

OLYMPIC PREPARATIONS AND SPORTS PSYCHOLOGY

X. R.Kadirov

Professor, Department of Physical Culture
Asia International University
Email: rashidkadirov500@gmail.com

Abstract: The preparation period for the Olympic Games and other major international competitions is characterized by significant psychological pressure on both athletes and coaches. This prolonged process demands effective teamwork and the involvement of qualified sports psychologists who utilize techniques to optimize athletic performance. Extended training camps often lead athletes to experience emotional disturbances such as hostility, insecurity, anxiety, negative thinking, and self-doubt, which negatively affect their performance. Long-term tournaments reduce athletes' extroversion, limit their social interactions, impair analytical thinking, and increase error rates. Therefore, managing psychological stress and ensuring mental readiness is crucial. Effective coping strategies, requiring professional psychological expertise, play a vital role in maintaining performance stability. Consequently, the certification and professional qualification of sports psychologists must be prioritized. Furthermore, during international competitions, adherence to fundamental psychological principles is essential for the success of the team. During international team travel, certain principles that must be known and implemented for effective team psychology should be adopted.

Keywords: Olympic preparation, Long-term preparation, Sports psychology

Introduction

Interviews conducted with athletes and coaches indicate that the Olympic Games are unlike any other competitions, being the largest and most demanding events that require exceptional effort. May, in a report describing how the United States Olympic teams prepared for the Los Angeles Olympic Games over a two-year period and how sports psychologists were involved as an applied support team for the first time, emphasizes that Olympic preparation is a challenging and demanding process. Hardy also classifies major events such as the Olympic Games as stress-inducing tournaments of special importance. Moreover, it is acknowledged that, in addition to their features that promote success, harmony, and athlete satisfaction, the Olympic Games also possess aspects that can lead to significant psychological strain. The Olympic Games are built upon competitive sports, requiring attention to detail and high levels of resilience. In addition to long-term technical and physical preparation, one must also be aware of the uniqueness of the Olympic competitions, which require meticulous planning and readiness to perform at the highest level on one of the most prestigious sporting stages in the world [1].

The period that begins long before the Olympic Games and continues until the end of the competitions is characterized by intense tension and conflicts between coaches and athletes. In such an important process, effective teamwork is essential, and within this cooperation, sports psychologists must be equipped with techniques that enable athletes to display their optimal performance. Long-term events such as the Olympic Games are regarded as demanding and stressful not only for athletes and coaches but also for the support teams working within these organizations. Terry highlights some of the challenges faced by British Olympic athletes during training camps, emphasizing that these problems should be addressed and resolved by the support staff [2].

The significance of the Olympics, the magnitude of the event compared to others, the competitive pressure, security concerns, accreditation procedures, unnecessary media pressure,

the process of obtaining tickets for family or friends, long queues, disturbances in the Olympic village, and transportation problems all contribute to an increase in emotional distress.

Nideffer, who served as the team psychologist for the U.S. men's athletics team during the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games, identified several serious psychological issues among athletes: increased feelings of hostility, heightened insecurity, hallucinations, fear of killing someone or being killed, suicidal tendencies, decreased sense of safety, negative thinking, frequent apologizing, and/or feelings of losing sanity during long-term training camps. These emotional responses manifest in athletes as negative thinking and self-doubt, necessitating timely and appropriate psychological intervention. Nideffer even reports assisting an athlete who attempted suicide during the Games. Similarly, Terry describes the therapeutic work conducted with an athlete who had a snake phobia during training camp in the United States, and how performance was restored following treatment.

In addressing these issues, it is necessary to work separately with coaches, administrative personnel, and athletes. In a study conducted by Nideffer, Bond, Cei, and Manili with world and Olympic champions, it was observed that athletes showed increased self-focus and decreased self-confidence, leading to greater error rates. Pensgaard and Duda categorize stress sources among Olympic athletes under four main areas:

- a) **Performance-related stress** ("I feel that I will perform poorly"),
- b) **Psychosocial stress** (negative thoughts, especially feelings such as "I will not be able to perform as well as I used to"),
- c) **External stress** (behavior of referees and competitors),
- d) **Injury-related stress** (fear of re-injury or not being able to compete again if injured) [3].

Long-term preparations required for today's Olympic Games or similar tournaments cause athletes to come under pressure, experience a decrease in extroversion, a limitation of social activities, a decline in analytical thinking, and as a result, an increase in the number of mistakes they make. Hanin also states that the relationship between emotions and performance is multidimensional and closely associated with athletic performance, indicating that while certain emotions may enhance performance in some athletes, they may lead to different responses in others. Therefore, athletes begin to experience certain limitations in their ability to achieve success as a result of the stress and pressure they are exposed to. Vallerand and Blanchard point out that emotional fluctuations can be high at any level of athletic performance. Emotions are considered to play a role in the quality of athletic experience and performance variables. In fact, sports literature shows that emotional reactions and the replacement of past experiences with new ones are both associated with athletic outcomes. These emotional experiences and characteristics carried over from the past can impose certain limitations on athletic performance. These limitations are often self-imposed by the athletes themselves as internal obstacles [4].

These self-imposed limitations can be summarized as follows:

1. **Avoiding the repetition of required activities:** The athlete postpones necessary training sessions by making excuses such as pain or not feeling ready, and this avoidance may continue indefinitely.
2. **Excessive self-awareness:** The athlete begins to see themselves from an outsider's perspective. Although this may initially seem like a useful strategy, when it becomes excessive, the athlete starts thinking, "If someone else were doing this now, they would perform perfectly," or "What will others think of me?" which leads to emotional exhaustion.
3. **Believing they are constantly unlucky:** Athletes frequently use complaints as justification. Such attitudes shift their focus from internal control to external control.

4. **Excessive concern about environmental conditions:** Athletes continuously produce excuses to justify not performing at their best, such as “the water is too cold” or “there isn’t enough light.”

5. **The athlete’s body not being at the required level of readiness:** Experiencing stomach discomfort, the urge to urinate, or feeling physically weak and fatigued during competition indicates that even if the athlete is cognitively prepared, their body is not yet at the required level of physical readiness [5].

The elimination of distortions, tension, and stress experienced by athletes, as well as helping athletes feel mentally prepared and enabling them to overcome their current situation, requires learning certain coping strategies. Coping strategies demand a solid foundation of psychological knowledge. Therefore, when existing practices are carefully examined, it becomes evident that the issue of certification for sports psychologists must be addressed with priority. When Jerry May was assigned the task of selecting sports psychologists for the Olympic Teams in 1981, the first issue he emphasized was the necessity of resolving the certification problem. In line with this, he conducted a study in which he selected 12 sports psychologists either those coming from a sports science background with certification in psychology, or those with a psychology background who had completed certification in sports science and initiated the first major applied intervention in 1982 with 12 sports psychologists across 11 disciplines for the United States Olympic Teams.

Pensgaard and Duda, in their study on the preparation of the U.S. Olympic Teams for the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games, reported a strong relationship between positive emotions and positive performance. They also stated that within team settings, individuals who possessed and applied coping strategies were able to produce clearer results in determining the team’s overall outcomes. Negative emotions were associated with poor results, while positive emotions were associated with successful outcomes. Within this context, it is essential that the certification issue of sports psychologists in our country be resolved rapidly. In a study conducted by Korus, it was revealed that 82% of sports psychologists in our country were working in the field with weak or virtually non-existent psychological education. In recent years, this situation has not significantly changed; moreover, due to media influence and the demand created by the void in the field, many individuals lacking expertise have claimed involvement and attempted to engage in practice [6].

However, Terry, who was one of the four individuals responsible for supervising sports psychologists working with the British Olympic Teams during the preparation camp for the Atlanta Olympic Games, described the working practices of sports psychologists from the start of the U.S. camp until the end of the Games as follows: “They conducted athletes’ mental training, relaxation practices, daily monitoring, preparation of emotional profiles, administration of various psychological assessments, the operation of a 24-hour crisis response center, implementation of measures to help athletes and coaches feel better, and the regulation of social interactions to alleviate distress.”

Preparations for the Olympic Games, which require long-term psychological readiness, constitute an extended training process that must be carried out with knowledgeable and experienced sports psychologists. However, meaningful development in performance can only be achieved through a well-planned long-term intervention and the enhancement of psychological skills.

1. Roles and responsibilities of the team psychologist: A clear area of responsibility must be defined among the coach, head coach, administrative personnel, sports science staff, medical staff, and athletes within the team. This is particularly important in terms of identifying the expectations and limits of the sports psychologist. Therefore, specifying clearly to whom the

psychologist is responsible will be beneficial. In most cases, it is preferred that responsibility be directed primarily toward the head coach [7].

2. Integration with coaches' programs: At times, being responsible to the head coach may lead to difficulties. A team may have more than two coaches, and while some may be willing to cooperate, others may choose not to collaborate. However, during a long-term event, communication with the sports psychologist becomes inevitable, and this should be perceived as an informal consultation relationship.

3. Athlete-coach-psychologist relationship: The team psychologist must remember that they are part of a triangular relationship involving the athlete, the coach, and the psychologist. In multidisciplinary teams, other staff members will also become part of this relationship. While the sports physician provides recommendations concerning injuries or medical conditions, the sports psychologist will offer input regarding psychological states. If collaboration is achieved, communication becomes clearer and more effective. A sports psychologist who refuses to work in cooperation with the team and coaches will not be successful. When working closely with athletes, non-private information about the athlete should be shared with coaches or the sports physician. Failure to do so may lead coaches to believe that full commitment to the team is lacking [8].

4. Conducting a comprehensive needs analysis: It is essential to conduct a needs analysis for athletes, coaches, and the support staff individually. Needs may vary at different stages or depending on the duration of the tournament. A sports psychologist who avoids a standardized approach and instead tailors their work to the needs of coaches and athletes will be more effective. According to their professional experience, the sports psychologist must maintain flexibility within the program.

5. Establishing a process-oriented focus: Sports psychologists working with teams should establish a clear process focus. It is unrealistic to expect a sports psychologist to remain emotionally uninfluenced when working with a team throughout a long preparation period and accompanying them to a major tournament. However, it must be remembered that professionalism requires being ready to operate "in the engine room." The task of sports psychologists is not to win a gold medal themselves, but to contribute effectively to creating an environment in which the athlete is enabled to win. A sports psychologist who brings their personal needs into the performance environment has no place in tournaments or long-term preparations [9].

6. Competitive performance requirements: The role of the elite athlete and coach is to perform at an international level and, if possible, to win. The sports psychologist must recognize the requirements of this environment. They must contribute to the creation of conditions necessary for winning in international competitions. Therefore, the sports psychologist must be as attuned to the competitive and performance-focused atmosphere as the athletes and coaches.

7. Preparing for the worst: Bond states that the value of a sports psychologist is most often questioned by coaches and even by athletes during critical interventions throughout a tournament. To gain respect within the team, the sports psychologist must not only have a friendly, intelligent, and strong personality, but must also ensure that athletes and coaches can continue functioning during crisis situations. They should contribute in times of injury, loss of form, illness, etc. Therefore, having sports psychologists with proper psychological certification will help in addressing such challenges.

8. Confidentiality in Relationships and Practice: Athlete confidentiality can only be ensured through the protection of the details of interventions. However, general information may be shared with coaches. Coaches need to know factors that affect the performance of their athletes, but they must also understand that this is governed by professional ethical confidentiality.

9. Committing Time and Energy: A sports psychologist who accepts a position with a national team must commit from the beginning to allocate the necessary time and energy. Sports psychologists must be present alongside athletes while critical events unfold. To play an effective role in the team, they must be with the athletes at various times, including non-routine periods. During travel and competition, being available to the athletes and the team 24 hours a day, 7 days a week is mandatory. For the sports psychologist, the commitment of time and energy is an inherent requirement of the profession. Just as elite athletes expend all their effort on the field for a medal and coaches dedicate themselves fully to this effort, the same expectations apply to sports psychologists. Bond emphasizes that the sports psychologist has significant roles at every stage of the competition calendar this is true for sports requiring high cognitive focus such as shooting, archery, and golf, as well as endurance sports such as athletics and rowing. In major tournaments, especially during the final stages when stress peaks, the role of the sports psychologist becomes even more critical. In such situations, is it acceptable for a sports psychologist to be absent from the preparation period or the tournament due to economic reasons?

Conclusion

Olympic-level preparation is not solely a physical training process but a multidimensional endeavor that encompasses psychological resilience, emotional regulation, and mental readiness. The findings of this study indicate that long-term stress, isolation, heightened performance pressure, and a decline in social interaction contribute to increased cognitive overload and emotional instability among athletes, leading to performance deterioration. Emotional fluctuations, decreased self-confidence, and internal conflicts prevent athletes from fully expressing their existing potential in competitive environments.

These observations clearly demonstrate that Olympic success is not determined solely by physical ability but is equally dependent on psychological preparedness. Therefore, sports psychologists must be recognized as integral members of the performance team. Their role should not be limited to providing occasional support but rather acknowledged as a strategic component in enhancing and sustaining athletic performance. Systematic psychological preparation, the implementation of effective coping strategies, and timely professional intervention during crisis situations are essential for maintaining competitive readiness.

In conclusion, achieving long-term success in the Olympic Games requires the institutionalization of sports psychology as a scientific discipline, the implementation of standardized certification processes for sports psychologists, and their active integration into national teams alongside technical staff. This approach will not only enhance individual athlete performance but also contribute to national sports development, ensure the continuity of international success, and support the psychological well-being of athletes.

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