



**Beijing 2008
Olympic and Paralympic Athlete and Coach
Preparation and Lessons Learned**

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Section One:

Beijing 2008 Olympic/Paralympic Coach Debrief Report *Lessons Learned and Best Practices*

Debbie Muir
May, 2009

Introduction

OTP (formerly RTE) took the initiative of debriefing with 30 of our Beijing Olympic and Paralympic Coaches following the Games. Recognizing the knowledge, experience and wisdom our coaches have and the need to begin to share that with the greater coaching and sporting community for future success was the impetus for conducting the interviews. Specifically, the outlined purpose and objectives of the Coach Debrief Project were:

Overall Purpose:

To help stimulate the kind of critical reflection and evaluation required to take Canadian athletes and coaches to a higher level of performance over the next quadrennial

Key Objectives:

1. To identify lessons learned and best practices that can be shared with the coaching community
2. To identify the required training and competitive environment required for coaching athletes to their full potential
3. To facilitate personal “coaching performance” debriefs with each participant and identify professional development needs

Sharing Coaches Knowledge (Knowledge Management)

OTP is very cognizant of the irreplaceable role of the coach in getting podium performances at the Olympics, Paralympics and World Championships. We are also highly aware of the fact that we do not capitalize and learn from the coaches that are currently producing world class athletes. The challenge has always been how do you capture this information and disseminate it to the appropriate people who can then apply it to their own circumstances.

This report is the first initiative of capturing and documenting that knowledge. In addition to that, OTP is committed to finding other effective means of disseminating this information in an endeavor to assist coaches in preparing athletes for higher levels of performance. We recognize that often the best knowledge is in people’s heads and that this information is often the most valuable of all. Why? Because the information is put into context and it is frequently more extensive and up to date than what can be gleaned from other methods. In short, we can use this information by sharing it with the right people at the right time to help them make more effective coaching decisions. It will provide coaches and others that work directly with athletes to discover, analyze and use this knowledge to become more successful themselves.

Five Key Themes

From the interviews, the conversations fell into 5 key theme areas and this report will go in depth with each one identifying the lessons learned and best practices.

The five key themes are:

- (i) Winning
- (ii) Planning
- (iii) Coaching
- (iv) Communication
- (v) NSO Application

In conjunction with the Coach Interviews, Penny Werthner interviewed a selection of Olympic and Paralympic athletes. Section two of this document contains her report.

Please note that it is not the intention of this report to tell coaches what to do, or to identify a one size fits all approach to performance. It is not about copying another coach but it is about taking in the knowledge and applying it in the most appropriate way for you. We hope that it will also motivate you to engage in your own critical reflection of how you currently do things and determine whether or not you are as effective as you could be and what you can do to be even better.

(i) Winning - Begin with the end in mind

Since the purpose of this report is to share best practices and lessons learned with the specific aim of helping to improve the performance of Canadian athletes on the international stage, it seems most appropriate to have a section solely dedicated to “Winning”.

While all the ideas expressed in this report will help us all be more successful, embracing the comments from the interviewed coaches around winning will help us to change the collective consciousness as it relates to being the best in the world. Thinking, speaking and acting more in terms of possibilities and winning will go a long way towards achieving our nation’s performance goals for the future. Coaches have the ability to influence others in many subtle, yet powerful ways and the great coaches know how to use that to develop a winning mentality.

The challenge for each coach reading this paper will be to determine how much they contribute to increasing the expectations in terms of winning at premier world events such as the Olympic/Paralympic Games and World Championships. And upon further reflection, determine whether or not their actions are congruent with what it will take to be the best. Through developing a “winning mindset” and combining that with the right actions, coaches can be the stimulus and role model for Canadians as a whole to want to be a winning sporting nation. The following quotes all pertain to having the required mindset around winning.

“We need to want to create more competition within the country. Currently we are too protectionist, an old boys club, and that holds us back from performing better internationally.”

“We need to get more comfortable to talk about winning. We need to have higher expectations, raise the bar and live by it.”

“We need to get more comfortable at feeling uncomfortable. Talking about winning isn’t something that we feel all that comfortable with.”

“Compared to other countries, we need to have more fight.”

“The athletes need to have an environment where they feel safe enough to take risks to get better – currently we are not enough of a risk taking, ‘Go for It’ environment.”

“We need to create a ‘no regrets mentality’.”

“Foster a ‘We Can Win’ attitude.”

It is interesting to note that with the exception of the last quote, they all say “We need to....” In future versions of this report, it is hoped that we will have solid examples of how coaches actually did create winning mindsets with their athletes and support teams.

Winning and how it relates to Talent ID

We can't really talk about winning if we do not talk about talent ID. The majority of coaches mentioned this in one way or another. You cannot expect to win if you do not have the horses to begin with and when you do find them you must spend your time and energy on providing the best training and competition possible.

-“Select your medal potential athletes early and then don't chase results – focus on the preparation required to have your best performance at the Olympics.”

-“Don't waste time with those that don't have the mental/physical ability. We must be more cut-throat in identifying and working with the talent.”

The reality in Canada is that there are not enough participants in sport that can create a critical mass of superior athletes that rise to the top. This is a Canadian sport and health issue that negatively affects our ability to be competitive with other countries that have large population bases to draw from. It means that we must be incredibly efficient and effective with the talent that we do have.

-“A best practice would be to have a system wide talent ID program that guides people to the right sport/program...we need to get into the schools.”

(ii) Planning

Technical Planning

The Quad Plan

“The best coaches know what it will take to win at the next Olympics, they have realistically established where the athletes currently are and they know what to do to get to be in a position to win. They make the plan accordingly and they don’t lower the standard or the expectations over the quadrennial.”

Often we make the mistake of assuming that Olympic/Paralympic preparation begins the year before the Games. The reality is Olympic preparation begins the day after they end and in many cases, the Games themselves might have been part of the preparation plan for 2012. During the interviews several coaches brought up the importance of having four year plans. It is so important to identify what it will take to win in 2012, identify what you expect to achieve at the next Games, evaluate where you are and make a broad plan for how you are going to do it.

While this seems very obvious, it is astounding how many coaches do not actually do it. Many have it in their head, but when one does not take the time to write it out, it is easy to miss something. And that something could initiate a negative ripple effect, eventually costing you a medal. As one coach expressed it, *“If you have to run 30 seconds faster off the bike to be competitive for a medal in 2012, it will take you four years of training to do it. You really do need a full quad plan to accomplish this.”* If you haven’t planned it out properly and didn’t build the right foundation in year one, you may be compromising each succeeding year. You do not want to get into the middle of the last year and be kicking yourself for missing something in the first two years. Taking the time to think about and then write out the four year plan provides some insurance that this will not happen.

One of the more painful lessons from one coach was in making the mistake of thinking that every year was as important as the next in terms of performance. We have seen coaches that have made this mistake with their top Olympic athletes. Following the Games, whether or not the athlete achieved their goals or not, if they are going to continue to compete, the pressure is added to perform well right away. To continue to prepare with the same intensity as before the Games and to begin to chase results right away. This is not usually effective. There are numerous examples of athletes that have come back right after the Games, only to burn out by the middle of the quadrennial. *“It is a mistake to make every year important in terms of performance. Had I taken the pressure off in the year after, he might have been able to go the distance to the next Olympics but instead he burnt out and quit.”*

Remember to individualize. The example above pertains to a seasoned Olympic, aging athlete. A four year plan for a young, potentially first time Olympian may look completely different. Getting a personal best performance under their belt in the first year may be a necessity. *“The new athletes will need lots of competition between now and 2012. Two or three world cups a year, FISU games, plus more.”*

Both examples outlined above reinforce the need for well thought out four year plans that are individualized to the specific needs of each athlete. Canada has several top athletes potentially returning for 2012, if their programs are planned and implemented correctly they will have a much greater chance of returning and performing at their highest level ever. Every coach knows the pain and frustration of not seeing an athlete reach their full potential. Do not let poor, long term planning be the limiting factor.

Yearly Training Plan (YTP)

This is an area where top coaches excel and was brought up as a best practice by many. Aside from the obvious benefits of great periodization from a physical and technical point of view, the confidence and belief on the athletes’ part in their training is magnified. *“Implementing the right periodization gives the athletes’ confidence – they need to see all the thought that has gone into the planning process.”*

For many sports, the YTP needs to integrate both the physical/technical aspects of preparation with a performance strategy. *“There needed to be more strategic/smarter decisions made for the best athletes in the Olympic year and it needed to be around giving them confidence as opposed to taking it away.”* Without specifically thinking about this and building it into the plan, you may inadvertently be undermining the confidence of your athletes at a time when they are expected to put in their best performance of the season.

The lessons learned were not so much in the creation of the plan but more around the implementation of the plan. Throughout the interviews there were several comments around the importance of sticking to the plan, focusing on the best preparation required to have the best performance at the Olympics/Paralympics, the tendency to want to chase results to gain confidence and how mindful they needed to be so they did not stray away from the plan.

A positive by-product of great planning and implementation is the belief and trust the athlete gains in what they are doing on a daily basis. This provides an important psychological advantage when they get out there to compete. *“Increase belief through tangible things such as effective training sessions and well thought out planning and periodization, so there is something solid to base that belief and trust on.”*

Competition Planning

Inherent in the YTP and Quad plans is the competition plan and schedule. Several coaches talked about how important the timing and intensity of competitions is as it relates to helping you achieve your best performance at the Games. As already noted above, one coach suggested that you needed to strategically plan when you want to give confidence as opposed to take it away. This implies that the type and timing of competition you plan for in the last few weeks or months of primarily the final year of the quad, should be around building the athletes' confidence that they are on track.

Further to that, competition planning also needs to take into consideration that through failure and setbacks you can find your weaknesses and expose areas that need to be attended to. The following quote clearly articulates why you would want to build challenging competitions into your plan at strategic points during the four year cycle: *“One should find the toughest competition you can because it is only in the hardest of circumstances that you really expose your weaknesses.”*

Non-Technical Planning

Distraction Control Plan

For many coaches managing the distractions of an Olympic Games was one of the greatest challenges. The lesson to be learned here is to make sure you have a distraction control plan...and because you know it will never go as planned, have a back-up plan. *“We kept saying we were going to avoid distractions at the Games – at every meeting this came up – but in the end we didn’t. We needed a formal plan and we needed to stick to it.”*

The advice/best practice suggested by one coach is to plan at least 1 year in advance, not at the eleventh hour, and plan for absolutely everything. Make sure you identify what you are going to do, what you aren't going to do, write it down and then stick to it. In debriefing the Games, make sure you discuss what was distracting, how it affected performance and how you will deal with it the next time round. It is important to realize that while you may not be able to predict absolutely everything that could potentially happen, you can and should put in place a “process” for how you will deal with problems as they arise. This should be a key part of your distraction control plan.

For some reason we like to ignore the importance of being prepared to deal with distractions effectively and do not give it the planning attention that we should. When put in terms of performance one can really begin to see the consequences of not being equipped to deal with distractions. *“The team’s ability to deal with distractions – both positive and negative – will directly influence whether or not they get a medal.”* Very bluntly stated, but I am sure we can all point to examples of medals that were lost because the athlete

and/or the coach became distracted and lost their ability to focus in on what really mattered.

Media Plan

Media could technically fall under the distraction control plan. Indeed, many coaches suggested that the biggest distraction for the athletes at the Games was the media. However, there are many other aspects related to media so it deserves its own plan.

In the lead-up to the Games, the performance of your athletes gets more and more scrutinized by the press. Doing well will increase the focus of attention on the athlete(s)/team, and the pressure to duplicate the performances at the Games. Some athletes do well under this kind of scrutiny but many do not. One athlete, who had won indoor World Championships 5 months prior to the Games, did not deal well with all the media attention. The closer to the Games, the more nervous the athlete became, seriously disturbing the daily training regime and undermining confidence. Managed better this athlete could have won a medal. *“The biggest distraction was the media, winning at World Indoors increased the media attention and added a lot more pressure. I would seriously consider not competing there before the next Olympics. At any rate, this needs to be much better managed next time round.”*

Many sports welcome and need the extra media attention they get before the Olympics. It is their big chance to show off their sport and bring recognition to their high performance athletes and it only comes along once every four years. This is why it is so critical to have a media plan that is strategic in meeting the sports’ needs, the media’s needs and still allows the athletes’ to effectively prepare for the Games and have the single minded focus required while competing. A few sports were prepared with media plans that included access and blackout times, however for the most part this area is still absent on the summer side. *“CBC was at the pre-games staging camp. I wouldn’t do that again. We need to control media access.”*

A best practice of one coach was to have a “fake” practice for media to attend. He used to let them attend a regular practice, making the mistake that they would just sit back and he could still have a good practice. By holding a mock practice you can control what gets recorded and what doesn’t, you do not mind taking the time to set-up for specific requests and you avoid the frustration of feeling like you are missing valuable training time.

Most of the athletes now have media training. One suggestion was for the coaches to get it as well, basing it specifically on media attention you might get around athlete selection. This should be built into the overall media plan, again reinforcing the need to have one in the first place.



Going hand in hand with the distraction control plan, is the importance of knowing what the athletes will have access to in the village, especially in terms of Canadian coverage of the games. In Athens, they had access to the live CBC feed and to daily Canadian newspapers. This had a negative impact for many because in the first half of the games Canada was getting lambasted by the press for seemingly poor performance. For some athletes, this affected their confidence and perhaps was part of the reason for some under performances. For Beijing, the live feed was not as easily accessed. At any rate, find out what the situation will be and then plan accordingly.

(iii) Coaching

Coaching Environment

For those coaching in decentralized, club based sports there were two critical lessons around what they needed in order to do their best coaching: 1. There needs to be coaching support in the clubs when the coach is engaged in national team activities and 2. There needs to be additional coaching support on a daily basis, so the coach can work with the very best athletes in smaller training groups thereby enabling them to individualize the programs as appropriate. Several coaches were able to do this in the lead up to the Games, however this support is required for the full quadrennial in order to improve for 2012. *“For 2012 I will really focus on individualizing the program for each athlete – more one on one. To do this I need more coaching support.”*

More than one coach suggested that we do not spend the requisite time providing individualized coaching support to the top athletes because we are *“too fair, which is unfair to the top athletes”*. Another said it more emphatically, *“We don’t want a net to pick up the weak, if you want results you need to support those that are going to give you the results. Earmark the 2012 athletes now and give them the attention they need.”* The real lesson here is if the coaching environment spreads the coaches’ time and energy too thin, then the performance of podium potential athletes may be compromised.

Another strong message was that the coach must be given the proper authority and the responsibility to do the job well. There needs to be more trust in the technical decisions that are made by the coaches and they should not be overturned by administrative decisions. When the coach is given this authority then they can and should be held accountable for the results. In the current environment, many coaches are not clear on what authority they have and how they will be held accountable. Coaches would like to be held responsible for results when they are given the trust and authority to run their own programs as they see fit.

–“Funding agencies that are giving dollars should not just give a blank cheque – there needs to be more accountability for performance. But this can only happen if you give the head coach full authority and back up to do the job. There needs to be more trust in technical decisions and they should not be overturned by administrative decisions.”

-“Believe in the people/person you hire and let them do their job – still too much interference and reporting to volunteers.”

Another common weakness in the coaching environment is the amount of time a coach is required to put into administration chores. It takes away from their ability to put full focus and energy on planning and coaching, resulting in coaches that are burnt out and tired before they even get to the practice, let alone the Games.

-“I really need a half time administrator – there is too much time being spent on admin which takes away from being fresh as a coach every day.”

Coaching Performance

Many of the best practices identified by the coaches interviewed came from lessons learned the hard way. Capitalizing on the experience of many of our top Canadian coaches, it is hoped that this section of the report will assist our less experienced but talented coaches to apply these lessons to their own circumstances, hopefully shortening the learning curve and enabling them to perform at a higher level sooner and with more consistency.

The best practices identified below mainly pertain to being effective in the high pressure time a few weeks before the Games and at the Games themselves.

However, you won't be able to apply these lessons if you do not start thinking about and practicing them now.

1. Be aware – do not waste your energy on things that aren't going to count. Maintain your focus on the “right thing”. You choose where to expend your energy.
2. Be sensitive to how you are under pressure and take measures to insure you are at your best. Everybody handles stress differently so figure out what works best for you.
3. Having some failure is important – otherwise you aren't pushing and learning – just be ready to learn and not panic. How you react when you make mistakes is important.
4. Do not let little things distract you. Keep your eye on the ball and do not sacrifice performance by focusing on things that you can't control.

5. “Walk the Talk”. Everyone is watching you, especially when there are setbacks. “Stay on Message” and do not come unraveled if it doesn’t go exactly to plan.
6. “Park” disappointment that may happen for one athlete so it does not affect your coaching performance for others coming up.
7. Learn how to emotionally pace yourself. You need to have psychological endurance.
8. Have someone you can talk to, to be a confidant, help relieve the pressure and gain perspective when required.
9. Do not fall into the temptation of trying to do too much. Stick with your plan.
10. Prepare yourself mentally in the same way that you prepare your athletes mentally.
11. Arrive at the games rested. It is scary how many coaches (and athletes for that matter) arrive exhausted and just want to get it over with.

(iv) Communication

There were not a lot of *best practices* identified for this area but there were a significant number of *lessons learned*. To overcome the potential destructive ability failing to communicate can have on critical relationships between team members, it would be wise to begin the best practice of developing communication plans. Identified below are some of the elements this plan should include as well as some comments about communication in general. Most of the lessons learned that the coaches identified were “at Games” issues however most could have been avoided if the proper communication had taken place beforehand.

1. Clarify and communicate the roles, responsibilities and decision making process for every person working directly and indirectly with athletes. In many cases, if this had not been addressed prior to the Games issues and misunderstandings arose. Athletes also need to be kept in the loop here as well, especially with the role of each Integrated Support Team (IST) member.
2. Talk to all of your IST members about your expectations of how they should act and interact with the athletes at the Games. Make sure your IST members have a chance to practice being the way you want them to be in the year leading up to Olympics. Do not underestimate the pressure even IST members feel at the Games. This could impact their ability to do their job well.

“Everyone is keen to be involved and be part of the Olympic experience but they are also out of their comfort zone – a lot of managing and communicating had to happen in this area to keep everyone focused and on track.”

3. At the Olympics/Paralympics, meetings tended to be “reactive” as opposed to “proactive.” While one cannot totally eliminate surprise challenges and problems surfacing, with better planning many things can be dealt with beforehand. This can leave meeting times at the Olympics to be more positive, proactive and simply information sharing.

4. Remember non-verbal communication, the best coaches understand that one of the best ways to communicate to your athletes is through your own actions and role modeling.

-“The coach must be the role model for the athletes, in terms of showing commitment, being at and engaged in all practices, never giving up and continually raising the bar. They are a full partner in the quest.”

5. Set very clear standards and rules with the athletes.

-“Set very clear standards with the team – very rational. Communicate upfront and ahead of time, identifying all the potential problems. Be prepared.”

6. Keep your lines of communication open with your athletes. The closer to the Games you get the more important and difficult this becomes.

-“There is a lot of public pressure and athletes start to feel squeezed. Coaches need to be aware of this happening with their athletes so communication is huge...you may need to get everything on the table.”

(v) NSO Application

It is not just the coaching or technical staff that can learn from this report. The overall leadership of the NSO needs to be aware of these lessons and best practices, as they are the ones charged with providing the environment required to take athletes to the highest levels. Every NSO needs to know what is required in the trenches, on a daily basis so coaches are given every opportunity possible to excel.

The comments identified below should be considered by the leadership of the NSO and used to help create a more effective high performance, winning environment for their coaches.

1. *“There is a lack of challenge within the NSO. We have no coaches meetings, no place to pass on knowledge or information to, no discussions around what we should do better. We need to be a learning organization.”*

This comment came from a team coach and is very appropriate for all of our team sports to be aware of. It is also appropriate for many individual sports. NSO’s need to create the opportunity for coaches to pass on their knowledge and learn from each other. It is unacceptable if the same mistakes keep getting made or if there is no forum where the coaches can discuss how they can collectively do a better job in preparing athletes.

Too many meetings are reactive, rather than proactive. If meetings could be planned to discuss ways to find opportunities, develop winning strategies and support each other it would go a long way to creating the environment for people to do their best work.
–“We need a more ‘evolution’ not ‘revolution’ climate.”

2. As noted under the Coaching Environment section, there needs to be more administrative and management support for coaches, so they can do what they do best....coach.
3. The coaches need to know what the HP budget is...and actually have input into it. They also need to be part of the goal setting/benchmarking process. This is not something that should be left only to the High Performance Director.
4. Believe in the technical person/people you hire and let them do their job. Coaches want to be given the authority and responsibility to do the job they were hired for. When they are given that, then they understand and want to be held accountable for the results.

5. Find ways to retain your best coaches. The most successful coaches at the Games often have multiple games experience. A cautionary note, often we think that retention of coaches is solely related to how much we can pay them. Insuring that they have the best possible environment to coach in and are recognized and respected for their contribution to athletic performance is just as, if not more important than how much they get paid.

Closing Remarks

The coaching community is made up of people with outstanding ability, experience and professionalism. By improving the way we create, share and gain access to these experiences and the accompanying information, will enable us to raise the level of expertise throughout the country to the mutual benefit of all.

This report is a snapshot in time of the best practices and lessons learned from 30 of our 2008 Beijing Olympic and Paralympic coaches. Hopefully, coaches and other technical leaders will take in this information and use it in a way that will help them be more effective and successful in their own environments. In this manner we can quit making the same mistakes over and over again. We can move on to “higher levels of mistakes” discovering new lessons learned and creating new best practices.



Section Two:

Beijing 2008 Olympic/Paralympic Athlete Debrief Report *Athletes' Preparation and Lessons Learned*

Penny Werthner, PhD
May, 2009

Introduction

This review process was initiated by OTP (Summer) in September, 2008, following the 2008 summer Olympic Games in Beijing, China. Specifically, the **key objectives** of the review process were:

- To identify, from the athletes' perspectives, the key factors that contributed to their successful Olympic performance
- To identify, from the athletes' perspectives, the factors that may have led to an underperformance at the Games
- To prepare a report to assist future high performance preparation by coaches, athletes, the National Sport Organizations and Canadian Sport Centres, and the Canadian Olympic and Paralympic Committees

Twenty-seven Olympic and Paralympic athletes were interviewed (as of April 2009). The athletes represented the sports of Athletics, Canoe/Kayak, Cycling, Diving, men's Gymnastics, Rowing, women's Soccer, Swimming, Triathlon, Trampoline, and Wrestling. Many of the athletes, in the process of being interviewed, said they appreciated being asked for their story on how they had won an Olympic medal or earned a personal best, and several mentioned that this type of debrief had not happened in their sport.

Five Key Themes

Five key themes have been developed as a result of the analysis of the interview data. The key areas that influenced performance were:

- (i) The level of athlete self-awareness – had they identified what they needed to perform optimally, and were the appropriate action steps taken?
- (ii) The strength of the relationship between athlete-coach
- (iii) Was the training environment optimal leading into Beijing?
- (iv) Was the support (social, financial, NSO and CSC) sufficient to allow an effective focus on preparation?
- (v) How well were the on-site conditions in Beijing planned and managed?

In addition, other aspects that arose from the interviews and are appropriate considerations are previous Olympic Games experience, and the specific factors that contributed to a poorer than expected performance by the athlete.

(i) The level of athlete self-awareness – had they identified what they needed to perform optimally, and were the appropriate action steps taken?

The following quotes from the interviews illustrate that the medal-winning athletes had developed a substantial degree of self-awareness, had developed comprehensive plans and took the action required to be fully prepared:

- *“I had a total plan for what I needed – training, recovery, competitions”*
- *“I built on my previous experience, both good and bad – from success as a young team, relaxed, no stress, where we were blissfully ignorant, to a major disappointment where everything got away from me, I had too much help (i.e. too many experts in the pool) and everything exploded, to Beijing, where we had a good team, and I didn’t take anything for granted this time, I had regained perspective”*
- *“with my coach, I knew exactly what I needed, physically, technically, mentally - our motto was “execute excellence”*
- *“my coach and I knew I needed to work on my confidence – so I worked with sport psychologist”*
- *“for us, our crew, the key pieces of success were a very good coach, very good training as a result of coaching, and a very good sport psychologist”*
- *“we analysed every aspect of my performance, with my coach – equipment, nutrition, sport psychology, strength and conditioning”*
- *“as a crew, we worked through our issues, learned to be a team – it was a conscious choice to work through things. As well, I had more experience, so was able to gauge my excitement and keep it in check”*
- *“I realized that it is the same work, same race in Olympic year”*
- *“we had no debrief after a poor performance in Athens but I went and talked with all of my teammates. For Beijing we did things differently - we had a full time therapist (less injuries), the coach only coached one boat, and the athletes took more ownership and were more independent, i.e. would question coach, took responsibility”*
- *“there was leadership this time from within - we were able to rise above stuff, not get carried away with small issues”*

- *“the fall before Beijing, I stopped doing what everyone else was doing, and made a commitment to do what I needed to do – less volume, and more technical, it was more specific – my coach and I decided to do this – I was incredibly focused in each training - plus I visualized all sorts of races and possible scenarios”*
- *“I learned I needed to remain myself through it all, just compete for myself - but that I also needed to get away from the media, in the time leading up to Beijing”*
- *“I knew what I needed to compete well – good technical coaching, and I had that, lots of rest – I need to be rested for a competition – and I changed a lot, what I did in competition – my pre-event preparation. I have changed a lot in last few years, matured a lot. And we were calm, if something went wrong, we just fixed it”*
- *“I have a great coach, and great teammates to learn from, but I have also learned a lot by myself, trying out moves. Plus we have a great video system where I can see/watch the move from all angles. I have become pretty independent as an athlete, at least in last few years. And I have also learned to love competing – I used to hate it, now I am excited to compete”*
- *“how did I win a medal? – by enjoying what I do, having a great coach (he helps you learn, and listens to you), watching a lot, a lot of video, and as an athlete, with my teammates, coaching each other to”*
- *“I learned that I wanted to enjoy the Olympics, not put so much stress on it”*
- *“I have learned what works for me – not to take myself too seriously, but I am hard on myself – in Beijing, by then, I had learned to just focus on my performance, taking it one step at a time. And I did very little media – just one interview two days before I started”*
- *“I have certainly now learned how important confidence is”*

Discussion

Each of the athletes spoke of how they had developed a clear sense of who they were, what ‘worked’ for them, and developed a plan with their coach to create what they knew was needed - whether that was getting away from the media; ensuring enough rest and recovery; determining how often to compete; knowing who was part of ‘their team’ and who was not; not arriving in Beijing until later or managing the time effectively in the village. In most cases, all of this was learned over a period of time, with much dialogue with their coach, and in some cases with other key members of ‘their team’. In most cases the athletes had considerable experience, and often a degree of maturity had been reached.

Recommendations

Within the framework of a national team program, identified medal potential athletes need to be given the scope and support to meet their individual needs. The principle of individualization of training needs to be respected. Attention to detail, with an individualized plan, is essential.

The athletes who did not perform up to expectation made mistakes – whether it was not getting enough rest, not addressing training issues in the final year or the final two weeks, on-site distractions or not effectively adjusting to a poor performance in the early rounds of competition. A support system is needed to minimize these mistakes - a support system that helps analyze and monitor the training environment, to ensure issues that arise are addressed, especially over the last year. However, the ultimate responsibility lies with the coach and athlete – so any interventions need to be well managed.

The successful athletes were mature, for the most part experienced, and had learned from previous experiences and mistakes. Again, the system, whether that be the OTP/Sport Canada/COC/CPC central leadership or sport specific NSO leadership, needs to respect, support and encourage the athlete-coach team – to analyze and act on the specific needs they identify. There are many support players in the system trying to be part of the Olympic performance. It is difficult to determine which/who of these contribute and when some of these players and interventions actually interfere. Whatever is done needs to be decided in consultation with the athlete and coach, and the support system then needs to help resolve the issues, if needed.

(ii) The strength of the relationship between the athlete and coach

The following quotes provide examples of the critical importance of the athlete-coach relationship:

- *“I have a great coach, foreign-trained, highly expert in the technical and training aspects of my event”*
- *“I had good coaches in a previous Games, but everything had gone to their heads. In Beijing, I had a good coach, we took off our watches, we simplified, got back to basics”*
- *“I had two great coaches - I moved to Calgary to train with them - they were well prepared for everything, and they believed in me more than I believed in myself - they encouraged me so much”*
- *“we had the best coach, with a great deal of international success in another country – he was skilled technically, but he kept it simple”*
- *“my coach and I have been together for three Olympics, and we have had the same sport psychologist for two Olympics”*
- *‘I have had the same team for 8 years – coach, massage therapist, naturopath’*
- *“my coach was great, he doesn’t talk a lot, but when he does, it motivates me, he told me to do it for myself”*
- *“my coach is like a mentor to me, we have a good relationship, open to learning from each other”*
- *“I have been with my coach since 2003, and we have worked on my pretty big weaknesses”*
- *“we have complete confidence in our coach, he has great experience and proven results, and he places the onus on the athlete to step up. He was clear on selection, He is clear on where you are at, and he knows when to push you”*
- *“we had a great relationship, working together on what I needed, and he was logical, knew the physiology, and will admit when he is wrong”*
- *“my coach and I get along so well, and she is so good technically – so good technically – and she really cares about helping me”*
- *“my personal coach was there, so that was good”*

- *“I have had the same coach for 12 years, and he builds independent athletes – he makes sure we have a plan, and are prepared to change the plan, and that is what we had to do”*
- *“my coach is the best – he has competed at the Olympics, he knows the world scene”*
- *“I have been with my coach since I was 11 and started the sport”*
- *“my coach and I are a team”*
- *“five years with my coach – he is great, but we also got some outside help with one event”*
- *“we changed coaches in the last year, to a coach with lots of experience, we did good debriefs, he built our confidence”*

Discussion

This second theme, the importance of the athlete and coach working well together, is not new. However, it is very clear from the above quotes that this type of relationship was crucial to winning an Olympic medal or earning a personal best at the 2008 Olympics. Each of the 27 athletes spoke at length about her/his coach and how they together created an environment that enabled consistently good performances. There was effective leadership and clear direction from the coach. The coach had excellent technical expertise, while at the same time there was discussion and a caring relationship. Many of the athlete-coach relationships had been in place for a considerable number of years, while a few were together for only a year or two prior to Beijing.

Recommendations

Support for the athlete-coach relationship is the most important intervention to be made to foster high performance results. All of the athletes spoke of its importance. Some athletes made changes late in the quadrennial when they realized their previous situation would not bring the results they wanted. At least one athlete did not make the change and his performance suffered as a result.

Support for athletes and their coaches needs to be addressed on an individual basis – whether this means freeing up a personal coach to spend more time with a smaller group of athletes, engaging a personal coach to be involved in a national team program, supporting an athlete to change coaches, or improving the relationship among the national coaching staff and the personal coach.

Given how critical this athlete-coach relationship is, individual attention needs to be focused on preparing the coach for this level of performance. In some cases the coach displays stress that is not productive, in some cases the coach lacks experience, and in some cases the fit between athlete and coach is just not right. Support needs to be provided to the coach to assess and address their needs. Where a change of coach is made, attention should be paid to retaining the coach in the system – in many cases the commitment and expertise is high even if the fit was not right for a particular athlete. Given the shortage of good coaches in the sport system, every effort should be made to not lose the expertise.

(iii) Was the training environment optimal leading into Beijing?

The following quotes illustrate the intense and well-formulated planning that was undertaken prior to Beijing. The quotes also illustrate the individual nature of that planning:

-“I have a great training environment - everything was created by my coach and myself, and we had a good plan of competitions for the whole year leading up to Beijing. I have a full-time therapist which helps with recovery. I also changed my sleeping patterns prior to Beijing (trained at 10pm and 4am) so we could stay in Canada as long as possible and reduce the time we would have to deal with the conditions in Beijing”

-“we had a bad training camp prior to Athens – it was a disaster, too long away from home, too hot, and I got real sick. For Beijing, I stayed home and trained, then in Beijing I was away from the village, with my own training partner, own chef”

-“we went to Beijing the year prior to Games, did the tourist part - the Wall etc., so there was no need to do any of that during the Games. Plus we lived outside the village in our own living and training environment”

-“we prepared well for my opponents - we did lots of video analysis of my opponents - I had confidence because I had practiced”

-“we had three weeks preparation away from home, in a good training environment prior to Paralympics (good training, personal space, and no media)”

-“I had enough European races”

-“everything we did, all year, was to get ready for Beijing”

-“the test event in China was crucial preparation, and Pan Am games helped with knowing what to expect at a major Games”

-“we had good training in Japan prior to Games, and flew business class which was important”

-“I had done all the work, so much technical analysis, watched so much video of my opponents, I was so confident”

-“technically – we worked hard after the heats, worked on starts, it gave us something to focus on, and gave us confidence”

Discussion

Most of the athletes spoke of how they went about creating their plan for training and competing, over a number of years – whether that was long-term preparation such as training camps and locations tried out the year before Beijing or the more immediate concerns of managing jet-lag or effective training between heats and finals. Again, most of this was accomplished by dialogue and reflection between the coach and athlete(s). It is within this theme that it is clear that preparation and planning must take an individualized approach, dependent upon the athlete and the particular demands of each sport. An injury, a piece of poor equipment, a poor decision on how long to stage prior to the Olympics, to name a few examples, can have a negative impact on performance.

Recommendations

The recommendations related to this theme, creating an optimal training environment are, to a degree, covered in the first two themes (self-awareness and athlete-coach relationship). These recommendations need to be applied to re-creating the optimal environment in the Olympic and Paralympic Games environment.

(iv) Was the support (social, financial, CSC's) sufficient to allow an effective focus on preparation?

The following quotes illustrate the importance of medical support, psychological support, and the support provided both by NSO's and the CSC's, that was necessary to perform well in 2008:

- *"I had a fulltime athletic therapist, working/traveling with me, and funding from my NSO and COC – it helped a lot, money equals results"*
- *"I do not use the Canadian Sport Centre, I have my own support team"*
- *"I had great support from the sport centre in Calgary"*
- *"I had more support to bring people with me to European races – it helped a lot"*
- *"we worked with exercise physiologist from Pacific Sport – but, so important, he let us/helped us adapt his heat acclimatization program so it worked for me – I knew what I needed"*
- *"the interaction between sports (rowing, triathlon, cycling) at PAC sport was useful, plus our centralized training program was good - we also had more medical resources, specific staff, plus lunches provided at Camosun College"*
- *"we had help from physiologist re: ice vests, recovery drinks, heat training"*
- *"I learned from sport psych how to turn up the focus and how to turn it down, and learned how to not worry about things that I could not control, so I got really good at just taking care of myself"*
- *"two key pieces to our success were our coach and our sport psych – from sport psych, just learning how to keep it simple and we had good debriefs"*
- *"when I injured my foot, got great rehab from doctor in the U.S." (set up by high performance director)*
- *"I had my team around me – coach, strength and conditioning, sport psych - they were people who cared about me"*
- *"I had lots of support – physiotherapy, massage, chiropractor, sport psych to help with nerves – "I was so nervous before my races"*

- *“I had been to Beijing year before Olympics with swimming, and COC, and that helped for the Games”*
- *“we have had, recently, great help medically, with our doctor, with a physiotherapist, and with a great strength and conditioning guy”*
- *“I have great support in Calgary, with an exercise physiologist and a physiotherapist), and biomechanics help from Vancouver on underwater analysis, and massage and sport psychology – it all helps”*
- *“good help from my sport (nutritionist) and Calgary (sport psych)”*

Discussion

This theme of support illustrates the variations among the athletes on what was required and what worked. However, many of the athletes felt that the additional support that is now provided for quick access to medical help, and for fulltime physical therapists/physiotherapy/massage has been very useful, in both preventing injuries and illness, and in managing the issues effectively when they occurred. Many of the athletes spoke highly of the services provided by the Canadian Sport Centres, with a few notable exceptions. There also appeared to be increased use of sport psychology.

Recommendations

Longer term and stable relationships between athletes and the support service providers need to be established. Particular attention needs to be paid to injury prevention and recovery services, as well as sport psychology services.

(v) How Well Were the On-Site Conditions in Beijing Planned and Managed?

The following quotes highlight the importance of the last few weeks and days of preparation for an Olympic Games:

-“we stayed in the apartments in Beijing, and had a chef – we were independent of the village”

-“everything was well planned in Beijing - I just had a little bit of lack of confidence, due in part to an injury in January”

-“I did not attend the training camp in Singapore – I had lost 12 lbs the previous year due to heat - we arrived in Beijing only 5 days prior to competing” (but had acclimatized at home, and trained on Beijing time)

-“I stayed home prior to Beijing, and when in Beijing, we set up own living arrangements – I had a training partner, chef, villa, good support team”

-“we managed Beijing, we only went on a few brief excursions”

-“we left late for Beijing, but had worked hard at acclimatizing at home – lots of heat training, rode at mid-day”

-“we lived outside the village – that was huge – the village is a giant distraction - and we decided to not read the media”

-“we lived outside village, so we had our training partners; I had my own space, my family knew I would not see them until after I was finished competing”

-“I wasn’t awed by the Olympics. My focus was I have a job to do. I knew how hard I had worked”

-“I had ten days in the village before I competed – not the best, but no choice, so we had to manage it well – so we had a training plan, and a plan for everything – when to think about diving and when not to think about it - it worked really well”

-“I flew a bit under the radar, there were not many expectations on me – and I didn’t read the media”

-“we went in just a few days before opening, trained and competed, kept everything familiar. And we didn’t read any media”

-“I had my own room in training camp, and in the village, so I could nap when I needed/wanted to, without being disturbed”

-“COC did a good job – the bikes were great for getting to the cafeteria, cell phones”

Discussion

The fifth key theme addresses the final preparation phase before the Olympic/ Paralympic Games. Many of the athletes spoke of the benefits of not being in the Olympic village, and those who did stay in the village spoke of creating their own space and being disciplined in their day-to-day activities. Those in the village spoke of the benefits of having their own room, primarily in being able to sleep/rest on their schedule. A number of athletes also spoke of not reading the press.

Recommendations

Support should continue to be provided to those individuals and teams who decide to stay outside the village. A detailed plan for those athletes who do stay in the Olympic Village is required, to manage the distractions and the time.

Additional issues, that arose during the interviews

Previous Olympic/Paralympic Games experience:

- 16 of the 27 athletes interviewed had competed in a previous Olympic/Paralympic Games
- *“I was in Athens as training partner – it was a great help in preparation for Beijing - I learned so much about the pressure at the Olympics, by observing it, the athletes, and what happened”*
- *“I learned from Athens - gold or nothing, and we got nothing. We had injuries in Athens that athletes did not take care of or hid - we took ownership, more responsibility for ourselves between Athens and Beijing, and for me personally, I got organized for chiropractic help and massage – that was key, to be healthy”*
- *“we were better this time around, we had more power, we had more experience, we were more stable emotionally”*

Some of the reasons for a less-than-expected performance:

In interviewing the athletes who did not compete as well as expected, a number of different reasons were expressed.

- *“I had a great heat, and I’m thinking, ok I can make final in my event – so I lost focus in my semi – I was fixed on guy in next lane”*
- *“I was ruffled a bit by my heat result” (not as good as expected)*
- *“it was overkill in the village – for years we are on our own, and then there is everything – it didn’t help. And yet, some of our coaches couldn’t be on the floor”*
- *“three personal coaches couldn’t get into training, and we had some wrong equipment for training – it was not the same as in Beijing and we probably did too much work getting used to it – and the head coach panics in competition*
- *“I had coach issues – I needed more rest, he didn’t really listen. I did too many races in the trials”*

- *“perhaps our coach made a few strategic errors, although I know there are many opinions on that one. But I feel we did not acknowledge our fear of (other team). And sometimes I felt he didn’t believe in us, that didn’t help my confidence. It would have been good if our sport psych could have been there. We could also have been even fitter”*
- *“we didn’t have two camps as planned, due to not enough money – that was not great”*
- *“I was injured in the winter before Beijing – I had back spasms so there were periods where I couldn’t train”*
- *“I had had good European races, good training – but perhaps we were in Beijing too long. And I did feel the pressure of the media”*

Discussion

In speaking with the athletes who did not perform as well as they had hoped, it was often a difficult conversation. For a few, it was a devastating experience, they really did not want to relive it, and as a result, their analysis of what occurred is not complete.

Nevertheless **factors that contributed to a poorer than expected performance** were: too much time spent with the media, too long a time period in Beijing, not enough money to do the training camps they needed, poor coaching, poor decision-making on the part of both coach and athlete, and interestingly, both a better than expected heat result, which resulted in a bit of over-confidence, that then resulted in lack of adequate preparation for the final, and a worse than expected heat result, which resulted in a lack of confidence on the part of the athlete.

I would argue that in these circumstances it is truly the coach’s job to do the in-depth analysis, and make the necessary changes, whether that is adjustments to the physical training, adjusting a future plan for the final weeks of Olympic Games preparation, developing a better plan for handling the media, and/or more effective management of the inevitable stress and anxiety.

Final Recommendations:

1. In recognizing that the athlete-coach relationship is crucial in fostering high performance results we should continue to educate coaches, both in terms of their technical expertise and their leadership skills. Both sets of skills are necessary to effectively lead athletes and the group of individuals (IST, support staff) that are now part of the high performance sport system.
2. Athletes need to be part of a regular review process to help them develop their own skills of critical analysis and the subsequent development of awareness of what they need, and do not need, in order to excel.
3. Each NSO should be conducting an in-depth, year-end review process and all key individuals (coaches, athletes, IST members) should be involved in that process.

Appendix A

Coach Interview Questions

Overall Purpose

As an overall objective, this interview is to stimulate the kind of critical reflection and evaluation required to take Canadian athletes and coaches to a higher level of performance over the next quadrennial.

Discussion Topics/Questions

1. Lessons learned and best practices that can be shared with the coaching community.

Collecting and sharing the collective wisdom of our best coaches is important for developing future coaches and increasing the likelihood of Canada reaching its podium objectives for 2012 and beyond. We want to begin to capture the knowledge and experience of our Olympic coaches so we can better understand the nuances and challenges of coaching and competing at the very highest level. A report will be generated from this discussion to be shared with key stakeholders. This will be a generic report where names or sports will not be specifically identified without getting permission in writing.

- a. For coaches that have been at multiple games, what wisdom would you share with 1st time Olympic coaches as it relates to “coaching performance” in high pressure situations?
 - b. In your view, what were the key things that helped prepare your athletes to compete at the highest level effectively?
 - c. In your view, what were the key things that detracted from your athletes being able to compete at the highest level effectively?
 - d. What will you do differently in this coming quadrennial to be successful in 2012?
2. Creating the training and competitive environment that is required for you to coach your athletes to achieve their full potential.

Without the required equipment, facilities and human resources required on a daily basis in the training and competitive environment world class performance will be difficult to achieve. From the information gained in this area, recommendations can be made to the NSO and RTE about what is required “in the trenches” to be highly

effective in the preparation of athletes. (Some of the information from this section will likely come out of the lessons learned and best practice discussion)

- a. For you to be able to coach at your full potential, what additional needs do you have in your current daily training and competition environment? For example, this could include things like more exclusive access to facilities, performance technology support, specific equipment, IST support etc.
 - b. Do you have any professional development or educational needs that will specifically assist you in being a more effective coach?
3. Coaching performance at the Games and in the year leading up to the Games.

Just as athletes must get into their own “performance state” in order to perform at their full potential in highly pressurized situations, so do coaches need to be in an effective “coaching performance state”. This discussion is meant to provide you with an opportunity to examine your own performance as a coach at the Games to assist you in identifying what worked, what didn’t and what you need to do differently to maintain or increase your current level of effectiveness. The following questions are simply meant to stimulate a discussion in this area. All conversations will be kept completely confidential.

- a. In what ways were you exceptional in your “coaching performance”?
- b. How were you able to positively impact the performance of the athletes you were coaching?
- c. Is there anything you would do differently to be more effective?
- d. How do you prepare yourself to be an effective coach in highly pressurized situations?
- e. What do you find are the most demanding times at an Olympic Games (and in the year leading up to it) where your coaching performance could go “off the rails” if you are not aware?
- f. Is there anything you need that would help you to improve in this area?

Appendix B

Athlete Interview Questions

The questions were designed to guide the discussion with each athlete about her/his performance in Beijing. The objective was to develop an in-depth understanding of all the factors that contributed to either a good performance/Olympic medal, or a performance that did not meet expectations.

For the athletes who performed well/met or exceeded expectations, or who medaled:

1. Tell me about your competition in Beijing? What/who helped you perform well?

- Tell me about your coach
- Tell me about your physical preparation (training camps, last four years, the past year, last few weeks)
- Tell me about your psychological preparation
- Tell me about other support staff (exercise physiologist, strength and conditioning, sport psychology, chiropractor, nutritionist, massage therapist etc.)
- Family, partners?
- Financial help/issues?
- Issues you faced and overcame?

#2. What did you learn in Beijing, about yourself, about the Olympic Games? Any advice you would like to share with other athletes and coaches?

For the athletes who did not perform as well as expected in Beijing:

#1. Tell me about your competition in Beijing? What do you think hurt/hampered your performance?

- Tell me about your coach (could he/she have done anything differently?)
- Tell me about your physical preparation (training camps, last four years, the past year, the last few days, the day of competition)
- Tell me about your psychological preparation?
- How were the other staff?
- How was media?
- What about injuries, recovery, health, nutrition/food
- Other issues?

#2. What have you learned from Beijing? What would you do differently? Any advice you would like to share with other athletes and coaches?