

Reflections on the Psychological Preparation of the USA Ski and Snowboard Team for the

Vancouver 2010 Olympic Games

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### Abstract

This article explains the program in existence since the 1990's that has been used to prepare the USA's male alpine and USA's male Nordic combined ski teams for international events including World Cup competitions, World Championships, and multiple Winter Olympic Games. The authors initially developed this program in the 1980's for use with Summer Olympic Teams including track and field, women's gymnastics, and other Olympic sports. Philosophical components of service delivery will be explored as well as the range of services provided, problems encountered, and how these issues were handled. Also, special attention will be provided to explain how we aided athletes in the year immediately following the Vancouver Games in order to promote healthy transition during post Olympic years.

*Keywords:* mental training, Olympics, elite athletes

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As applied sport psychology consultants with many years of experience, in this paper we will share our thoughts on applying sport psychology services to Olympic level performers. In essence, what we are doing is similar, in terms of content, to what many other professionals are doing in the field of applied sport psychology. Possibly the only difference between us and our colleagues is how we dispense the knowledge to our clients. The rest of the article will explore our delivery system in more depth.

The authors have been involved with consulting for professional and Olympic caliber athletes for over 30 years. Both authors began their first consultations with the United States Gymnastics Federation (USGF) in 1985 just after the summer Olympic Games in Los Angeles. We were introduced to the federation by several prominent gymnastics coaches who were residing in Salt Lake City area. The federation had a wonderful performance in Los Angeles when individual athletes such as Mary Lou Retton, Julianne McNamara, Peter Vidmar, and Bart Conner won several gold medals. However, little systematic attempt had been made to include a mental training program into the athlete's development. In fact, sport psychology services were relatively absent from any USA team's training with a few exceptions. Certainly the United States Olympic Training Center was not including this component officially until Shane Murphy was hired and attended the summer Olympic Games in Seoul in an official capacity with full credentials (Murphy & Ferrante, 1989). About the same time a group of individuals including Rick McGuire, Ralph Vernacchia, Gloria Balague, and the authors began to work systematically with our USA Track and Field team following the lead of previous consultants Robert Nideffer and Betty Wenz who accompanied the track and field team to Seoul in 1988 (Nideffer, 1989). An

entire special edition of *The Sport Psychologist* in 1989 was devoted to describing the services provided to Olympic teams in the US and Canada during this time period.

Both authors began consulting for the United States Ski and Snowboard Association (USSA) most recently with Henschen beginning prior to the 2002 Salt Lake City Games and Gordin before the 2010 Vancouver Games. We believe that consultants should begin working with the athletes with plenty of time available prior to the Games to facilitate the integration of mental training into the regular training regimen of the athletes rather than adding something new at the last moment. With this brief history as an introduction to service provision we will now continue this manuscript with an overview of our philosophy of service delivery.

### **Philosophy of Service Delivery**

The developmental model of service is our orientation. Rather than wait until there is a problem in performance, in our model of service delivery, mental training begins months if not years prior to the major competition. Similar to physical skills, critical psychological skills are identified and taught to athletes. The rest of the coaching staff is involved in the development of these skills and the sport psychologist coordinates the team effort. The identified critical skills include: attitude, effort, commitment, emotional control, focusing skills, composure development, and an attitude of life-long learning. When the coaching staffs hire us, we set out the relationship prerequisites of trust, belief, and cooperation. Although confidentiality is essential to success when working with athletes and coaches, it is also important to realize that a certain amount of information should be consensually shared among all involved. The first author for instance, will often encourage the coaching staff to undertake the mental training program along with the athletes. This often serves two purposes; the coaches become more adept

at controlling their own emotions but they also will more frequently encourage the athletes to practice these skills on a daily basis.

Our approach is time tested, practical, and readily accepted by all types of Olympic performers that we have worked with. It is theoretically grounded on “whole person development”. This approach is fairly simplistic because it can be mastered through a logical and sequential pattern of learning fundamental mental performance skills, which are hierarchical in nature. For instance, focus is such a fundamentally essential skill to possess that we believe that few other skills can be developed without it. When working with Olympic athletes (no matter the actual level of expertise) it is imperative to initially develop a trusting relationship. This is normally accomplished by genuinely caring about the total person instead of focusing primarily on performance skills alone. Our philosophy includes the idea that “sports are something people do, not who they are!” When we are able to identify who the performers really are, then they are more than willing to confide in us as consultants, because they understand that we want to help them in becoming, not only better performers, but better overall people. This approach leads to a trusting atmosphere and is easy to establish if you are consistent and “real” in all your dealings with each individual. For the 2010 Vancouver Olympic Games, as in all Olympic competitions, a number of athletes we were working with were not selected to be part of the United States team. We spent countless hours counseling them through their frustrations and disappointments. We continued to help them to refocus and look forward to the remainder of the season and future opportunities. Again, they are complex people, not just athletes

### **Range of Services Provided**

We provide services primarily in four areas; (a) team issues and team chemistry, (b) individual issues and problems, (c) practical mental training through exercises, and (d) clinical referrals for specific problems.

All teams including Olympic teams will experience a variety of issues at various times once they are assembled. These will include dealing with injuries, handling burnout, personal problems with teammates, coach/athlete friction, and a host of smaller issues. Developing team cohesion/chemistry is an area that every group needs to confront and work on. As consultants, we exert a great deal of effort in educating our athletes and coaches concerning the stages of group development including forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning (Tuckman, 1965). No team is immune to this phenomenon and must work through these stages appropriately in order to actually experience good team chemistry. When players and coaches understand the various stages and their characteristics, then and only then, will it be possible to negotiate through each stage and attain the desired results-team chemistry.

Another large amount of our consulting effort revolves around helping players to recognize and deal with their individual problems and issues. These occur in variety of areas: family problems, motivation concerns, relationships, and communication. Based upon our philosophy of “whole person development”, it is imperative that we address and provide guidance for a wide variety of issues. It is not that we are able to solve all of these problems, however we do attempt to provide constructive perceptions for mitigating the issues. Providing practical mental skills training through exercises is also a portion of our consulting. We do not just talk about areas that need improvement (anxiety, stress, handling pressure, burnout, concentration issues, mental practice techniques, and competition preparation) rather we provide

practical exercises that are designed to improve any weaknesses. These practical exercises involve athletes committing to doing some “mental homework” everyday in order to increase their skills. The operant word here is skills. Athletes work long and hard to hone their physical skills and it is no different for mental skills. If an athlete is not willing to commit to doing homework, then we probably will not continue to work with him/her.

### **Providing Clinical Referrals**

We believe we need to be cognizant of our ethical competency boundaries and we do not try to work in areas where we are not adequately trained. We have a great referral network in our local area where we can refer to highly competent specialists. As we stated earlier, athletes are people first and athletes second. Therefore, some issues emerge that are of a clinical nature. It is important to offer support at these crucial times and to provide the necessary and sufficient service referrals in a timely fashion. Over the years, the authors have abided by these ethical standards and continue to develop the appropriate relationships with fellow professionals that are willing and capable to provide expert support.

### **Gaining Entry**

Both of the authors of this article are at stages of their careers where gaining entry has been relatively easy. We continually receive calls both teams and individual athletes requesting the use of our services. This occurs primarily by word of mouth or through referrals from other professional colleagues. This is gratifying, but of course we can't fulfill all requests. Neither of us has ever applied for a consulting position, as we have been fortunate to be requested to consult with many athletes and teams over the years. We would guess that these offers come to us based upon what we have accomplished in the past. We have a group of professional colleagues across

the country and around the world that are familiar with our philosophies and values, and thus recommend our services when warranted. We also do the same for them when appropriate.

### **Effectiveness**

Effectiveness is a combination of being genuine, experienced, straightforward, speaking the language of coaches and athletes, and portraying our strengths in terms of personal characteristics (Gould, Murphy, Tammen, & May, 1991; Poczwardowski, Sherman, & Ravizza, 2004). As mentioned previously, we have very similar philosophies; but how we attain our end results are completely different. Knowing who we are and presenting ourselves genuinely has been of great benefit. We are confident and know what works for us. We believe that our experience helps us. Over the years, we have each made a great number of mistakes or have misread a situation or client; but hopefully we learn from these mishaps and avoid making the same error again. Also, we learned a long time ago, not to venture into areas where we are not confident, competent, or unsure of how to handle a particular situation. We try to work only in areas where our personalities and/or characteristics can be effective. The true measure of effectiveness in applied sport psychology is whether you are invited back as part of the team. After each quadrennium a number of staff changes occur including sports medicine personnel. A complete evaluation of service providers often occurs and any ineffective members are dismissed.

We are pleased to have been invited to return for this next quadrennium to work with these dedicated individuals. A final point to be considered is length of contact with the coaches and athletes. It is our belief that a minimum of two to three years is necessary to provide the type of quality services to these dedicated athletes. Any shorter time period does not allow for the establishment of appropriate levels of trust and relationship building.



### **Problems Encountered and How Handled**

Preparing for any Olympic games is difficult and Vancouver was no exception. The problems we encountered before and during the Games can be placed in the following eight problem areas: non-selection to the team, injury, burnout, living arrangements, handling the media, dealing with the weather and other potential distractions, luge problems, and moving on after the Games.

#### **Non-selection to the team**

Not all members of the US Ski Team were fortunate enough to be selected to represent our country at the Games. The Alpine team actually has 20 members and the Nordic Combined team had about 10 members who are on the World Cup or Continental Cup circuits. The coaches publish a set of criteria, early in the season, based on objective data for the most part. Of course, this sounds good, but there are always challenges and some close calls that are really determined by subjective coach decisions. Our challenge, as sport psychology consultants, should be to help the athletes who were not selected to handle their disappointment and frustration, and to refocus on the remainder of the season. This is why we need to know each of the athletes and how to motivate them in a positive manner.

#### **Injury**

The aftermath of being injured for athletes is an age-old problem. The fears that competitors experience during injury must be addressed and mitigated. The counseling that occurs at this time is crucial in order for confidence to be restored. One of the Nordic Combined skiers was injured prior to the Games and it was an important part of our relationship to be there to offer support in this difficult time. The first author provided a series of audio recordings that were specific to visualizations of healing in the knee joint that the athlete found particularly

helpful in his recovery. The physical therapist that travels with the team was also complementary of these recordings stating that it allowed the athlete to relax through the treatment periods. It is important to build a good relationship with all auxiliary personnel to help the athletes through injury.

### **Burnout**

Many of the athletes participating in the Vancouver Games were in the middle of their seasons. This meant that they had been training, conditioning, and competing for at least four to five months prior to the Olympics. In addition, after the Games, they were planning to travel back to Europe to finish their competitive year. Their travel schedules in a normal year may cause burnout and the Olympics in North America just added to the issue. Compound this with the high stress of the Olympics and it is no wonder that we had to deal with burnout for many athletes. Not only were the athletes prone to burnout, but so were the coaches. To counteract this phenomenon we planned “burnout prevention breaks” for coaches and athletes even if it meant missing a few competitions during the remainder of the season. Also, allowing team members and coaches to return to a “normal” life for a few days or even weeks is an individual decision for each athlete and might possibly mitigate staleness and burnout for some. Alternatively to prevent boredom, if an athlete is coming off a successful Olympic competition, he might be encouraged to keep competing and earn more money in World Cup competitions.

Also, life-changing experiences can occur in any Games and it is our duty to be cognizant of how the athlete feels about the outcome of the event. For instance, one of the Nordic Combined athletes proposed marriage to his girlfriend on the night he won a gold medal and was also elected to carry the American flag for closing ceremonies by his American teammates. Appearances on television shows, trips to Afghanistan to visit and support US troops

who watched the coverage and other travel opportunities to build the sport can create havoc in post Games scheduling. The Nordic Combined team won an historic four medals (one gold and three silver medals) after having won no medals in the history of the Olympic Games. This was a news-making story that demanded a large amount of media attention, travel, and adulation. All of these factors are possible contributors to burnout once the excitement subsides.

### **Living Arrangements at the Games**

The Men's Alpine Ski Team from the United States did not stay in the Olympic Village during the Vancouver Games. Instead, we rented six condominiums in Whistler (where the competition was held). All coaches, athletes, and team sport science personnel stayed together. We also had our own chef to prepare our meals. These living arrangements contributed greatly to the teams' success. Instead of being part of the commotion in the village, we controlled our own time schedules and enjoyed the supportive atmosphere of being with those who were there for the same reasons. The Nordic Combined Team voted to stay in the Olympic Village during the Games. We had many returning Olympians on our team and they had experienced staying outside the village in prior Games. However, we were prepared for the distractions that can occur in the Olympic Village such as noise, crowded conditions, interacting with fellow competitors, and boredom. For example, our team was very well trained in time management strategies to prevent boredom. Each athlete individually worked out the best schedule for himself with the cooperation of the coaching staff and support staff. Drug testing was handled efficiently and effectively and did not cause a distraction to our team.

We were able to eat together and have brief team meetings nightly to go over the day's lessons and events and share a sense of team unity. An added advantage of staying in the village was to keep well meaning family members at bay. The team came to Vancouver to do a job and

socializing was handled at the end of the competition and at the awards ceremonies. The USA House that was maintained by the United States Olympic Committee served as an excellent venue to keep socializing at an appropriate level. Also the opening ceremony occurred only a day prior to our first competition and the team and coaching staff elected not to attend the event. The maturity of this decision cannot be understated. The most important ceremony the team wanted to attend was the medal ceremony.

### **Handling the Media**

During the Games, the media can exert both positive and negative stress. They can be positive because they keep the world informed about the outcomes of the competition and they also provide human-interest stories. On the other hand, the media has a job to do and many times are focused on getting stories that seem oblivious to the needs and concerns of the athletes. So in this regard they can become an impediment or a distraction. We did not keep our athletes away **from** the media, but we did orchestrate where and when the media had access to the team. When one of our athletes reached the podium (earned a medal), we attended the medal ceremonies as a team to provide the media with some time with our competitors, but the living areas were always off limits to them.

### **Dealing with Distractions**

The weather in Whistler was unseasonably warm and rainy. Most events were postponed for **three to four** days at a time. This created a great deal of hardship on the athletes because they were always on edge and could not practice when needed. Early in the competition we decided to fly back to Park City, Utah between events so the team could receive quality practice and conditioning. This seemed to bring great dividends both mentally and physically. Obviously,

this contributed to keeping confidence at a high level. Instead of lying around and getting stale, they came back to the Games highly motivated and eager for more competition.

An example of this travel advantage occurred during the Nordic Combined large hill competition, as the event had to be restarted because of poor weather conditions after several jumpers had completed their competition attempts including some of our athletes. This stoppage and restarting caused panic in several Olympic caliber athletes. Fortunately, our team was very calm and composed during this process, as we had anticipated some unlikely event occurring because of this unusual weather pattern. One of the skills we had practiced individually and as a team was the ability **to** refocus after a major distraction. Dealing with distraction including weather is an important aspect of mental toughness and we suggest that some simulations for these types of events should be incorporated into any mental training program.

### **Luge Problems**

The problems in the Luge with the death of the young man from Georgia really cast a shadow over the entire Olympic Games. We talked to all of our athletes and watched them closely to see if they were handling this tragedy appropriately. These types of situations require counseling and should not be ignored in hopes that it will just go away. It is always important to check in with all athletes, coaches, and support staff and to attend to feelings of survivor guilt or fear associated with such tragedies. Training in critical incident debriefing is a plus in such situations.

### **Post Olympic Transition**

No matter what the results of the competition, we stressed with our athletes that at the end of the Games it was time to “play forward”. We still had the rest of the season to finish and there was nothing we could do to change any of the results in Vancouver. The great ones always

play forward. That is, great athletes find the best way to advance is to continue to live in the present and not dwell in the past. The time immediately following an Olympic year is crucial in helping athletes to make appropriate successful transitions. Many events can occur that can distract or demotivate athletes during this time period. National governing bodies (NGB's) make financial and reorganizational decisions including funding issues that directly affect both athletes and coaches. Often athletes and coaches experience something akin to "wedding depression". Once a goal has been reached often athletes experience a void similar to a recent bride after the wedding she has been planning since she was a child. Since no new goal is readily apparent there can be an "emptiness vacuum" unless the athlete sets a new goal. Confusion, depression, anger, resentment, abandonment or emptiness can be experienced and if not correctly addressed can become problematic.

We feel we should help athletes and coaches to refocus and start over, not just repeat what has already been accomplished. We can do this by helping athletes create positive visions and "memories for the future". Athletes can develop a "whole life vision" to work on, putting their performance in perspective, and asking relevant questions such as "What do I want for the future?" instead of languishing in self pity and asking "is that all there is to sport?" Likewise, many changes occur to athletes from one quadrennium to the next. For instance, two of the Nordic Combined athletes fathered their first child within months of the Games. This life change can affect the athlete in many ways including changing the way they look at their sport, viewing it no longer as a hobby, but as a job to support a family. New responsibilities can take time and energy away from training but can also provide an excellent balance to life by having a family to attend to and to embrace. These additional demands can add a tremendous regenerative energy to the life of an athlete.

### **Conclusion**

We have been consultants for many Olympic Games (11 total), and we feel the Vancouver experience served us well from a sport psychology perspective. We attempted to prepare for every issue that might have distracted our athletes and coaches. We still have some issues to resolve for the next Games, but we feel comfortable that we are using adequate methods for our athletes to be successful in Russia. As we continue to prepare the teams for Sochi we are cognizant of all that is required to get even better at service delivery. We are constantly seeking information, instituting team building sessions, and employing more effective mental training exercises. Athletes require change, innovation, and new creative programs in order to stay motivated and interested in mental training. Rest assured, that even with all of the above discussed planning and preparation, there will be issues that will need to be addressed that we cannot predict.

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