



## Analysis of sport psychology consultancy at three Olympic Games: Facts and figures

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Available online 19 April 2012

#### Keywords:

Olympic games  
Onsite interventions  
Brief contact intervention  
Crisis intervention  
Critical incident  
Psychology consultancy

### ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** Despite many reports on best practises regarding onsite psychological services, little research has attempted to systematically explore the frequency, issues, nature and client groups of onsite sport psychology consultancy at the Olympic Games. The present paper will fill this gap through a systematic analysis of the sport psychology consultancy of the Swiss team for the Olympic Games of 2006 in Turin, 2008 in Beijing and 2010 in Vancouver.

**Design:** Descriptive research design.

**Methods:** The day reports of the official sport psychologist were analysed. Intervention issues were labelled using categories derived from previous research and divided into the following four intervention-issue dimensions: “general performance”, “specific Olympic performance”, “organisational” and “personal” issues. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, chi square statistics and odds ratios.

**Results:** Across the Olympic Games, between 11% and 25% of the Swiss delegation used the sport psychology services. On average, the sport psychologist provided between 2.1 and 4.6 interventions per day. Around 50% of the interventions were informal interventions. Around 30% of the clients were coaches. The most commonly addressed issues were performance related. An association was observed between previous collaboration, intervention likelihood and intervention theme.

**Conclusions:** Sport psychologists working at the Olympic Games are fully engaged with daily interventions and should have developed ideally long-term relationships with clients to truly help athletes with general performance issues. Critical incidents, working with coaches, brief contact interventions and team conflicts are specific features of the onsite consultancy. Practitioners should be trained to deal with these sorts of challenges.

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Competing at the Olympic Games is often considered the pinnacle of an athletic career (McCann, 2008). Its 4-year cycle makes the Olympic Games an exceptional event for athletes. Other factors contributing to its uniqueness are its multisport context and the immense media interest surrounding it. During the Olympic Games, sports, which normally do not arouse much public interest, are, for a short period, in the media's keen, but also unforgiving, focus. Haberl and Peterson (2006) concluded that competing at the Olympics is similar to being in a crucible that produces extraordinary pressures for all persons involved, whether athlete, coach or other support staff. The Olympic experience can be the reward for a long period of hard work, systematic preparation and suffering. If athletes succeed at the Games, not only does their previous investment (financial and effort) pay off, but also they might secure funding for the future (Haberl & Peterson, 2006; Pensgaard, 2008).

In their quest for Olympic success, many nations have increased their scientific support. Additionally, many sport associations and National Olympic Committees (NOCs) have integrated sport psychological services during the build-up to and at the Games itself (e.g., Blumenstein & Lidor, 2008; Samulski & Lopes, 2008). Consequently, the demand for scientific knowledge regarding psychological factors influencing or associated with successful Olympic performance has risen. There is a substantial amount of literature on the Olympic experience of athletes and on practise reports of Olympic consultants (for a review, see Gould & Maynard, 2009).

However, little research has been done on the most common psychological challenges and demands that sport psychologists face at the Olympic Games. For example, little is known about the number and type of interventions a sport psychologist has to deal with, which type of client he or she will most likely work with and which additional factors will most likely influence associated collaborative efforts (e.g., previous collaborations between sport

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psychologist and athletes/coaches). Answers to these questions would be valuable not only for sport psychologists in order to prepare themselves for an Olympic mission but also for National Olympic bodies to plan the assignments of sport psychologists and develop the functional specifications for such specialists within the support staff.

Research related to the specific onsite challenges and demands faced by sport psychologists at the Games and which may provide some insights, include (a) research on stress and coping in sports, (b) evaluations of the Olympic experience of athletes and coaches and (c) best-practise reports on onsite psychology consultancy.

### Research on stress and coping of high-performance athletes

One can view seeking the support of a sport psychologist as an attempt to cope with the demands of a specific situation, where athletes/coaches consider their coping resources or strategies to be inadequate to the situational requirements. Not surprisingly, sport psychologists have been interested in examining various sources of perceived stress in elite athletes. To explore organisational stress issues, researchers have predominantly used qualitative methods. Woodman and Hardy (2001) proposed a theoretical framework for organisational stress that was also used by Fletcher and colleagues (Fletcher & Hanton, 2003; Hanton, Fletcher, & Coughlan, 2005; Mellalieu, Neil, Hanton, & Fletcher, 2009). They interviewed elite athletes with regard to potential sources of organisational stress while preparing for major international competitions (the Olympics and World Championships). Within this framework, issues that are directly related to sport performance are deemed to be competitive stressors, whereas issues that are not directed to sport performance are regarded as organisational stressors. Frequency analysis revealed that participants mentioned competitive stressors less often than organisational ones. However, Mellalieu et al. (2009) saw a need to investigate stressors encountered by elite athletes directly within the competition environment and primarily related to competition. Using a similar methodology, they focused on both competitive and organisational stressors experienced by elite athletes in the hour before competition. Inconsistent with earlier research, their findings demonstrated a similar number of performance and organisational stressors directly before a competition. Perhaps because of the temporal proximity to competition, more competitive stressors were present, as compared to earlier studies. Nevertheless, a significant number of organisational stressors were observed, demonstrating that these factors influence athletic performance 1 h before the competition.

However, while these researchers widened the focus concerning performance and organisational demands involved in athletes' preparation and competition, they failed to consider that the personal environment (e.g., differences of opinion with a significant other) may also affect an athlete's performance. Thus, factors beyond the scope of organisational and competitive demand also need to be addressed to understand the overall stress elite athletes experience.

### Evaluations of the Olympic experience

Gould and colleagues investigated factors influencing athletes' Olympic performance success (Gould, Greenleaf, Chung, & Guinan, 2002; Gould, Guinan, Greenleaf, & Chung, 2002). For this purpose, 296 Atlanta and 83 Nagano U.S. Olympians as well as 46 Atlanta and 19 Nagano U.S. coaches rated the frequency and perceived impact of different factors on performance. Following Gould and colleagues' rationale and on behalf of the Swiss Olympic Association, Schmid (2005a) conducted a similar study with 87 Swiss Athens

Olympians. These Olympians indicated whether they faced any of 33 specific potential stressors and whether they were negatively or positively influenced in their Olympic performance by these potential stressors. A high percentage of athletes were challenged by "good results of opponents before the games" (91%), "absolutely wanting to excel – high expectancies of self" (90%), "high coach expectations" (74%) and "lack of experience with Olympic specifics" (61%). In contrast, relatively few athletes faced "safety worries" (5%), "a lack of information regarding their competitors" (5%) or a "change of direct pre-event preparation" (6%). More significant than the mere presence of such potential stressors, however, is their ascribed positive or negative influence on Olympic performance. The following 12 stressors had the strongest influence on the athletes' performance: "difficulties keeping cool in challenging performance situations", "feeling of physical limpness", "difficulties in recovering", "lack of confidence in the coach's abilities", "lack of financial support", "disruption in the direct pre-event preparation through unforeseen distractions", "unfair umpire decisions", "lack of experience with uniqueness of Olympic competition", "bad timing of competitions before the Olympics", "head coach's incompetence", "change in the direct pre-event preparation" and "self-allegations during the Olympic competition".

To narrow down the factors for a possible intervention, Schmid (2005b) explored which factors had both a considerable negative impact and with which a significant number of athletes were challenged. This increased the list by eight factors: "lack of preparation for unexpected events and unforeseen distractions at the Olympics", "lack of familiarity with competition venue", "absolutely wanting to excel", "pressure due to great expectations", "challenging media demands", "sleep-onset and sleep-maintenance difficulties" and "unfamiliar weather/climatic conditions". All in all, 20 factors were identified as being relevant to Olympic performance success. These findings not only underline U.S. Olympic committee sport psychologist Sean McCann's idea (2008) that "at the Olympics, everything is a performance issue" (p. 267) but also serve as a cornerstone on which the Swiss Olympic Association built their preparation for the Olympic Games of 2006, 2008 and 2010.

### Best-practise reports on onsite psychology consultancy

Another valuable source for preparing psychologists for onsite services are best-practise reports on effective Olympic psychological consultations. McCann (2008) reported on the wide scope of issues U.S. sport psychologists faced at the Games. He mentioned (a) clinical issues, such as suicidal ideation, depression, mania, compulsion, eating disorders; (b) problems with the adjustment to external factors (e.g., death of a family member, homicide by a friend, legal charges and marriage crisis); (c) financial crisis or drug-testing uncertainty; (d) interpersonal conflicts (e.g., conflict with agent, coach or teammate); (e) distractions at the Games, like issues with sexuality, the media and sponsors and (f) performance pressures due to coaches, the media, parents, significant others, agents and internal standards. This list shows that sport psychologists, as well as athletes and coaches, should prepare themselves for a wide variety of issues.

The literature concerning Olympic mental skills training programmes (e.g., Blumenstein & Lidor, 2008) focuses on psychological skills training prior to the Games. But as highlighted above, athletes might want to address a wide range of additional challenges and issues with a sport psychologist during the Olympics. This appraisal is supported by Hodge's (2010) review of the literature. He pointed out several mental issues as being relevant and common to the Olympic environment. Particularly, he identified stress management and coping with stressors, such as transport, security and

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