

LESSONS FROM THE OLYMPICS: PARTICIPANTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE 2000 GAMES

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the experiences of South African athletes at the Olympic Games and to identify the possible factors that could have affected their performances. A sample of 44 participants at the 2000 Olympic Games completed a post-Olympic questionnaire. Although most athletes believed that they were adequately prepared, a large proportion (58%) did not meet their pre-Olympic expectations. A variety of factors such as team selection, the media, village life, distractions, and coaching behaviours were identified as possible factors that influenced performance. Suggestions based on these data are proposed for future Olympic teams.

Key words: Olympic Games; Sport psychology; Elite competition.

INTRODUCTION

What was really positive was waking up every morning and seeing the flame burning at the stadium.
(Athlete comment)

The Olympic Games are in many ways different from other international competitions and therefore present unique demands, stresses and distractions. The general Olympic environment in itself may have had a significant effect on the performance of some participants. Some athletes thrive in this environment while others fail to live up to pre-Olympic expectations (Gould, *et al.* 1999b).

A study by Orlick and Partington (1988) identified factors that affected Olympic performances negatively. These included changing things that worked successfully in the past, late team selection and distractions at the Games. These authors were of the opinion that the athletes themselves were an important source of information regarding the mental dimensions of Olympic participation.

PROBLEM

The purpose of the current study is to investigate factors that from the athletes' perspective may have effected their performance. The long-term goal is to use these findings to ensure that optimal conditions are created for future Olympic participants. These are not only limited to mental readiness, but could also include other aspects such as organisational, administrative and political issues that have the potential to disrupt peak performance.

METHOD

Sample

After obtaining permission from the National Olympic Committee of South Africa (NOCSA) 113 questionnaires were mailed to athletes who attended the 2000 Games in Sydney. The football team was not included because they did not stay at the Olympic Village and competed almost exclusively at venues outside Sydney. They also returned home relatively early, immediately after their last match.

A stamped and addressed envelope was included for respondents to return their completed questionnaires. The response of the athletes was disappointing. Only 24 completed questionnaires were returned. A possible reason for this poor response was that questionnaires did not reach all the athletes. Quite a few are based overseas and others have moved base since the Games. Personal inquiries also revealed that some athletes did not have the desire to do anything after the Games, least of all completing a questionnaire. This aspect of lethargy and feelings of depression will be dealt with at a later stage.

A second round of questionnaires was mailed to the athletes. This second appeal yielded 20 additional questionnaires giving a total of 44 completed questionnaires for analysis. This represents 39% of the South African team that participated in the Games.

The questionnaire

The contents of the questionnaire was based on similar Olympic surveys carried out by Orlick and Partington (1988), Partington and Orlick (1991), Meyers (1997) and Gould, *et al.* (1999a, 1999b). The first section deals with the athletes' perception of whether they have met their pre-Olympic expectations. The second section investigates coaching behaviours. This is followed by items pertaining to environmental factors that could have affected performance. The next sections deals with post-Olympic perceptions and emotions. The specific issues covered in the questionnaire will be discussed in the presentation of results that follows.

RESULTS

Adequacy of pre-Olympic preparation

The vast majority (80%) of athletes believed that they were adequately physically prepared for the Games. However, members of the baseball team were of the opinion that they were short of recent match experience when arriving in Sydney. Only three athletes were of the opinion that they were not adequately physically prepared. Six athletes were uncertain about the adequacy of their physical preparation. As regards technical and psychological preparation the athletes were less confident. A total of 77% of the sample believed that they were technically adequately prepared and 66% were of the opinion that they were adequately psychologically prepared.

*The best thing I did before the Games was that I visited the sport psychologist.
It helped me mentally to relax.*

Quite a few (34%) athletes were uncertain about the adequacy of their psychological preparation and two athletes stated that they were not adequately psychologically prepared.

Things that I did not expect to hit my feet out from underneath me, that bowled me over.

I was prepared before the Games, but in hindsight I needed more preparation.

Success of performances

A large proportion of the sample (58%) stated that they did not meet their pre-Olympic expectations. Approximately a third (33%) of the sample were satisfied that they met their expectations. Only three athletes reported that they exceeded their expectations.

The role of coaches and managers

Respondents were requested to mention the best things that their coaches and managers did to help them perform well at the Games. They were also asked to comment on things that coaches and managers did that hurt their performances.

The athletes expressed appreciation for coaches and managers who looked after their needs such as organising transport, training sessions, etc. They also appreciated the efforts of coaches and managers to shield them from unnecessary hassles and stresses. They also commended coaches and managers who kept them informed.

Positive behaviours

The coach did a good job scheduling training sessions and keeping us informed about travelling and other arrangements.

The manager sorted out all missions to keep us free from hassles and pressures.

The coach tried to take all unnecessary worry away.

The manager kept politics and administrative problems away from me.

My manager created a training environment in which I could achieve my best.

Our competitions last ten days, therefore the coach had an important task in keeping me mentally focused.

Negative behaviours

He made decisions without consulting the athletes.

There was a lack of communication between the coach and team members.

Some athletes perceived the freedom allowed by the coaches and managers as positive.

Positive behaviours

They gave us the freedom to deal with the games in our own way.

Another good thing was that he allowed time alone (to think and relax).

Allowed me to stay away from the opening ceremony and village.

Negative behaviours

Not giving me space to relax alone and do my own thing.

Positive support from the coach was also mentioned. A seasoned international competitor wrote:

I was grateful to have my coach at the Games. He helped me with confidence and technical advice. But positive support was the most important thing.

The athletes commended the professional demeanour of the coach, staying calm, and maintaining confidence under pressure.

Positive behaviours

He kept things professional.

He remained positive although the morale was pretty low.

He was professional, calm and in control. He wasn't overwhelmed.

The coach remained calm and relaxed and therefore did not cause additional stress for us.

Negative behaviours

The coach seemed to lack confidence.

He did not take enough control.

There were some complaints about negativism and favouritism.

I was not afforded the opportunity to enjoy myself as my manager was the most negative thing on the tour.

There were two sets of rules for different people.

One athlete complained about a lack of loyalty and support from the coaches and managers.

Most of the time they were praising athletes from other countries that we had competed against before and had defeated. That kind of put a damper on my spirit.

Selection procedures

Seven (16%) athletes stated that selection procedures affected their performance extremely negatively. A further 15 (34%) were of the opinion that selection procedures affected their performances moderately negatively.

A few athletes were unhappy with the fact that the men's hockey team had not been included in the South African team.

The universal problem of late selection of teams was mentioned frequently.

The uncertainty caused by the late announcement of the team was a mental drain.

Team selection should have been done sooner. This would have given everyone peace of mind when preparing for the Olympics.

The team was selected too late. Uncertainty about participation affected my preparation negatively.

I only knew by the Durban camp that I was selected. I found it extremely stressful and emotionally draining.

The selection was left too late. I know that I was a border-line case for selection. The amount of pressure and anxiety that I suffered the whole year was excruciating.

There were also negative perceptions about selection criteria and procedures.

They changed the criteria. One never knew where one stood.

I was never made to feel part of the team and that my selection was on merit.

Other extraneous factors

Respondents were requested to report their perceptions of various factors on a 5-point scale ranging from “extremely negative” through “no impact” to “extremely positive”.

Travel arrangements

In general, the respondents did not experience travelling to and at the Games as negative. However, some of the athletes were of the opinion that they travelled too much in the year prior to the Games.

I had to travel to competitions in order to qualify. This drained me mentally and financially.

I should have stayed in South Africa to train and not have travelled so much.

Village life

The average response on the 5-point scale was 3.4. Village life in general (4), eating arrangements (4.1) and accommodation (3.8) were generally perceived positively.

Living amongst the best athletes in the world and coming to realise that they are also just human was in a sense very uplifting and very motivating.

The whole vibe and hype in the Village helped me want to achieve, fuelled my eagerness to succeed.

It was good that we were located close to the dining hall.

There was some dissatisfaction with the accommodation. However, this was the exception rather than the rule.

The accommodations were too close together. One could hear people talking late into the night.

I really enjoyed the Village, but I lost too much sleep because the rooms were too noisy with little soundproofing.

The heat in the afternoons in the rooms was a bit too much. I could not have an afternoon rest, which was sometimes needed.

The smoking was awful.

Distractions

The average perception of the effect of distractions during the Games was that it did not have an impact (2.8 on the 5-point scale) on their performance.

I was well aware of what to expect about the distractions in the Village.

Although we were forewarned, distractions still got the better of certain members of the team.

Having been at the Commonwealth Games helped me to deal with distractions.

We had the freedom to avoid distractions (e.g. functions, etc.) which was good.

It is not good to stay in the Village for such a long time before competing. One loses focus.

Being away from the Village for the first two weeks was a good move.

The athletes had to attend too many functions (e.g. sponsors). This led to a loss of focus.

Trying to secure tickets for family for the final caused extra stress that perhaps should be shouldered by someone else.

The media

The overall response to the possible effect of the media on performance was that it did not have a significant impact on performance. However, five athletes (11%) were of the opinion that the media affected them extremely negatively. A further nine (20%) of the sample experienced the effect of the media moderately negatively. Six (13%) experienced the media moderately positively, while four (9%) of the sample rated the effect of the media as “extremely positive.”

Not only do you have to deal with your poor performance, but also the negative criticism I got from individuals going straight to the papers without talking with me first. They had no idea what went wrong.

The media only think of medals and fail to see the bigger picture. To have athletes in 29 finals is a massive improvement from Atlanta.

The media seemed to think that we had to fit in with them and not the other way around.

Members of the baseball team experienced the media negatively due to the issue of the men's hockey team not being included in the Sydney team. The following statement represents the feelings of some of the baseball players:

The media gave us no chance. The "hockey vs baseball" debate made us feel that we were not good enough to be at the Games. The media should have supported us.

Administrative support

In general the respondents were of the opinion that the administrative support staff did not have any impact on their performances. A group of 14 athletes (32%) experienced the effect of the administrative staff positively.

I found the administrative staff very supportive of my decisions and needs.

I found the individuals who I dealt with exceptionally helpful.

However, 11 (25%) of the sample perceived the effect of the administrative staff negatively.

Some staff members were not as helpful as others.

I found the general lack of punctuality of administrators and athletes alike very irritating. It leads to lack of discipline.

Medical support

There was general satisfaction with and appreciation for the medical staff at the Games. The average rating on the 5-point scale was 4.4. A total of 25 athletes (56%) gave the medical staff an "extremely positive" rating.

They worked very hard and gave a lot without receiving much thank you and appreciation.

The medical staff helped beyond their call of duty and became good friends over and above their official functions.

The medical team should be enlarged. They were overbooked and not available when I needed them.

Team-mates

A total of nine (20%) of the sample of athletes were of the opinion that team-mates did not have any impact on their performance. Twenty-nine (61%) perceived the effect of their team-mates positively. Only four (9%) of the sample rated the effect of team-mates negatively.

I really enjoyed the team spirit.

There was a great atmosphere among the track and field athletes. During the tournament and the preparation process there were no problems. Only now afterwards the realization that some players are spreading negative rumours about things is very painful. But at the time, that was not really detected.

Team-mates were very supportive. This created a positive environment.

Family

The effect of family members on performance was generally rated highly positively (average rating of 4.6 on the 5-point scale).

My family and friends were my biggest support. I couldn't have done it without them.

My folks were there and helped make my Olympics more enjoyable. They supported me, no matter what.

Very supportive. They told me they were happy to see me in the team and would like me whether or not I got a medal.

My father and husband helped create a warm, familiar environment.

Only one athlete experienced the effect of his/her family on performance negatively.

Others' expectations

Thirteen athletes (30%) reported that the expectations of others did not have any impact on their performance. Nine athletes (20%) were of the opinion that the expectations of others had a negative effect on their achievements.

NOCSA put high expectations (medal count) on us instead of letting everyone perform to their best without pressure.

The expectations and disappointments on behalf of the South Africans were very hard to accept.

Fifty percent of the sample perceived the effect of the expectations of others as positive.

Post-Olympic perceptions

Feelings of depression

The majority (77%) of the sample reported subjective feelings of post-Olympic depression. Twelve (27%) respondents reported feelings of "extreme" depression after the Games. A total of 11 (25%) athletes experienced "quite a bit" of post-Olympic depression. A further 12 (27%) reported subjective feelings of "moderate" depression. Only nine athletes (20%) reported that they did not experience any depression.

There was no significant relationship between these scores of incidence/degree of depression and the athletes' perceptions of their pre-Olympic psychological readiness ($r=0.173$; $p=0.262$) and their evaluation of whether they met their pre-Olympic expectations ($r=0.197$; $p=0.199$).

I still wonder about certain things, but with time things will become easier to digest. I will still take a while to get over the whole experience.

Two athletes mentioned the need for post-Olympic counselling.

It would have been quite nice to have had some counselling after the Olympics.

How do we deal with life after the Olympics? Some guidance is needed.

Second chances

Respondents were asked to comment on matters that they would have done differently if they were given a second chance to attend the Games. A response mentioned, that is worth considering, is that members of various sporting codes should build a stronger relationship with the entire team. Mention was also made of a need for better psychological preparation.

I would like to have been more mentally prepared for an event like this.

There should be a more thorough debriefing (technically and psychologically) after each event to refocus and set new goals.

I would like a stronger team spirit.

I would spend less time in the Village before my race.

The travelling prior to the Olympics exhausted me. Next time I would plan better.

Some athletes were of the opinion that they should have expressed their unhappiness with certain matters earlier.

I would have spoken my mind earlier.

Post-Olympic criticism

Respondents were generally of the opinion that the post-Olympic criticism was harsh and unfair. The following are examples of the many responses to this question:

Some of it was very unfair. Mr. Ramsamy and NOCSA, however, were very supportive and appreciated our performance.

The media and NOCSA tend to overstate the athletes' abilities, which is part of the building interest, but the public does not understand it.

It was very hurtful, but one has to take it from where it comes from. I was proud to represent my team-mates at the Olympics, but not my country. I feel that South Africans failed their athletes.

We performed better than ever before, so it would be crazy to listen to uninformed opinions.

The criticism is based on a misinformed public, a poor understanding of the Olympics by our press, and generally a poor Olympic culture in the country.

I was shocked that a country can just turn on you. We did our best to perform at the level that we can. It was very disheartening.

People need to see the number of finals reached in Sydney compared to Atlanta in order to see an improvement from then.

There were also team members who acknowledged the public criticism as realistic and justified.

The criticism was deserved, as we did not do well because we were not prepared to face the professional teams.

For the sports talent and sports fanatical public we should definitely be producing more medals.

Some of it was valid, but South Africans don't know what it takes for an athlete to perform well at the Games.

Some of it is fair, but we cannot compare to other countries as far as available resources.

The reaction of the press was much more positive than it was in Atlanta. They had learnt a lot over the years and were more supportive of us.

Other comments and suggestions

Respondents were requested to make suggestions or comment on any other matters of interest. Mention was made of monetary sacrifices and the need for financial support for athletes in general.

We suffered enormous monetary loss. Because we had to pay for all medical costs we played through pain before the games.

More money needs to be put into schools of excellence. We need a super squad system supported by NOCSA and the government.

It is not possible to work to survive and put in the effort that is needed to win Gold.

I received good support from NOCSA for my final year of preparation. Ideally, the support needs to begin earlier, not just in the final build up to the Olympics.

Frequent mention was made of extending the preparation period of athletes for international events such as the Olympic Games.

Don't ignore us the three years between Games. Now is the time to lay a foundation for Athens.

A programme of at least four years should be introduced for athletes who qualify for the Olympics.

More emphasis should be placed on mental states before, during and after the Games. Individual sessions with athletes are needed.

A need for team building was frequently mentioned.

There needs to be more team-building exercises so that the whole team gets to know one another. The smaller sports do tend to stick together while the team sports and larger groups keep separate.

We need to act more as a team and not have people treated differently and exclusively.

More should have been done to create a team spirit. The team seemed disjointed, not intentionally or as a result of tensions, but rather due to a lack of interaction.

The team could have gotten together to support other sports and team-mates.

The team spirit needs to be better.

Better team synergy was needed.

One athlete suggested that the participants should have some input when appointing managers and coaches.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Adequacy of pre-Olympic preparation

NOCSA did its best to ensure that this was the best-prepared Olympic team to ever leave the shores of South Africa. However, there is always room for improvement because many athletes felt that they were not optimally prepared in all dimensions (physical, technical and psychological). NOCSA should continue to give athletes the financial and other support to empower them to prepare over an extended time period for the Games.

The role of coaches, managers and support staff

In the midst of the everyday hassles and crises management, the critical role of coaches, managers and administrative staff is possibly negated. These individuals should not underestimate the crucial role they play in providing a positive environment for athletes to perform optimally. This places great demands on them. They need to have a positive, helping attitude towards the athletes and be prepared for the Olympic experience.

Athletes seem to have high, and in some cases, unrealistic expectations of their coaches and support staff. They expect a professional attitude, confidence, commitment, technical and administrative competence, placing the needs of the athlete first, trust and fairness, good communication and interpersonal skills, loyalty and confidence-building support. Although this places great demands on staff, such expectations are natural. Only coaches and staff who meet these criteria should be appointed in these positions. On the other hand, athletes should also acknowledge their dependence on the administrative support staff, cooperate with them, and show appreciation for their efforts. It is not the responsibility of the administrative staff only to maintain a positive environment.

Selection procedures

Late selection of teams is a universal problem. The responses of athletes who participated in this study highlighted this problem. Although there are usually valid practical reasons for this phenomenon, every possible precaution should be taken to alleviate this problem. The appointment of support staff should similarly be concluded as soon as practically possible.

Other extraneous factors

The athletes did not report significant problems with travel arrangement and life in the Olympic village. In contrast with other studies (Orlick & Partington, 1988) the South African team did not have major problems with distractions at the Sydney Olympic Games. This could possibly be attributed to the quality of the general organisation at the Games and perhaps to a lesser degree to the fact that attention was given to this aspect at the pre-Olympic preparation camps. In addition, coaches and managers visited the Olympic site shortly before the commencement of the Games. The familiarity with many of the conditions surrounding the Games enabled them to better prepare their athletes as to what they should expect at the Games. This practice should be continued when preparing future teams.

Athletes should be made aware of how their behaviour could affect their team-mates. A commitment to be sensitive to the needs of other athletes should be instilled in all team members. This includes matters such as positive interpersonal relations, allowing other athletes quiet time for resting and sleeping, supporting and encouraging team-mates, and other behaviours such as punctuality and inconsiderate behaviour such as smoking.

The media

The responses of the athletes in this survey showed that the media could play a positive as well as destructive role. Attempts should be made to maintain a good relationship between athletes and the media. The ideal would be for the media to refrain from creating unrealistic expectations among their readers and to promote and support the various sport codes and their athletes.

Medical support

The athletes involved in this survey were generally very satisfied with the quality of medical support. Because this is an important factor in the life of athletes NOCSA should continue to appoint competent professionals with a "feel" for elite sport to assist athletes in their preparation for and performance at the Games.

Team-mates

Many of the respondents in this survey were of the opinion that the spirit of the SA team could have been better. Serious attention should be given to this aspect when preparing future teams.

Family

For many athletes the support of their families was very important. Attempts should be made to assist family and friends of athletes to fulfil this supportive role without becoming an additional source of distraction. These include obtaining tickets for events and passes to visit the athletes.

Others' expectations

The expectations of others can have a negative as well as positive effect on performance. It is recommended that an overemphasis on medals should be avoided.

Post-Olympic matters

Athletes should be prepared to handle the possible media criticism they will have to endure after the Games.

The feelings of depression that was reported by a large percentage of the athletes can possibly be attributed to feelings of emptiness and lack of purpose after many years of preparation and eager anticipation, which came to a climactic end at the Games. Athletes should be prepared for possible post-Olympic negative emotions. Some post-Olympic counselling should be offered.

CONCLUSION

A professional approach is imperative to compete successfully at the Olympic Games. In order to enhance the professional development of athletes the necessary resources should be put at their disposal. This includes adequate financial, technical, scientific, medical, and psychological assistance.

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