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Preparing Athletes and Teams for the Olympic Games:  
Experiences and Lessons Learned from the World's Best Sport Psychologists

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### Abstract

As part of an increased effort to understand the most effective ways to psychologically prepare athletes and teams for Olympic competition, a number of sport psychology consultants have offered best-practice insights into working in this context. These individual reports have typically comprised anecdotal reflections of working with particular sports or countries; therefore, a more holistic approach is needed so that developing practitioners can have access to - and utilise - a comprehensive evidence-base. The purpose of this paper is to provide a panel-type article, which offers lessons and advice for the next generation of aspiring practitioners on preparing athletes and teams for the Olympic Games from some of the world's most recognised and experienced sport psychologists. The sample comprised 15 sport psychology practitioners who, collectively, have accumulated over 200 years of first-hand experience preparing athletes and/or teams from a range of nations for six summer and five winter Olympic Games. Interviews with the participants revealed 28 main themes and 5 categories: Olympic stressors, success and failure lessons, top tips for neophyte practitioners, differences within one's own consulting work, and multidisciplinary consulting. It is hoped that the findings of this study can help the next generation of sport psychologists better face the realities of Olympic consultancy and plan their own professional development so that, ultimately, their aspirations to be the world's best can become a reality.

*Keywords:* applied sport psychology; consultancy; mental preparation; performance excellence; training

### Preparing Athletes and Teams for the Olympic Games:

#### Experiences and Lessons Learned from the World's Best Sport Psychologists

For most athletes, the Olympic Games represent the pinnacle of sporting achievement. Winning an Olympic gold medal is typically recognised as the ultimate accolade of a successful athletic career and arguably the most demanding challenge an athlete can pursue (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012; Gould, Dieffenbach, & Moffett, 2002). This is, in part, due to the unique occurrence of the Olympics which takes place only once every four years. It is this infrequency of the event, combined with its magnitude and the globalisation of the sport industry, that ensures worldwide interest in and fascination with athletes' performances. This intense scrutiny, however, brings with it enormous pressure and only those who can manage the stress that accompanies sport at this level will be successful. It is no surprise, then, that there has been an increased effort to understand the most effective ways to psychologically prepare athletes and teams for Olympic competition (see e.g. Gould & Maynard, 2009).

Over the past three decades, there has been a growth in the number of sport psychologists helping athletes and teams prepare for the Olympic and Paralympic Games. Alongside this surge in applied work, there has been a flurry of reports by consultants who have shared their experiences of working with such athletes and teams. These reflections have been disseminated via different scholarly outlets including Olympic and Paralympic special editions of *The Sport Psychologist* (Roberts, 1989), *Sport & Exercise Psychology Review* (Anderson & Cecil, 2006), *Athletic Insight: The Online Journal of Sport Psychology* (Schinke, 2007), *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology* (Samulski, 2008), *Psychology of Sport and Exercise* (Wylleman & Johnson, 2012), and *Journal of Sport Psychology in Action* (Fletcher, 2012). Collectively, this body of work has offered privileged insights into the practice of sport psychologists working with Olympic and Paralympic athletes and teams.

In a particularly noteworthy article in the *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology* special issue, United States Olympic Committee staff psychologist Sean McCann (2008) discussed his experiences of working with athletes at a number of Olympic Games. Importantly, McCann argued that at the Olympics “everything is a performance issue” (p. 267). He further contended that sport psychology success at the Olympic Games is not about preventing problems or challenges; rather, it is helping athletes and teams prevent the problems from becoming critical. Turning from the work conducted to the ways in which it is delivered, Gould, Murphy, Tammen, and May (1989) highlighted that consultants were most frequently involved in consultations with an individual athlete, seminars with groups of athletes, and consultations with individual coaches. With regards to the practitioner providing the sport psychology service, Statler (2001) conducted research to identify what makes an outstanding sport psychology practitioner. Although this study only sampled North American practitioners, it can provide lessons for consultants on the factors involved in creating an exceptional sport psychology consultant, including having a sense of self, an athlete-centred approach, experience, a sense of fulfilment, external support, and elusive factors. Furthermore, research on the individual consultants has provided insight into different philosophies when working with Olympic athletes and teams, including an educational mental skills approach (Halliwell, 1989), a broad spectrum systems theory approach (May & Brown, 1989), and a preventative medicine model approach (Murphy & Ferrante, 1989).

Although the sport psychology literature has greatly increased our best-practice knowledge of the most effective ways to psychologically prepare athletes and teams for the Olympic Games, the research to date has typically relied on individual consultant’s reports (Gould & Maynard, 2009). Specifically, these articles have predominantly been based on sport psychologists’ personal musings and anecdotal reflections of working with athletes and teams in specific countries (see e.g. Haberl & McCann, 2012; Hodge & Hermansson, 2007;

Samulski & Lopes, 2008) or sports (see e.g. Galloway, 2007; Portenga, Aoyagi, & Statler, 2012; Vernacchia & Henschen, 2008). To advance knowledge in this area, a more holistic approach is needed so that developing practitioners have access to—and can utilise—a comprehensive evidence-base. Indeed, moving from the individual reflections to a holistic approach will offer a more encompassing insight into preparing athletes and teams for an Olympic Games, enhance the relevance of a study and enable the transferability of its findings (cf. Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007; Tracy, 2010). The purpose of this paper is to provide a panel-type article, which offers lessons and advice for the next generation of aspiring practitioners on preparing athletes and teams for the Olympic Games from some of the world's most recognised and experienced sport psychologists. It is hoped that this study will be educational for neophyte sport psychologists who have an ambition of consulting with Olympic athletes (see e.g. Owton, Bond, & Tod, 2014). Indeed, emerging practitioners can learn valuable lessons from those more experienced as highlighted in the following quote:

Consultants who have not yet achieved a high level of experience or excellence can learn from experienced Olympic consultants . . . Learning . . . can be facilitated by clearly understanding how the best performers “do their thing” when they are doing it best. Excellence in performance is based at least in part on knowing how to do something, and requisite know-how can be shared, highlighted, or taught by those who have experienced it firsthand. (Partington & Orlick, 1991, p. 184)

## **Method**

### **Participants**

To be eligible for this study, participants were required to be sport psychology practitioners with first-hand experience of preparing athletes and/or teams for Olympic competition. Based on this criterion, the sample consisted of the following 15 practitioners: Frank Abrahamsen, Steve Bull, Karen Cogan, Alexander Cohen, Simon Drane, Richard

Gordin, Daniel Gould, Peter Haberl, Gary Hermansson, Sean McCann, Jason Patchell, Anne Marte Pensgaard, Kirsten Peterson, Steve Portenga, and William Winstone. Collectively, the sample (12 men, 3 women) have a total of 228.50 years of experience consulting with Olympic athletes and teams ( $M = 15.23$  years,  $SD = 8.83$ ). Furthermore, the participants have experience consulting with Olympic athletes and teams from the UK, Norway, New Zealand, Australia, and the USA, and have worked at six summer Olympic Games (1988 Seoul, 1996 Atlanta, 2000 Sydney, 2004 Athens, 2008 Beijing, 2012 London) and five winter Olympic Games (1994 Lillehammer, 1998 Nagano, 2002 Salt Lake City, 2006 Turin, 2010 Vancouver).

### **Procedure**

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the corresponding author's institution. Following this approval, sport psychology practitioners with first-hand experience of preparing athletes and/or teams for Olympic competition were contacted, informed about the study, and invited to participate. This initial contact made each participant aware that his or her name would be included in the participant section of the paper to provide the reader with a more complete understanding of the sample (American Psychological Association, 2010); however, it was made clear that any quotes presented would remain anonymous. After gaining informed consent from the participants, semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore each practitioner's Olympic experiences and lessons they had learned from consulting in this context. An interview schedule was developed to guide the interviews (available on request from the corresponding author), and included questions such as: "Can you tell me about your consultancy with Olympic athletes and what it has involved?", "What have been your experiences of working as part of a team?", "How do you typically prepare somebody for an Olympic Games?", "What advice would you offer another sport psychologist based on your own experiences?" These interviews were conducted at a

convenient time for each participant, with a dictaphone used to record the face-to-face interviews and digital recording software for those taking place on Skype.

### **Data analysis**

The duration of the interviews ranged from 27 to 89 minutes ( $M = 46.38$  minutes,  $SD = 19.07$ ). A thematic analysis was conducted on the data to identify common themes being raised by the participants (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). In line with thematic analysis procedures (Braun & Clarke, 2006), the researchers familiarised themselves with the transcripts and coded the raw data into themes, before organising the themes into categories. To improve the credibility of the study, participants were asked to review their transcript and provide any reflections, questions, feedback, or affirmation (cf. Tracy, 2010). The rigour of the data analysis was enhanced by giving careful consideration to Braun and Clarke's (2006) recommendations, alongside Patton's (1990) dual criteria of internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity. More specifically, data within themes cohered together meaningfully, with clear and identifiable distinctions between themes. Care was also taken to ensure that emerging categories fitted the data rather than forcing the data to fit into the categories.

### **Results**

The thematic analysis procedures revealed 28 main themes in the interview data, which were organised into five categories: Olympic stressors, success and failure lessons, top tips for neophyte practitioners, differences within one's own consulting work, and multidisciplinary consulting. The categories, themes, and a selection of raw-data quotes are presented forthwith so that the scope and complexity of preparing athletes and/or teams psychologically for an Olympic Games can be portrayed. Furthermore, presenting quotations helps to preserve the essence of the participants' experiences and, in doing so, enhances the authenticity of the study (Roulston, 2010).

#### **Olympic stressors**



This category included the stressors that sport psychology practitioners had observed athletes and/or teams encountering before, during, and after an Olympic Games. There were 10 main themes (stressors) in this category: selection, expectations, first Olympic Games, staying true to personal values and beliefs, rarity value of an Olympic Games, distractions, performance considerations, coach–athlete interactions, motivation, and planning for the future.

### **Selection.**

P9: I think the biggest pressure is making it [getting selected] . . . if it's gonna be easy then a lot of the athletes feel pressure like "I am supposed to be there," but if something goes wrong "I am screwed" . . . . And the ones on the flip side, that are struggling to make it, can put a lot of pressure on themselves to justify four years . . . it is very easy for athletes to look back and determine the worth of those four years, of their sacrifices, based on whether they made the team or not.

P11: In one sport in which I worked we had to qualify in each event for us to put someone in the Olympics . . . . So that was a huge amount of pressure there. Then for the Olympic trials themselves, we knew we had the spot but we didn't know who was going. So it was one competition, that was it. Either you get your Olympic dream or you don't. By the time they got to the Olympics it wasn't that there wasn't pressure, but a lot of them said that it was more pressure getting there than actually being there.

P12: Being picked for the squad is a major issue. So everyone knows the criteria and the date that it will be picked. The training camp before that final selection is very stressful for many. Especially those 5/6/7 players who are insecure and don't know if they will be picked or not . . . . We try to be objective, but there will always be some element of the coach's choice. We make them aware of that though.

### **Expectations.**

P1: For me, what a home Olympics does is just exacerbates one of the general challenges that a lot of athletes face and that is around the media and its coverage . . . . For many of the athletes who are perhaps not in the high-profile sports, for the rest of their Olympic cycle they can be under the radar to some extent and then, suddenly, they are thrust into the home Olympic limelight and they have to deal with the tension, expectation, and added pressure that they are clearly not used to.

P3: The single major stress, which brings a range of others with it as well at pinnacle events, is being able to manage the pressures that come from expectations and the demands of outcomes . . . . That's difficult in all sport contexts, but particularly difficult in the Olympic environment where the consequences of performing well are quite major, either positively or negatively.

#### **First Olympic Games.**

P5: [The nation's high performance sport agency] produced a website [to prepare athletes for a first Games and/or home Games], where they interviewed past high profile athletes about their experiences in previous Games. I used this as a portal, as for all of our athletes it was their first Games and a home Games as well so this really helped with these unique pressures.

P15: When consulting with those for whom it is their first games, I kinda knew what was going on from working with all the people in [nation's Olympic Centre] and from the studies I did on [area of Olympic research]. Once we had done those studies, it was really helpful because I had learnt from all the other coaches and athletes. It was almost like preventative medicine, so I would introduce the athletes and coaches to the [research] prior to the Games.

#### **Staying true to personal values and beliefs.**

P3: A lot of the lead-up work is around ensuring that their [athletes] affirmations and self-belief messages are solid. I mean most of them are pretty well established anyway and they have probably got to the point they are at by having a positive and strong mentality, self-belief, and personal affirmations. So what is required is mainly just managing it and tweaking it.

P9: A lot of them [the athletes] realise that the amount of pressure they are putting on themselves is about finding value as a person. Especially in those sports where everything is quantified in terms of time or distance, it's very easy to have a rank list of everyone's character. The crazy thing is they will look at the descending order list of times for the season and then it's very easy to make the assumption that the best person is ranked number one and if you are ranked number 25 then you are not a very good person.

#### **Rarity value of an Olympic Games.**

P4: That's probably one of the more unique factors of the Olympics, the amount of hype and media attention given to the Games. You know the opening and closing ceremonies, it [the Olympic Games] only happening once every four years, that just creates an additional level of pressure and hype around it. If athletes aren't able to have a plan about being able to talk about it, resolve it, and let it go; then it is more than likely that it's gonna affect their ability to manage themselves in those environments.

P10: It would be good if we could just say a competition is a competition, but the reality is there is nothing like the Games . . . . Even though you're always representing your country, this is completely different. The media presence is ten times more than any World Championship. So it's about getting ready for that experience and speaking to athletes and coaches that have been there before.

P13: When you have a competition once every four years, that's a big competition. Anyone that says the Olympics isn't a big competition, hasn't been in one. If you've trained

for 8–12 years for one moment in time, that’s a huge microscopic moment in your life and that can be made very big, even more so if you make it that way. Acknowledge the pressure of the Olympics. I say “Yes, this is a big deal.” I don’t go down the “This is just another competition” route straight away; else you lose a lot of credibility. Instead, I say “Let’s go back and figure out what you did that got you here, and let’s do it again.” Everyone has to deal with this, even multiple Olympians.

### **Distractions.**

P5: We had some real life stressors, where the schedule [of competition at the Olympics] changed literally the day before play started. We were all going to go to the opening ceremony, then suddenly three out of the four [athletes] couldn’t go as they were playing the next day. Their opponents changed as well to the top seeds in their group, which was a big change in perspective. So this really did throw us a little bit, but it was an “unexpected” that we had prepared for pre-Games.

P9: I think it’s a very interesting concept the Olympic village - it sucks! It’s painful, it’s horrible, and it’s perfectly set up to mess with people . . . . So you have athletes as they finish letting off steam and athletes not competing until the second week figuring out what to do. There are tons of parties . . . . It is so easy to get caught up in all of that stuff.

### **Performance considerations.**

P2: An opponent setting a completely new level of performance has been a big stressor for athletes. So what you thought previously might have been good enough is now not even remotely good enough.

P7: I have had a couple of new experiences pretty recently, where athletes have failed on a very public scale. And been embarrassed. Last time [they failed] four years ago, and they are worried it’s going to happen again. One athlete I was working with had a magazine

on choking and was listed as one of the top chokers in sport. So coming into the Olympics and being focused on not just performing well, but also not being seen as a choker.

### **Coach–athlete interactions.**

P11: There is the pressure from the coach, either intended or not. At this stage they both want an Olympic medal; neither wants to let the other down. The coaches feel their own pressure at the event, their jobs are on the line too and they have a lot less control. Sometimes that anxiety trickles down to the athlete.

P12: There can sometimes be problems in the coach–athlete relationship, like if the athlete feels they have no control. That’s a tough one, especially if the coach is very stressed too . . . . I’ve noticed that some coaches changed their behaviour during the Olympics because they were so stressed.

### **Motivation.**

P2: Whatever happens, success or otherwise, is often a big stressor. To some extent, the Games will have changed their [athletes] lives. So that could be around fame or distraction, but could also be about “How do I restart? Why am I doing this now?” So motivation can be a factor.

P6: Post an Olympic Games, it depends a lot on what happened. Quite often the routine or lack of it is quite hard for an athlete post a Games, they are used to having that structure from the coach which may not be there anymore. For other athletes who decide to come back, it’s about finding the motivation to get back to training and competing.

P14: Sometimes their [athletes] motivation for performance is not as good as it could be. For instance, having a “performance for results” goal. They should more be focused on the day to day motives, such as being better. So sometimes you have to help athletes with their motives. Some older athletes are tired of all the training, all the tours, all the travelling. So the motivation is more like a job for them, rather than an inner drive.

**Planning for the future.**

P7: Certainly, after an Olympics it is the decision making about what to do now, like “Should I stay? Should I go?” The easiest thing is they [the athletes] just continue and stay in their sports and that’s fine. The hardest ones are where they are waiting until after the Games to decide. The middle ground is someone who is transitioning to something else but they know exactly what it is, like school or a job; so it’s intense, it’s busy, and it’s tiring, but psychologically they are ok.

P11: We don’t prepare athletes enough for what happens afterwards. I remember in one of my first Olympics, I had worked extensively with one athlete and we talked about what was going to happen afterwards as he knew this was his last competition. Even in discussing his future ahead of time, he said to me at the after party “Well, what now?” “You didn’t prepare me for this part.” And no-one wants to talk about what happens afterwards too much ahead of time. You know “What if you don’t do so well, what are you going to do?” Put that conversation out there. I mean you may not spend a lot of time on it, as your priority is really to get them ready for the event.

P15: One of the guys I worked with was pretty devastated as he thought he was going to be captain, and then he didn’t and had a miserable Games. We talked and he was pretty bummed out . . . . I jokingly said “Why don’t you just bury your uniform and move on?” “Does your wife love you any less because you didn’t win a medal? Does your child love you any less?” and he said “No”. I remember saying “Well there you got three or four really good things going on and one thing that sucks. Are you going to let that ruin your life?” He called me up when he got home to tell me he had buried it [the uniform]. Then, at the next Olympics he won a medal.

**Success and failure lessons**

This category included the lessons that sport psychology practitioners had learned from experiencing success and failure during their careers. There were six main themes (lessons) in this category: start with the team early; build good and trusting relationships; make yourself accessible as the sport psychologist; know when to intervene; do not feel you have to prove your expertise; and evaluate your performance.

**Start with the team early.**

P9: Get to know the athletes as much as you can in that four-year window [prior to an Olympics], because for some of them it will take a while to answer the questions that really need answered. Like “Why are you doing this?” We probably needed two years for some to figure this out, as it was a much bigger question in their life . . . I also think that if I can work with athletes ahead of time, it gives us more time to experiment, to take risks, and try something different so they are really comfortable with it at the Games.

P11: There was one team that I was working with, but I hadn’t been travelling with them before. It was a bit awkward really because they didn’t really know what to do with me, and I just kept showing up. Ideally, I would have wanted to be more involved with that team earlier on. All the individual athletes knew me, but I got the feeling that the coaches and administrators were saying “Who is [s/he] and what is [s/he] doing here?” That is always a little bit uncomfortable.

P14: Try to be in a long-term relationship with the athletes. This is difficult, because quite often money follows the Olympic cycle, and quite often sport psychologists are introduced in the last two years before an Olympics. When you come into a new team, you will often see that they are not doing things by the book; you can either try and live with that or feel so far away from the group that you feel obliged to withdraw your participation. So you don’t always have to say yes. So while it is flattering to get the opportunity to work with

Olympic athletes, if your gut feeling says you are not comfortable then it is good to search those feelings.

**Build good and trusting relationships.**

P4: Going into a chaotic environment, such as the Games, it's so important to have those quality relationships that are built on trust, transparency, and a very clear role. If you don't have those and you don't have the buy in by certain individuals, when you add stress to that mix it creates problems and things aren't dealt with appropriately.

P13: If you can have two things with athletes and coaches then you have a chance of being effective. First, they have to trust you implicitly. Two, they have to believe that you can help them in a way that they can't do themselves . . . . Athletes and coaches are bottom line people. If they don't trust you and you are not giving something useful to them, then you are not going to be working with them.

**Make yourself accessible as the sport psychologist.**

P3: A helpful strategy I sometimes use is to buy a poster that is associated with the Games, and get all the athletes to sign it. I put it up in my room and then wander through the health area and say "Oh you haven't signed my poster" and they'll walk back to my room to come and sign it. And once they [the athletes] get there, often two things happen. First, it familiarises the territory and makes it normal. Then, when they are signing the poster, they will check out if we are on our own and start talking to me, if they haven't already on the way over here. These are little pragmatic things, which create access.

P9: The first thing that's important to consult with athlete pressures is to be there. It makes it a logistical nightmare if you are not in the village and can only see them at practice . . . . We had a sign-up sheet for massage and physio, so I would look who was coming at 2pm, then get there a bit earlier. Hopefully get into something just enough to set up a time to go into it in more detail later . . . . Figure out where you will cross paths with them [the athletes].



P11: There was a situation where I was told that due to extra security, I shouldn't go to my usual place before the race. Then the athlete asked for me up there before the race and I wasn't there. I had to speak to them over the walky talky and that wasn't good really. They didn't perform well, so from then on I try to push the boundaries and do what is best for the athlete.

**Know when to intervene.**

P1: One of the biggest mistakes I think that, historically, sport psychologists have made is intervening when it might have been better to hold back. I think that comes with confidence; the danger when you are a less experienced sport psychologist is to dive in too quickly. Having said that, on the other end of the scale when it's appropriate to intervene, you have got to get in there and do just that. It's a very fine line and one of the biggest challenges.

P2: There was one particular athlete who I was preparing for an Olympics, where it didn't work as well as I would have liked it too. We didn't unearth what was troubling this person until it became too late . . . . They had a big disappointment at the Games. I, the coach, and others all assumed from the interactions we had that they were in a much better psychological and physical state than they actually were. So one of the big lessons here is that with athletes who are very successful and very self-contained, do keep asking questions. There is a balance here as a psychologist with not bothering people because they are fine and being in the background, to having enough contact to notice things and being able to address them before they have a performance impact. Every now and then, I may have veered into not intervening when an intervention might have been helpful; it wasn't asked for, but might have been helpful.

P7: The lesson is if you see it, don't pretend it's not there. If you are fortunate to be in there early enough, confront it, practice it, and train for that potential weakness. Don't put

your head in the sand as the sport psychologist just because someone is doing well on the World Cup circuit; this doesn't always mean they will handle the heat of the Olympics.

**Do not feel you have to prove your expertise.**

P3: If things have gone wrong, it is probably because you have been eager to demonstrate your expertise. One of the things that happens at the Games a lot is when you get there first time up, you want to prove that you deserve to be there and there is a tendency to apply a formula. You just hear a couple of sentences and immediately grab something out your toolbox and start using it. But if you listen a bit longer and facilitate the athlete through the process, then you often find what you might have initially gone for isn't the issue at all. Don't race in and prove your value, worth, or expertise. That will come through you being patient and being able to work in collaboration with athletes.

P8: I am thinking about an athlete I worked with right before the final. They were very nervous and literally just wanted me there. So part of it was being very afraid I was going to do something wrong at this critical juncture when we are sitting there by ourselves. It wasn't anything rocket science; it was just being calm, reminding them what they could control, and building their confidence. They left feeling better and in a better state of mind.

P15: We [sport psychology practitioners] shouldn't assume that just because we have specialist knowledge, we know it all. The athletes and coaches will teach you a lot. How much you learn from them is amazing, and then you have another thing in your tool belt to pull out when you need to help.

**Evaluate your performance.**

P4: Success in some ways can be a bit of a curse, because people can be more reluctant to do a full de-brief and respond appropriately. The job is never over as a sport psychologist; even during success we need to ask how we can be more successful. Yes, it's important to highlight success, but as soon as you rest on laurels, high-performance stops.

P6: What I have learnt from when things have gone well is that sometimes success can be the enemy. Success can make you complacent and then perhaps you don't prepare as well the next time around. I think that failure can be your best friend. It teaches you that you have to get good at critically appraising your own work. You have to take your work very seriously, but not yourself too seriously.

### **Top tips for neophyte practitioners**

This category included the advice that participants provided for the next generation of practitioners aspiring to prepare athletes and/or teams for the Olympic Games. There were six main themes (top tips) in this category: get experience and exposure, develop your skills and delivery, be in the background, adopt appropriate and flexible behaviour, manage yourself, and have a mentor.

#### **Get experience and exposure.**

P1: Providing on-site support services is a different role to when you are working more generally, so I think the more experience you can get on-site before you step into the great white heat of the Olympics the better.

P9: Make sure you have been in situations where you have been overwhelmed beforehand . . . you learn how to manage and deal with that. It's gonna be very hard to manage the Olympic Games if you haven't put yourself in some really challenging international situations previously.

P12: In [participant's nation], we always send people to the Paralympics first, because here everyone can get an accreditation and the experiences are very much the same. I think that's important that you have that experience, especially as a young practitioner.

#### **Develop your skills and delivery.**

P3: If you don't have a qualification or background in the counselling area, certainly do some counselling skills work . . . . There are some situations when managers and coaches

are in conflict with each other, or similar situations, and I play a role in helping to sort that. My background in counselling can really help with managing such conflict.

P12: I still continue my training and take courses. I think it's important to continue development with yourself to learn new approaches . . . . Have some training in clinical issues as well. You don't need to be a clinical psychologist, but be able to deal with some issues and crises that emerge at the Olympics, like the boyfriend breaking up with you the day before competition.

P14: Know your stuff. Read a lot. You can never have too much knowledge . . . . Read sport psych[ology] books, biographies of good coaches and athletes. There are some mistakes you can avoid by reading about others' mistakes.

**Be in the background.**

P2: You need to have the ability to show unobtrusive availability and be around and able to help with anything. You need to manage your own ego to be useful. At the Games itself, there is an awful lot of just hanging around . . . . And I think it's being in that juxtaposition to be at one of the most high-profile sports events that you can be at, but being very much in the background, because actually that's a sign of success.

P8: You want to be perceived as useful. You want to do good. Sometimes this isn't possible. The best thing is to sit tight. My boss used to say "You need to get better at being lazy" . . . . It's an attitude to work on cultivating. You are just there and relaxed so that people can approach you if they need.

P15: I am like a bodyguard in the background that is invisible, but the athletes know where I am if they need me . . . . One of the things that the coach said that I did well in the Olympics was that "You were a slice of the pie, but you didn't try to be the whole pie. You knew your role and you knew that the athletes always came first." I always knew that I was auxiliary; the athletes and coaches were the heroes and heroines.

**Adopt appropriate and flexible behaviour.**

P4: One of the most important skills for young practitioners is contextual intelligence. So be able to observe, understand, and be sensitive to the context in which you are providing a service . . . . Understand the culture of the sport, the personalities involved, the dynamics in each system, and be able to speak in the appropriate language.

P7: That's a real common working mistake I have seen from sport psychologists, getting caught up with the Olympics and thinking "I wanna see stuff, I wanna do stuff." You are only there for a couple of weeks to work with the athletes on what could be the two most important weeks of their life - that is your job so you need to behave appropriately and not be a spectator or get autographs.

P14: I learnt a lot from having some really tough issues at my first Olympics. You can prepare for a lot, but something at the Olympics will always occur that you haven't prepared for, so you need to be flexible. Sometimes being thrown to the wolves is the best way of training, but a little bit at a time if possible.

**Manage yourself.**

P3: Often young support people, whether it is psychologists or physios or whoever, tend to try and be one of the lads or lasses and cross the boundaries to look for acceptance. You have to keep anchored in your professional role. By all means be approachable, be involved with what is happening, be prepared to have a sense of humour, and don't take yourself too seriously; but always retain your professional identity, because once you lose that your credibility is shot.

P4: Be able to manage your own emotions. In a Games environment, that is super crucial. In my experience as a psychologist, you should be the role model of self-regulation. In an environment like the Games, people will look towards the psychologist for rational and

logic reason, to be calm and composed. If you are unable to manage your own anxieties, stressors, and fears, it's very hard to then teach athletes and coaches those skills.

P10: Make sure you are taking care of yourself. It's a long haul and you are going to be there well over a month . . . . Make sure you continue to get enough sleep, proper nutrition, and exercise. It's so easy to put aside self-care things to be available a little more. It will dramatically interfere with the quality of work that you can do if you don't take care of yourself. There are times, certainly, when I haven't done this so well and after four weeks of international travel, I have been pretty burnt out.

### **Have a mentor.**

P5: The way we coined me, as the sport psychologist, was that I was a sponge. So I was there to soak up any of the annoyances or the concerns of anyone in the team. And that means at some point, I am going to need to offload that . . . so have someone to talk to. So I had a sport psych[ologist] in another sport who I could call, and the lead sport psych[ologist] in the village I could speak to. But also someone who doesn't care about the Olympics, someone who could put it all into perspective for me.

P9: Get yourself a good mentor. I had mentors who had been to twenty plus Olympic Games. It was great for close to a decade to listen to them tell stories. We would come to AASP [Association of Applied Sport Psychology conference] after the Olympics and go out to dinner. I would just keep my mouth shut and let them [mentors] talk.

P12: Have a mentor. I used mine a lot to ask for advice. They have been really important for the way I meet challenges. I will ask them about all the practical things that you might not even think about; like how to make yourself available, where to sit on the bus, where to sit at breakfast.

### **Differences in one's own consulting work**

This category included the differences that sport psychology practitioners had encountered when consulting either in different contexts and cultures or with different groups. There were two main themes (consultancy differences) in this category: context of service delivery and the Olympic/Paralympic distinction.

**Context of service delivery.**

P6: I think in terms of preparing athletes for different Olympics, the climate is a key factor. For example, in Beijing the heat caused a major distraction and could impact performance negatively. So here you are relying on the physiologists and their input on best preparing the athletes. I think where we come in as sport psychologists is helping the athletes to become very aware of their perceptions of those environmental conditions, and how these perceptions can negatively impact performance.

P13: For a home Olympics, I wouldn't treat it much differently. If anything, I would say "We are going to get some good calls being at home, so let's take advantage of being at home." You try and spin it out in a more positive way, rather than a big pressure way. When it really comes down to it, you're doing it for yourself, and that holds up no matter where the venue is.

P15: For some venues, you might need to talk to the less experienced athletes about jet lag and beating it. Also, in Beijing, I would ask the athletes "Have you read about pollution? Have you taken advantage of your governing body's info?" Usually there is a lot of good information that committees make for athletes, but sometimes it doesn't get to them.

**The Olympic/Paralympic distinction.**

P7: With the Paralympics, there are a lot more clinical issues that come up, even at the Games. The Olympics reveals stuff that has been lurking beneath, but for the Paralympics I was surprised about how much of the clinical stuff comes up actually . . . I was just surprised

to hear the athlete struggling with that stuff the day before they are competing. You know, when there is so much else there to think about.

P8: My experience is you have to spend more time understanding the underlying disability [when working with Paralympic athletes] and working through those issues before you can get to the performance space . . . it's interesting to me that for some Paralympians, the Paralympics may be their first international competition. So you can't assume that same level of sophistication and understanding about their sport and their ability to manage stress in general. There are of course very experienced Paralympians that don't fit that mould at all, so I would say just be aware of those things.

P14: Sometimes self-identity can be an issue for Paralympians. Some of them see the Paralympics as an opportunity to show the world that they are as able as everyone else. That can add some pressure. In general terms, I feel that Paralympians are better at handling external stressors, because they are used to their wheelchair being left on the plane or something being broken . . . . Sometimes Paralympians will make jokes about their handicap. But there can be a bit of self-deprecation there so you should listen to them carefully and be even more aware. Sometimes they use humour as a defence mechanism. So you need to be a bit more sensitive to those issues.

### **Multidisciplinary consulting**

This category included the advice that consultants provided to neophyte practitioners with regards to working as part of a multidisciplinary team when preparing athletes and/or teams for an Olympic Games. There were four main themes in this category: build relationships with support staff; consult with support staff like athletes; create a coach, athlete, and psychologist triangle; and overcome barriers.

#### **Build relationships with support staff.**



P1: In the headquarters role, you don't actually end up doing that much work with athletes, so the vast majority of my work was with coaches, team managers, but also working very closely with doctors and physios. Often it would be giving them help, support, and advice in their dealings with the athletes . . . . Work hard to form strong relationships with members of the support services, because it is often those individuals who are going to be best placed to directly support the athlete.

P8: I don't think I did this consciously, but I definitely went out of my way to meet and befriend the other team members and listen to them, because you want to be a resource for them, but you also want them to be a resource for you. So develop those mutually comfortable relationships . . . . It's very much like being a friend, but it's also about being a professional. Build the alliances first and that allows you to be effective later on.

P14: I had been working with one team for a few years. The coach I was working with was really strong and we had a good working relationship. The problem was that we disagreed totally on some of the technical aspects. We had a long discussion on that and the coach and I decided to disagree, but we could still have a strong working relationship. Sometimes you have to work with a team even when you feel what they are doing is not by the book in sport psychology standards.

**Consult with support staff like athletes.**

P1: You basically work with anyone that is there. So across the Olympics, I would have done work with athletes, coaches, managers, [nation's Olympic association] staff, administrators, doctors, physios, and volunteers. My view has always been that, in a sense, we are all performers and as such we need to adopt the work we do with athletes in terms of preparation and self-management.

P5: There was a huge amount of work done with the coaches, but a lot of that work was about managing themselves. We did a lot of work with them on personality profiling as a

base and looked at their stress responses. We looked at how coaches reacted to the pressure at other events as well, like the World Championships, and the effect that can have on other people including the athletes.

P13: The coaches are going to be emotional and nervous, just like the athlete, but they can't play. So you sometimes have to teach them the same skills as the athletes. When I am putting athletes through mental training, I like the coaches to do it too. This means that they can have the [same] skillset under high-pressured situations as well.

**Create a coach, athlete, and psychologist triangle.**

P7: Meeting with coaches and athletes together at the Games is common for me. We are all on the same page. And partly because the coaches are so stressed, it helps to relieve their worry. Even the ones that have worked with me for a long time and trust me, their anxiety is still high so I will actively try and pull them into a session in a way that protects confidentiality.

P12: Sometimes I will have meetings with the athlete and coach to keep them in the loop. I find that this is very useful to be effective and so that they don't feel left out of the work . . . . It's really important not to make the coach feel threatened or suspicious when the athlete is working with me, which has happened in the past. I try to explain to the coach how we work and our aim, which is always to help the athlete perform well. We all have the same goal in mind.

P13: I always include coaches with the work that I do. I look at it as a triangle: coach, athlete, consultant. It has got to be that way for me. I've never seen the situation where the coach doesn't want to be involved work out very well. I had one coach who highly resisted, but I finally got him to agree at the Olympic Games when we roomed together. We had meals together and he finally figured out what I could offer to him. He wanted to be in charge and

thought I was trying to motivate his athletes; I'm not trying to motivate his athletes, that's his job. I'm just trying to help them perform to their best.

**Overcome barriers.**

P2: If you are working with performance directors, I would suggest they are that bit more experienced and possibly older than athletes and coaches, so the big part here is your personal authority and confidence . . . and that is very difficult if you are young. I am not sure many performance directors would choose a 25 year old sport psychologist to provide that support.

P4: It's a difficult one [working with personnel other than athletes] because often that's not the brief. And there is limited engagement from the staff because their belief is that you are there to support the athlete. Show them that your role can be valuable to them in those environments and in the preparation, not just with the athletes.

**Discussion**

In this study, some of the world's most recognised and experienced sport psychologists were interviewed to share their experiences and lessons for the next generation of aspiring practitioners on preparing athletes and/or teams for the Olympic Games. The findings of these interviews highlight the stressors for which Olympic athletes required psychological support, lessons that practitioners have learned from success and failure, top tips for neophyte practitioners, differences that practitioners have experienced when working in diverse contexts and groups, and suggestions for consulting as part of a multidisciplinary team.

Considering first the stressors that athletes and/or teams encountered at the Olympics, it was evident that these occurred prior to, during, and post an Olympic Games. Furthermore, the 10 identified themes pertaining to Olympic stressors are wide-ranging; therefore, neophyte practitioners must be prepared for and feel competent to deal with an array of

pressures that an athlete may encounter (McCann, 2008). Neophyte sport psychologists should also prepare for certain stressors that appear to be unique to the Olympic context. For example, specific preparation occurs given that the Olympic Games only occur once every four years, particularly when athletes attend their first Olympic Games. Overall, this unrelenting and multifaceted nature of Olympic stressors underscores the importance of sport psychologists' presence with Olympic athletes and/or teams; particularly at the Games itself where stressors tend to heighten in intensity and have the potential to be performance issues (McCann, 2008). To deal with the identified Olympic stressors in this study, practitioners should draw lessons from the extant sport psychology literature in this area. For example, Halliwell (1989) provides advice on how to help accommodate the plans of the media and family members at an Olympic Games (an identified stressor in the present study). In addition, Blumenstein and Lidor (2008) have highlighted a focusing-attention technique to help athletes cope with external distractions at an Olympics.

The availability of a sport psychologist is valued by athletes and coaches, who have both expressed a desire for more psychological support at the Olympic Games (Gould et al., 1999). In line with this request, experienced practitioners in the present study reflected that instances they had been successful were when they made themselves accessible, as the sport psychologist, to athletes and coaches. In addition to this lesson for neophyte practitioners, further guidance from success and failure includes starting with the team early (see also Pensgaard & Abrahamsen, 2012), building good and trusting relationships (see also Williams & Andersen, 2012), and evaluating your performance as a practitioner (see also Haberl & McCann, 2012), which supports previous findings. A main lesson provided to the next generation of sport psychologists from all participants, was not feeling a need to prove one's expertise, but instead recognising the appropriate time to intervene. The participants suggested that getting this balance between intervening and being in the background is not

always straightforward, and does develop with experience. It is important for neophyte practitioners to learn this lesson, since athletes and coaches have suggested that the best sport psychology consultants are knowledgeable enough to meet an individual's needs, yet can implement interventions in an applied and flexible manner, identifying when support is necessary (Orlick & Partington, 1987; Statler, 2001).

The experienced practitioners interviewed in this study provided a number of top tips for the next generation of sport psychologists, particularly emphasising the importance of managing your own self and career. In addition to previous research with outstanding consultants (see e.g. Statler, 2001), which has provided the advice of getting experience and seeking external support, the present study highlighted that the key to self-management is developing self-awareness. This capacity ensures individuals are mindful of, and can effectively take responsibility for, one's personal and professional development (e.g. developing skills and delivery, getting experience and exposure, having a mentor) and, in doing so, deliver a balanced and professional sport psychology service (e.g. being in the background, appropriate and flexible behaviour). This self-management ability is crucial across a range of occupations, not only to ensure that a competent and effective service is provided to clients, but also to help individuals experience a sustainable professional career and desirable personal health (see e.g. De Vos, Dewettinck, & Buyens, 2009; Gould, Kelly, Goldstone, & Maidwell, 2001).

Turning to the differences in consulting that the sport psychologists practised based on the context, the participants spoke about working with two different groups (i.e. Olympians and Paralympians) and preparing athletes and/or teams for diverse contexts/cultures (e.g. varied locations of the Games). In contrast to the majority of sport psychology literature on consultancy differences, which has tended to focus on those that emerge across cultures (cf. Schinke & Hanrahan, 2009), the findings of the present study

illustrate some of the more contextual differences that sport psychologists have encountered in consultancy (e.g. unusual climate, preparing for a home Olympics versus one abroad). In relation to the Olympic/Paralympic distinction, although many participants believed that the needs and experiences of the two groups were similar (cf. Dieffenbach & Statler, 2012), some explicit differences were also noted, including the level of international experience, prevalence of clinical diagnoses, and occurrence of self-identity concerns. This latter difference might be explained by Huang and Brittain's (2006) case study with elite-disabled athletes, which highlighted that success in international disability sport can offer potential for a changed self-understanding and an increased sense of personal empowerment.

There is growing recognition amongst sport psychologists that consultancy is most effective when it is integrated as part of a multidisciplinary team, rather than in isolation with athletes (see e.g. Blumenstein & Lidor, 2008; Gould & Maynard, 2009). The sport psychology practitioners in the present study agreed with this approach and identified ways in which consultants could most effectively work as part of a multidisciplinary team.

Specifically, the data suggested that in addition to building relationships with all staff members (see also Haberl & Peterson, 2006), educating coaches to help them develop the same mental skills as that of athletes (see e.g. Portenga et al., 2012), and creating a coach, athlete, and psychologist triad (see also Samulski & Lopes, 2008), practitioners should be aware of any potential barriers that might be encountered if they wish to be effective within these multidisciplinary teams. In addition to the programme funding, scheduling, and time barriers identified by Gould et al. (1989), one noteworthy barrier that was highlighted in this study was a lack of engagement from staff with the sport psychology service. To overcome this obstacle, lessons can be learned from previous work on engagement issues with athletes (see e.g. Shiang & Mitzel, 2010), but also individuals from other performance domains such as education (see e.g. Smith, Sheppard, Johnson, & Johnson, 2005), healthcare (see e.g.

Broome, Flynn, Knight, & Simpson, 2007), and management (see e.g. Campbell, 2001). To overcome engagement issues in the educational context, for instance, various techniques have been used such as: active and cooperative learning, service learning, cooperative education, learning communities, inquiry and problem-based learning, and team projects (Smith et al., 2005).

To conclude, this study has provided insight into the experiences of the world's best sport psychologists and the lessons they have learned with regards to preparing athletes and/or teams for the Olympic Games. There were five main categories that were identified from the data: Olympic stressors, success and failure lessons, top tips for neophyte practitioners, differences within one's own consulting work, and multidisciplinary consulting. To elaborate, practitioners should be aware of the various stressors that athletes might encounter prior to, during, and after an Olympic Games and have techniques in place to help proactively prevent or cope with these demands. When preparing athletes and teams for an Olympics, consultants should aim to start working with the clients early so that trusting relationships can be built; however, they must also make sure that they know when it is most appropriate for them to intervene. Practitioners should also look to continually develop and manage themselves and their behaviours, using the top tips generated in this study, as well as flexibly implementing their consultancy based on the location and personnel they are working with. Overall, it is hoped that this study will offer a comprehensive evidence-base for neophyte practitioners to face the realities of Olympic consultancy and, in turn, provide opportunities to plan their own professional development to ultimately become one of the world's best consultants in the field of sport psychology.

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