of their family and friends. They had a great deal of difficulty getting tickets and the planned sport psychology meeting with family members prior to the Games never took place—an example cited as a lack of coach follow-through. Finally, the coach mentioned that dealing with the media was a major distraction for the coaches and the team. This may have been magnified by the perception that this sport’s “media person” was more focused on public relations for the team than team performance.

Of all the teams interviewed, the greatest lack of correspondence between the coach and athletes responses existed in this team, especially in regard to factors having a negative impact on performance. The research team felt this resulted from the major coach credibility problem of which the coach had little, if any, awareness.

Team C. This team was highly favored to win a gold medal at the Games but failed to medal. Several positive factors were noted by the respondents. Technically, the coach was excellent and the athletes trained hard under his/her guidance. In addition, the athletes expressed a great deal of trust and respect for one another. As a result, they had a great deal of team success during the time period leading to the Olympics. All of these factors combined with the benefits of the USOC grants designed to enhance Olympic preparation were perceived as having a positive influence on performance.

The coach and athletes also identified many negative factors perceived to influence performance. Primary among these was overtraining, including quantity, intensity, and lack of appropriate taper as the Games neared. As noted by one athlete, they tried to “get the edge by pushing the edge.” But the push was too great, and the coach and athletes agreed that the overtraining had a disastrous effect on their performance. One contributing factor to the overtraining was the poor athlete-coach communication. Although the athletes greatly respected the coach, the coach came from a different culture and was not interested in the athletes’ personal problems or concerns, and the athletes did not feel comfortable sharing their feelings. Hence, the coach was unaware of the athletes’ mood states and did not detect the signs of overtraining.

As the athletes entered the Games, they were forced to deal with relatively high external expectations and pressure, problems securing tickets for family members, disharmony resulting from disproportionate media attention, and disagreements about sponsorship issues. In addition, the coach was making equipment changes up to the last minute and was perceived as being indecisive. The athletes felt out of sync and began to question the coach’s confidence in them as well as their confidence in themselves. All of these factors were perceived to have a negative impact on performance.

The coach also mentioned concern about the lack of funding for all that was necessary to train properly, ACOG/NGB inconsistencies and failure to keep promises, problems with the training sites, lack of communication from assistant coaches
about team issues, and one athlete in a key position not adhering to the competition plan.

Finally, the athletes reported the need for mental training in focus, stress management, and other sport psychology issues. The coach, who did not believe in sport psychology prior to the Atlanta Games, noted the necessity of appropriate sport psychology training for future teams.

**Team D.** Team D was the fourth team that did not meet performance expectations in Atlanta. Interestingly, few positive performance-influencing factors were identified by either the coaches or the athletes of this team. They did note that the older athletes helped the younger athletes in knowing what to expect. In addition, there was a perceived benefit to the “mock” Olympic Tournament that took place following the selection process. The Opening Ceremonies were viewed as positive and negative – the experience was tremendous, but due to lack of support from the USOC and ACOG, the athletes were not able to get out quickly and fatigue was a factor in their opening competition, which occurred the next day. Similarly, the Olympic Village generated energy, but not without considerable distractions (e.g., pagers going off constantly, video arcade, and interest in members of the opposite sex).

The discussion with the coaches and athletes focused primarily on the factors that negatively influenced performance. Among those were (a) a lack of team cohesion, (b) a lack of commitment by some players on the team, and (c) a lack of some athletes embracing the mental training, which was thought to contribute to the inability of some team members to deal with distraction. Contributing to the problems with mental training was the failure of the sport psychologist to deal with team building and the distrust some players had concerning the confidentiality of discussions with the sport psychologist.

Preparation problems included overtraining and team selection occurring too close to the Olympics. This prevented the team from having a necessary break before the final focus on the Games and made it difficult for the team to gel as a unit. Some athletes noted that they did not even have the opportunity to enjoy their success in making the Olympic team due to the immediate and intense focus on the Games. As noted by one athlete, “Two weeks after the Olympics, I felt awesome. Mentally, physically, everything. But I was just a wreck during the Olympics. I was just a wreck, a mental wreck. Not for the reason that I was nervous or worried about performance or anything, but I was like claustrophobic. I needed a mental break sometime a month ago.” At the Games themselves, there was a lack of depth on the team, increased pressure from family and friends, and a breakdown in the designated plan to deal with media. Aside from “team time,” some players became undisciplined and made poor decisions prior to competition.

Finally, there was a lack of communication and a lack of trust between the athletes, coaches, and sport psychologist. It was felt that the coaches and support staff lost their focus on the players and were not able to handle the stress of the Games and panicked and this negatively influenced performance. This emotion was so strong that one athlete stated, “. . . I really believe this – if we had no coaching staff at that Olympics, we would have medaled on our own without the coaching staff. Without their distractions and freak-outs and negativism, I think [the athletes] by ourselves would have medaled.”

When asked to reflect on the experience, both coaches and athletes agreed that the team was capable of a much better performance than they experienced.
The coaches, athletes, and staff, however, were not able to come together as a team and thus were not able to take advantage of their talents.

Teams that Met/Exceeded Performance Expectations

**Team E.** This team went into the Games, expected to win the gold medal, and did so. Numerous positive performance factors were mentioned by the athletes and coaches. Few negative factors were mentioned, partly because of the athletes’ and coaches’ abilities to reframe and adapt to potentially negative factors (e.g., a less than optimal tournament seeding, player number restrictions, time delays due to security, and some media interactions). The Opening Ceremonies was mentioned as a factor that had the potential for both a positive and negative influence—positively influencing motivation and team spirit, while being a tiring experience that took special attention to prevent negative performance repercussions. This team, however, anticipated the potentially negative side effects of participation in Opening Ceremonies and created a plan to maximize the benefits and minimize the negative impact.

Positive factors affecting performance prior to the Olympics included turning a disappointing World Championship finish the year before the Games into a positive source of motivation. The coaches also had excellent time management tied to a larger and detailed vision of a plan to perform well at the Games. Positive influences within their performance plan were the following factors: training in residency, training at the venue prior to the Olympics, considerable help from a sport psychology consultant, international competition, a delicate blend between a demanding training schedule and appropriate breaks (time away from training to get rejuvenated and reconnected with family and loved ones), and limited travel prior to the Olympics.

During the Olympics factors identified as positively influencing performance included competition and housing away from Atlanta, not letting their less than desirable seed lead to poor mental attitude, positive crowd and fan support, and having a well thought out plan for handling Opening Ceremonies and potential distractions.

As previously mentioned, this team embraced the Olympic pressure, exhibiting team chemistry, player leadership, and an attitude that “we are winning this, no doubt about it,” and there are “no insurmountable obstacles.” Finally, this team organized a highly effective two layer buffer system that kept parents from distracting team members while at the same time allowing families to provide positive motivation and support.

In many ways this team and coaching staff provided an excellent model for Olympic success. They approached preparation and performance from a holistic, well-rounded perspective. They consciously and deliberately worked on attitude, cohesion, mental preparation, fitness, nutrition, strength training, acclimatization, and enjoyment. This approach was made possible due to support from the USOC and NGB, research and meticulous attention to detail, the opportunity for international competition, and a tremendous relationship and respect between the coaches, athletes, and support staff.

**Team F.** Team F was another team expected to win a gold medal in Atlanta and did so. However, as compared to Team E, this team was not as successful at reframing and adapting to negative factors and thus reported more factors having a potentially negative influence on performance.

There were several factors that played a negative role in this team’s “quest for the Gold.” The team selection process was perceived as a negative factor. It
was long, intense, and delayed. Injuries to key players delayed selection even more and made it difficult for the athletes to become familiar with their specific roles and to gel as a unit. This was combined with a training period that was perceived as too long and intense, primarily because it lacked necessary breaks and an appropriate taper at the end. In addition, the athletes felt there was poor communication and organization by the coaches in relation to the training plan, causing frustration and making it difficult to know what to expect. Luckily, however, this team was able to counter these negative effects because of positive team characteristics (e.g., previous athlete experience and success together; team cohesion, trust, and respect; and directed and unified goals), program decisions (e.g., excellent mental preparation, competitive simulations, leaving the village to train, etc.), and positive factors influencing performance.

The coaches and athletes identified numerous positive factors thought to have affected performance. A number of these factors were associated with the extensive experience of the athletes, including personal experience as athletes and years of competition together. The athletes also exhibited a strong “performance focus” at the Games where their primary mission was to perform well and win the Gold medal. They expressed strong team cohesion, respect, and trust. In addition, simulated Olympic competition; practicing at the venue; mental training; support from family, friends, and fans; and staying in the Village were said to contribute to their success.

The athletes and coaches also felt they had good support for their Olympic campaign. In particular, they felt the financial support of the USOC, especially in regard to paying full-time coaches, was very important for their success. Additionally, they felt their mental trainer and training program as well as their strength trainer and training program were critical for their success. For example, prior to the Games, a family meeting was held and a mental preparation plan was developed. Additionally, coaches and athletes agreed that having a great media person and a seasoned and extremely knowledgeable team manager who handled many of the meticulous details also contributed to performance in a positive fashion.

Finally, several factors were identified as having both a positive and negative effect. As expressed by other teams, increased media exposure is often great to have, but it can present a problem when selected athletes become the center of attention, a factor this team was forced to face. Another factor having the potential for positive and negative consequences was that multiple individuals were given head coaching responsibilities. This provided enhanced knowledge and experience and allowed focus and guidance in very unique aspects of the sport. Having multiple coaches caused some problems in defining roles and decision-making responsibilities, though these problems diminished as time progressed.

**Team G.** This team was expected to do well at the Games and did so, winning the gold medal. Positive factors identified as influencing performance included (a) the amount of previous experience in international competitions and the athletes’ success in those competitions, (b) the lack of pressure and expectation to win and thus the sense of “nothing to lose,” (c) teammate trust and confidence, (d) training together at a common site, (e) arriving early and training at the venue before competition, (f) knowing what to expect by gathering information from previous Olympians, and (g) USOC support.

The coach and athletes were not in total agreement about the factors that positively and negatively influenced performance. In particular, the coach felt that the highly competitive selection process was a positive factor preparing the athletes
for Olympic pressure, whereas the athletes viewed the selection process as too long, drawn out, and fatiguing. Another area of disagreement centers on the accessibility of personal coaches. The coach noted that personal coaches were provided access to the competition area, whereas the athletes would have preferred more interactions with their personal coach and less with the Olympic coach, a coach they rarely interacted with in the preparation phase for the Olympics.

Negative factors identified included dealing with the media (note: this sport is one that does not normally get much media coverage) and stress and pressure of suddenly being in the spotlight. Lastly, athletes noted problems with the head coach as they had their own personal coaches, but the coach did not perceive this athlete concern as an issue.

Overall, the coach cited a number of positive factors influencing performance and only a few negative factors. The athletes, however, identified a more balanced list of positive and negative performance influencing factors.

Team H. Team H differed from the three other teams that met or exceeded expectations in that they “met expectations,” but none of the athletes won Olympic medals. It was the team’s best Olympic performance as almost all the athlete’s exhibited personal bests.

The athletes felt that their coach was critical to their success. The coach had tremendous credibility, was enthusiastic, and very knowledgeable. The coach monitored all aspects of the Olympic environment and made appropriate adjustments to facilitate athlete readiness. Finally, the coach formulated a clear plan for peak performance and adhered to that plan. Most notably the athletes believed in and followed the plan. Two other factors identified as positively influencing performance were the great physical condition of the athletes and that prior to the Games, the athletes trained by themselves in an environment that was close to their normal training regiment.

Negative factors identified by the coach and athletes included the lack of financial support for training. This interfered with the athletes’ preparation as they were forced to worry about financial support and daily concerns. They also found the media to have a negative influence on performance (note: this team did not normally receive much media attention). The athletes also struggled with the sentiment (from media, family, and friends) that only those athletes who medal at the Games succeed, despite their notably positive achievements. Lastly, respondents indicated that believing their competitors were taking drugs to enhance performance and not getting caught was demoralizing and negatively influenced performance.

**Comparison of Teams that Met or Failed to Meet Performance Expectations: Positive Factors Influencing Performance**

When the four teams that exhibited performances at or above expectations were compared to the four teams who failed to meet expectations on all major themes, a number of differences were noted. Table 2 contains those themes that distinguish the two groups and the number of teams within each group citing a particular theme. These differences are discussed below.
Teams that successfully met or exceeded expectations spent a good deal of time training together prior to the Games. This may have involved either a residency program or bringing the team together for numerous competitions and training camps. One athlete said that living and training together acted as a source of motivation for him. He stated that it “definitely stepped me up mega notches.” A coach mentioned that he liked the resident training program because it allowed him to control his athletes’ training environment. While not uniform, teams that failed to meet expectations did not mention this as an important factor influencing performance.

Crowd Support

Those teams that performed at or above expectations more often mentioned spectators and crowds as a positive performance influence. One coach of a team that exceeded performance expectations stated that his athletes “loved to play in front of crowds, they want to showcase their skills, they want to show everybody what they can do.” Only one of the teams that failed to meet expectations mentioned this factor.

Family/Friend Support

Family and friend support was more often mentioned as a positive performance factor for teams that met or exceeded expectations. Moreover, this involved more
than perceiving family and friends as supportive. Teams that were more successful often had plans for educating family and friends about the demands of high performance sport and the best way to enhance their athlete’s Olympic experience. They were also more likely to have a structure to help athletes and their families communicate in appropriate ways at the Games, while not interfering with the athletes’ preparation or focus. One team had a very effective “two-layer buffer” system between the families and the athletes. The coach met with the families and explained how they could be great resources for the athletes. The first layer of the system involved two mothers that acted as communication liaisons in case of problems or questions. The second layer involved two administrators who knew the athletes’ families. The families were asked to rely on the parent and administrative representatives and to avoid contacting the athletes directly. This system helped athletes enjoy their families without having to worry about meeting their needs (i.e., getting them tickets, answering questions).

**Mental Preparation**

Both groups experienced stress and pressure at and leading up to the Games. All of the more successful teams and athletes, however, mentioned having mentally prepared to deal with such events. Besides discussing mental preparation more often, teams that met or exceeded expectations specifically mentioned the importance of adhering to mental preparation routines. Interestingly, the two teams from the “failed to meet performance expectations” group that did report mental preparation as having a positive influence on performance, also noted that they did not do enough or spend enough time on this area. Teams that failed to meet expectations were much less detailed in their descriptions of their mental preparation practices—they merely discussed the importance of it. One athlete from a team that did not meet performance expectations stated that “just as physical training is a process, so is mental training, and you can’t expect to have an expert come in and do a quick fix.”

**Focus and Commitment**

Relative to the ability to focus, teams that successfully met expectations more often reported a sole performance focus, total commitment, and the ability to reframe negative events in a positive light. One athlete on a team that met/exceeded performance expectations stated that “we knew that we were there for one purpose and one purpose only . . . it wasn’t to go party . . . it was for us to be the best that we could be.”

**Other Differences**

Besides the specific differences in the number of positive performance enhancing themes mentioned by each group, a number of qualitative differences occurred in terms of the way in which specific factors related to the Games were handled. A number of these differences are listed below.

**Training at Olympic venue.** Teams from both groups trained at the Olympic venue prior to the Games. One athlete said that training at the venue was helpful in familiarizing himself with the venue. However, at the Games, teams that performed up to or exceeded expectations more often left the venue to prepare away from potential distractions. One athlete state that “I was kind of glad [that we
left] because I was starting to feel like I was under the microscope too much, particularly from our competition, so I needed to get away from that.”

**Team cohesion.** Both groups mentioned team cohesion as being an important component of good performance, but more successful teams also emphasized athlete leadership as a key component of team cohesion. One athlete on a team that met or exceeded performance expectations stated that “we had respect for one another and we made each other live up to a higher standard.”

**Media training.** Teams that met or exceeded expectations mentioned the utility of media training and the utility of support personnel, especially sport psychology specialists. It is important to note the dilemma between giving athletes exposure and a sense of media support and obstructing athletes’ training and focus.

### Comparison of Teams that Met or Failed to Meet Performance Expectations: Negative Factors Influencing Performance

Table 3 summarizes differences between the themes noted by groups of teams that met or exceeded performance expectations and those that did not on negative factors influencing performance. These distinctions are discussed below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Met expectations $(n = 4)$</th>
<th>Failed to meet expectations $(n = 4)$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Planning problems</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of implementation of plans</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of follow-through</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plans implemented too late</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team cohesion concerns</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of trust</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unequal press coverage of teammates</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team slow to “gel”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of experience</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel problems</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coach issues</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative attitude toward coach</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor athlete-coach communication</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of athlete-coach trust</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus and commitment</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Planning Problems**

Teams that failed to meet expectations more often reported a lack of planning or failure to implement or follow through on plans. One athlete said, “we had a zillion plans, but we never followed through.” Those teams that met or exceeded expectations and noted a negative impact related to planning talked about plans being implemented too late in the cycle. It should be noted that only coaches reported this concern.

**Team Cohesion Concerns**

Concerns related to cohesion, athlete trust, unequal press coverage of individual team members, and failure to prepare properly for competition were more often mentioned by teams that failed to meet expectations. Successful teams that identified cohesion concerns mentioned that the team did not gel as quickly as desired. However, the lack of gelling was more likely to reflect difficulty in understanding roles and responsibilities rather than difficulty between individuals.

**Lack of Experience**

Teams that did not meet or exceeded expectations more often identified a lack of experience as a negative performance factor. The lack of experience referred to coaches as well as athletes. One athlete said that her team had an “inexperienced coaching staff caught up in Olympic excitement.”

**Travel Problems**

Teams that failed to meet expectations reported more travel problems, whether it involved too much travel or not traveling enough together as a team.

**Coaching Issues**

Negative attitudes toward the coach, poor athlete-coach communication, and a lack of athlete-coach trust were mentioned by teams that failed to meet expectations. Athletes from one team in particular focused much of their discussion on coaching issues. One athlete said, “I’m not so sure that . . . we were taught the game from our coach.” Another athlete stated that “there were probably a few of us that were better prepared for the distractions and handled the situation better than some of the coaching staff.” Those teams that met or exceeded expectations that identified coaching issues as negative performance factors focused on such issues as wanting more access to personal coaches or synchronizing multiple coaches into specified roles.

**Focus and Commitment**

Athlete focus and commitment problems were reported by teams that failed to reach expectations, but not by any of the successful teams. One athlete said, “when it came to mental training, not all players bought into it.” Focus and commitment problems were also evident at the Games as one athlete said her teammates were “playing laser tag two hours before the game, they have no clue who we’re playing, what the line-up is, or what’s going on.”
Other Differences

A number of qualitative differences emerged in the quality and manner in which specific issues were addressed beyond the specific differences in the number of themes cited by each group previously discussed.

Overtraining. Teams failing to meet expectations more often overtrained. These teams typically trained too long, too hard, or both. The main distinguishing factors for the teams that met or exceeded expectations were the number of breaks taken and the willingness to taper as the Olympics approached. One athlete stated that “sometimes you go a little overboard on [training] . . . I think the last weeks that we did.” Another athlete said that “what I needed was a mental break.”

Distractions. All teams experienced stress. However, less successful teams experienced more stress from distractions from securing tickets for family and friends or external pressure. More importantly, the less successful teams typically did not have plans to deal with these distractions. Referring to distractions from pagers, e-mail, and computers, one coach of a team that did not meet performance expectations stated that “it was a technological nightmare as a first time coach in the Olympics.” Teams that met or exceeded performance expectations researched and prepared for distractions.

Olympic village distractions. Teams that failed to meet performance expectations were more likely to report distractions associated with the Olympic Village. One coach said that “we were in there for almost the entire time and that is just way too long to have to be subjected to all of the stimuli.” Those that met or exceeded performance expectations reported a positive experience or did not stay in the Village.

Discussion

The results of this study verify existing sport psychology research on peak performance in sport. Specifically, relative to results from previous studies (see Table 1), our findings supported Williams and Krane’s conclusions that well-developed competitive routines and plans, high levels of motivation and commitment, and having coping skills for dealing with distractions and unexpected events were associated with Olympic performance success. Similarly, the focus groups’ participants in the present study were consistent with Orlick and Partington’s (1988) successful Olympians in that they emphasized the importance of mental readiness, a total commitment to the pursuit of performance excellence, and high quality training in achieving peak performance. Not being prepared to deal with distractions, changing things that worked, late team selection, and inability to refocus after distractions were associated with poor performance. Gould, Eklund, and Jackson’s (1992a, 1992b) Olympic wrestler findings that mental preparation routines, technical strategy focus, and motivational strategies were associated with performance success, and nonadherence to preparation routines were associated with performance failure were also strongly verified.

Although our study was not designed to provide an in-depth examination of stress sources in the Olympians, results were generally consistent with Gould, Jackson and Finch’s (1993a, 1993b) finding that a variety of stress management strategies are used by elite athletes and that poor performance is associated with a
variety of stress sources. Lastly, consistent with Woodman and Hardy’s (1998) contentions, a number of organizational stressors were associated with less successful performance including sport organization politics and poor administration.

Although these findings are important because they verified much of the previous research on peak performance in athletes, it is important to note that our study was not designed to provide a positivistic “test” of all the previous results summarized in Table 1. Hence, the failure to find peak performance to be associated with heightened concentration, visualization-imagery, or optimal arousal states does not negate previous findings in these areas. Instead, it more likely reflects that these issues were not specifically discussed in the open-ended focus group format employed in this study.

A number of other findings were also derived from this investigation that extended and offered new insights and possible directions for sport science researchers studying performance optimization. For example, optimal physical conditioning while not overtraining was perceived to have a major impact on Olympic performance. Overtraining has been a topic of considerable interest both to sport physiologists (Hackney, Pearman, & Nowacki, 1990; Murphy, Fleck, Dudley, & Callister, 1990) and sport psychologists (Murphy et al., 1990). Research in this area, however, is still in its infancy (Hackney et al., 1990) and our results certainly verify the importance of placing increased emphasis on the topic. Based on our findings, especially salient is the need to develop a plan to successfully deal with the fine line between getting the edge over the opponents and going over the edge physically and mentally. Included in this plan is the need for practical markers that can be used to detect overtraining as well as facilitating coaches’ abilities to read or detect overtrained states in their athletes.

Relative to preparing for distractions, Woodman and Hardy (1998) have recently shown that sport psychologists need to expand their view of distractions from a sole focus on athlete centered issues (e.g., injury, bad calls from officials) to the study of organizational stressors that disrupt the peak performance environment (e.g., sport organization politics, poor administration and planing) and athlete functioning. The present findings certainly support this conclusion as factors such as the scheduling of Opening Ceremonies, a perceived lack of governing body support, and transportation problems were all issues identified as influencing performance.

Related to preparation for distractions, an extremely interesting finding from this study was the perceived influence that family and significant others had on athletes. On one hand, they have the potential to be a tremendous source of social support for the athlete. In contrast, if inappropriate family and significant other interactions occur, this social support becomes very negative and distracting. This finding parallels social support research with injured World Cup skiers and junior tennis burnouts (Udry, Gould, Bridges, & Tuffey, 1997), showing that the provision of social support is not always positive in its effects. Researchers need to better document positive and negative effects of social support and better understand individual athlete differences in this regard.

Researchers also need to consider a new dimension to the concept of confidence in performance. Although the strong relationship between confidence and superior performance has been consistently supported in the literature (McAuley, 1992), the present findings showed that at the Olympic Games athlete confidence levels can be atypically “fragile” and can more easily be shaken. This is an important and interesting notion that has not been studied by self-efficacy investigators.
Why is this the case? What can be done to sturdy one’s confidence, particularly in an environment that is different from all other competitions and occurs only once every four years? Answering questions like these have important implications for high performance sport and self-efficacy theory.

“Team building” exercises were also reported to play an important role in building cohesion in Olympic teams. While ropes courses and other such programs are often used to develop and enhance team cohesion, little evaluation research has been conducted in elite sport to verify program effectiveness. This type of research would be extremely helpful, especially in light of current exercise psychology research showing how instructors can be taught team building skills which increase adherence and group satisfaction (Carron, Spink, & Prapavessis, 1997). Additionally, emerging out of the focus groups was the finding that peer leaders were extremely important components of team success. Despite the importance that coaches and athletes place on this issue, it has not been studied in the peak performance literature.

Emerging from the data was the notion that coping skills had to be so well learned that they were employed in an automatic fashion that required little analysis and contemplation. Specifically, while all athletes reported the need for more emphasis on mental training, those who performed up to or exceeded expectations were very specific about what techniques they used and how they employed those techniques. Athletes who failed to achieve performance expectations were much more general in their descriptions of coping strategies. This finding supports coping research with elite Olympic wrestlers where Gould, Eklund, and Jackson (1993) found that medal versus non-medal winning wrestlers had more firmly entrenched coping strategies which were automatically executed with little conscious thought. Non-medal winning wrestlers, however, did not have their coping strategies so well automated.

Research investigating peak performance and the Olympics typically focuses attention on athletes. However, our results have shown that U.S. coaches are performers in their own ways and their performance directly influenced athletes at the Games. If they markedly changed their coaching behaviors, did not handle crisis situations, or failed to monitor their athletes training status, performance suffered. Yet, if they had high levels of trust and credibility with their athletes, stayed cool under pressure, and made fair but decisive decisions, they became a source of confidence. Like the athletes, then, coaches need to be prepared to deal with stress and distractions by participating in mental skills training themselves. For the most part, however, sport psychology researchers have failed to study psychological skills for coaching effectiveness, especially at the elite levels. Research in this area is badly needed.

Finally, while the focus of this study was on factors influencing athlete and coach performance, nonperformance issues must be recognized. Chief among these is preparing U.S. athletes and coaches to process their experiences at the Games (whether successful or not) and to properly deal with life after the Games. The present results indicate that one’s Olympic experience can have long-lasting effects on participation. Not only can these issues affect personal satisfaction and fulfillment but also future Olympic success. These findings, then, support the need for sport psychological career-related research with U.S. Olympic athletes, perhaps tracking the effects of their Olympic experience over a period of years. Similarly, several months after the Sydney and Salt Lake Games, it may be useful to hold debriefing sessions for participants and assess the effectiveness of such sessions.
on mental health. In fact, several of the athletes and coaches involved in the focus group sessions (from both successful and less successful teams) indicated the usefulness of the focus group discussions. For some, it was the first time they had looked back on their Olympic experience in nearly a year. It allowed them to reflect on their success and failure, to process their experience and to release emotion. Coaches and athletes can learn a great deal from each other simply by reflecting, processing, and communicating about past performances.

Strengths and Limitations

Like all investigations, this study had both scientific strengths and limitations that must be understood in interpreting the results. A strength of the study was the verification of findings across data sources (coaches, athletes). Thus, particular importance was placed on results found to be reported across these sources and the trustworthiness of our conclusions was strengthened. Moreover, the profiles of individual teams allowed us to see how the numerous individual factors influencing performance interacted in particular group contexts.

Second, the focus group participants interviewed appeared very cooperative, open and honest, and frank in their discussions. They appeared comfortable in providing positive and negative comments about the Olympic committee and their NGB. A third strength of the investigation was its broad scope. While mental factors involved in peak performance were certainly a major focus of the study, focus group participants were encouraged to discuss other performance influencing factors (e.g., transportation, overtraining).

A limitation of the present study was its retrospective design. Because the data was collected after Olympic outcomes had been determined, there is no way to determine whether attribution effects and memory bias were activated. That is, teams and coaches who performed up to expectations or medaled may have recalled more favorable experiences, while teams and coaches who failed to meet expectations or did not medal may have focused more on and recalled more negative events. A related weakness was the length of time (one year) the data was collected after the Games were concluded. While this was unavoidable due to the timing of the USOC request for the study, this may have influenced participant recall. It should be noted, however, that interview participants never mentioned or seemed to have any problems remembering the events of the Games. Additionally, some of the information gleaned in the study (e.g., Olympic village distractions) could only be identified retrospectively.

Implications for Practice

These findings certainly have implications for sport psychology consultants working with elite Olympic athletes and potential Olympians. Athletes need to be aware of the factors that are associated with enhanced performance such as adhering to competitive routines and the importance of facilitating team cohesion. Awareness is not enough, however. The factors identified in this study must be developed through long-term mental training and preparation programs, a major finding identified by these Olympians. Finally, mental preparation is not totally in the control of athletes and coaches. Efforts must be made to organize and control the Olympic
environment by, for example, educating parents and significant others about ways to facilitate athlete support and teaching competitors how to recognize and avoid village distractions. Most important is the need to develop strategies for dealing with numerous unexpected events and distractions that will occur even with excellent planning.

We think our study also emphasizes the importance and value of debriefing Olympic athletes about the role psychological factors play in performance enhancement. Not only will this enhance peak performance knowledge, but we observed that for many of the athletes involved in the focus groups, the interviews let them process and come to terms with their Olympic experience, whether they were from successful or less successful teams.

Working in Finland, Hanin (1999) has also demonstrated that Olympic debriefing sessions involving similar methods to this study are excellent ways for sport organizations to evaluate their programmatic efforts. He goes on to indicate that we not limit findings from such meetings to post-Olympic debriefing but hold pre-Olympic processing meetings where athlete and coach lessons from past Olympics can serve as valuable resources for new coaches and athletes joining the Olympic team.

Conclusions

In a team briefing speech at Nagano Olympic processing, legendary U.S. Olympic speed skater Bonnie Blair told U.S. athletes that “successfully performing in the Olympics is like being a kid in a candy shop. The trick is to taste all the candy, but not eat so much one becomes sick.” Our results are consistent with Blair’s advice. The key is for the U.S. athletes to draw energy and enthusiasm from the Olympic experience so that they stay positive and relaxed, while not getting so caught up in the hoopla of the Games that they become distracted, lose focus, and forget their mission of achieving competitive excellence. It is hoped that the results of this study help Olympic athletes and coaches better prepare to balance the excitement of the Games with the focus needed for peak performance.

References


Authors’ Notes

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2Interview guides can be obtained from the primary investigator.

3NGB performance expectations were determined prior to the Olympic Games and were based on previous World and International competition performance and coach input.

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