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Submitted for Special Issue: “Preparing Athletes for the Olympic Games”

The P⁷ approach to the Olympic challenge: Sharing a practical framework for mission preparation and execution

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Abstract

The Olympic Games represent the biggest and third biggest sporting occasions in the world (Summer and Winter respectively). As such, dealing with the various challenges and optimizing performance at this event has been an important dual focus for team leaders, coaches, performers, and their supporting sport psychologists. In this paper, we share an organizational approach to planning and preparation that, in our experience, provides an effective setup for athletes, coaches, and support teams alike. Specifically, this presented framework enables the focused tasking of support staff and resources to address both individual and specific challenges. To illuminate the route via which this approach delivers its impact, underpinning mechanisms, advantages, and other considerations are also presented.

Keywords: Olympics; organization; planning; preparation; support team

The P⁷ approach to the Olympic challenge: Sharing a practical framework for mission preparation and execution

The Olympic Games represent the biggest and third biggest sporting occasions in the world (Summer and Winter respectively). The combination of media attention, village life, the multisport environment, and coping with the wait (especially while others have finished and entered “party mode”) makes for a potent challenge to even the most experienced of athletes (Arnold & Sarkar, 2014). This challenge also permeates to all members of the support staff, including sport psychologists (Harberl & Peterson, 2006; Sharp, Hodge, & Danish, 2014). As such, helping individuals to develop and then follow well-considered plans is one of the most important components of success. Indeed, structured and detailed planning can work to remove roadblocks before they occur and provide crucial reassurance and confidence to all involved (including external groups as well; e.g., the media: Cruickshank, Collins, & Minten, 2014).

Given that specific psychology-focused preparation programs have been previously presented in the literature (e.g., Blumenstein & Lidor, 2008; Gordin & Henschen, 2012), it is clear that well-designed and well-developed approaches of this kind have a part to play in advancing support provision and performance. In a more general sense, and as an essential precursor to “capital P” psychology interventions (i.e., those which address specific and specified mental issues), there are, however, some simpler and more fundamental things which can be done. Accordingly, we suggest that overt attention to all aspects of preparation and execution can bring benefits to the psychological wellbeing of performers and, in addition, the broader performance team. In short, anything that reassures performers that all aspects are organized and allowed for (thereby optimizing confidence and minimizing worry) will have an arguably minor but often significant psychological impact.

Specifically, the approach that we outline, which has evolved over 20 World, European, and Olympic competitions, extends beyond coach leadership alone (cf. Din & Paskevich, 2013) and toward a more holistic preparation process that can allocate responsibility to and empower all parts of the support team. While the principles of this approach are not novel, we hope that their packaging may offer a useful contrast or addition to the tools already used by established sport psychologists, as well as something which less experienced practitioners may more directly adopt as they head into an Olympics or other major event. Certainly, our work across a number of such competitions suggest that, even in the apparently ever-more sophisticated performance environment, common sense issues are still “banana skins” for many performers, support practitioners, and team managers alike. Accordingly, and following the experience-based contributions of others (e.g., Harberl & Peterson, 2006; Haberl & McCann, 2012; Hodge & Hermansson, 2007; Samulski & Lopes, 2008; Galloway, 2007; Portenga, Aoyagi, & Statler, 2012; Vernacchia & Henschen, 2008), we therefore take a reflective rather than investigative approach to share a framework that, for us, has helped to manage the Olympic challenge.

The planning framework and its basis

Research shows that a wide variety of administration-based challenges can act to initiate or in themselves cause derailment of the Olympic preparation process through distraction, loss of confidence, or direct hampering of performance-focused efforts (for a full review see Gould & Maynard, 2009). Accordingly, and matching the almost military-scale challenges apparent at such a major sporting event (for this comparison, see Goodhart & Chataway, 1968), we turn to the first author’s earlier experiences in combat settings. More specifically, we consider the military-based mantra of anticipating, preparing for, and countering potential problems through “Plan A” and “Plan B” strategies *before* contact (Pathiravithana, 2014). By definition, such an approach requires ongoing testing and

refinement in pressurized circumstances, with plans based on substantial experience and carefully considered adjustments. Supporting its transfer to other fields, this style of identifying and planning for possible obstacles and setbacks is now also finding its way into mainstream applications (e.g., in business; Sabre, 2014).

Reflecting the importance of preparing for potential issues, “Perfect Prior Preparation Prevents P*** Poor Performance” (hereafter P⁷) is a call that is taught from the earliest moments in military training. In this manner, checking that preparation has been as comprehensive as possible is a feature of standard methods such as *combat appreciations*, where a military planner is required to plot a base/ideal strategy while simultaneously addressing as many possible variations of what might go wrong (Pathiravithana, 2014). Notably, such attention to potential issues is something that has been generally overlooked within sport psychology literature but has been implicated in recent accounts of best practice within an Olympic Games context. Specifically, and in contrast to McCann’s (2008) view that “sport psychology success is not preventing problems or challenges . . . [but] helping athletes and coaches prevent the problems from ‘going critical’” (p. 275), Arnold and Sarkar’s (2014) work with 15 leading practitioners pointed to the importance of preventative strategies. For example, one participant in this study reported:

We had some real life stressors, where the schedule [of competition at the Olympics] changed literally the day before play started. We were all going to go to the opening ceremony, then suddenly three out of the four [athletes] couldn’t go as they were playing the next day. Their opponents changed as well to the top seeds in their group, which was a big change in perspective. So this really did throw us a little bit, but it was an “unexpected” that we had prepared for pre-Games. (Arnold & Sarkar, p. 6)

Based on this and other perceptions, Arnold and Sarkar concluded that practitioners need to have techniques in place that enable individuals to proactively prevent and manage the various potential demands of Olympic participation.

Our example of such an approach, as applied by the first author and colleagues for track and field athletes at the Beijing Olympics in 2008, is shown in Figure 1. The presented structure requires each respondent to consider the possible challenges of the impending contest against a chronological design which denotes when, where, and what stage of preparation core supporting activities/processes should be engaged (as detailed in the columns on the left hand side of the figure). Please note that, while the respondents in this instance are athletes, different versions can be used for support staff. Notable features include proactive strategies to counter issues, developing a confidence that your preparation is extensive and sound, and acknowledging things that *might* go wrong while ensuring that there are resources available to counter them¹ (Harberl & Peterson, 2006). Of course, this consideration of *what might go wrong* needs to be done well in advance of competition to then allow focus to return to wholly positive and productive behaviors in the immediate period before performance.

It should also be emphasized that Figure 1 represents a template for the entire team. Indeed, each athlete or support staff member builds on this basis by adding details of their own event schedule plus associated challenges, individual concerns and developed solutions, and additional “wrinkles” and strategies that they have evolved through competitive experience. Additionally, the refinement of such plans represent a collaboration between a range of relevant parties; in the case of the athlete, for example, inputs will be sourced from their coach(es), Performance Manager (hereafter PM), and other lead support staff (e.g.,

¹ Given the level of required detail, the figure contains a lot of information with ‘shorthand’ used for parsimony. For example, in Phase 2 the athlete is reminded to avoid locally purchased medication with reference to Alain Baxter, a UK skier who lost his bronze medal at the Salt Lake City Games in 2002 after testing positive for a banned substance that originated from a US nasal spray which differed in recipe from its UK equivalent.

physiotherapist, psychologist). Illuminating another important benefit that use of the presented framework may bring, this open discussion can also facilitate group-wide involvement, buy in, and commitment; all crucial features of developing the respondent's self-efficacy for the forthcoming event (Bandura, 1977). In addition, any residual or specialist concerns are highlighted, enabling the PM to source and deploy further specialist support to address these issues. In short, we have found that the process of such planning makes almost as big a contribution as addressing the features it highlights.

How the planning framework works

Clearly, focusing on *what to do* rather than *what will happen if I...* is a simple but sometimes hard to achieve guideline. As such, the P⁷ approach has worked in our experience, if by no other means, through establishing and maintaining a focus on the process of performance preparation rather than the tempting, often media-induced, and well known emphasis on outcome (cf. Harberl & Peterson, 2006; Hermansson & Hodge, 2012). Importantly, and to prevent any stifling of adaptability or improvisation, the framework can be deployed as a “check and balance” tool or as a more tightly followed procedure. Indeed, while many athletes and support staff will have a clear understanding of what is required of them at different moments (but who still benefit from external audit and confirmation), there are also many who will overlook some basics as they move into the “white heat” of competition and negotiate a highly distracting village. As ever, careful consideration of each individual's needs and preferences should determine application; in this case, balancing the framework's use as a reminder and more rigid guide.

From a mechanistic angle, the framework further addresses several previously identified sources of stress, including travel, food, boredom (cf. Gould & Maynard, 2009), staff, drug testing (cf. Vernacchia & Henschen, 2008), media (Harberl & Peterson, 2006; Kristiansen, Hanstad, & Roberts, 2011), and the quality and perceived quality of preparation

(Olusoga, Maynard, Hays, & Butt, 2012). Epistemologically, such an approach has its roots in the classic *Antecedents-Behavior-Consequences* model of cognitive-behavioral approaches to performance optimization; whereby individuals increasingly engage in specific behaviors when these are promoted by antecedent stimuli and systematically reinforced by controlled consequences (Martin & Pear, 2003). Indeed, the framework works to set the conditions for individuals to engage with fundamental preparatory behaviors (by providing a reminder/guide of the activities required at particular moments) and systematically reinforces these behaviors through the individual's consequent feelings of control and confidence (as further supported by all others who have collaborated on this plan and see it being executed). Highlighting its potential for multi-level impact, comfort and confidence may also be promoted in the group surrounding the specific individual as they deliver on their plans; something which may, for example, help to reduce stress in a support staff that also has a significant stake in an athlete's performance (cf. Arnold & Sarkar, 2014).

As well as this core foundation, the presented framework is more specifically grounded in the adaptation work of Fiske (2004; also see Schinke, Battochio, Dubuc, Apolloni, & Tenenbaum, 2008). Indeed, through the early identification of, and structured solution for, the individual's perceived challenges, the development and maintenance of optimized emotions is promoted (cf. Pensgaard & Duda, 2003). Finally, by anticipating and establishing plans and contingencies, this approach is also designed to avoid the inherent challenges (and potential mistakes) of thinking under pressure to solve unexpected issues (Pensgaard, 2008). Of course, these will almost always occur to some extent. However, just as with the military traditions that spawned the P⁷ approach, rigorous and open debriefs on such "unexpecteds" have, in our experience, often shown that they clearly could and should have been anticipated and planned for.

Significantly, the approach that we have presented and advocated in this paper has worked well across a variety of high-level competitions, including world and junior events. Certainly, the nature of challenge faced by younger athletes is largely no different to those operating at senior level (cf. Kristiansen & Roberts, 2010) and an early sensitization and treatment of the various organizational challenges would seem a logical part of their performance “finishing school”. With regard to the increasing number of individuals who may be concerned (or consider themselves concerned) with a performer’s preparation (Collins, Trower, & Cruickshank, 2012), the P⁷ approach also helps to keep everyone focused appropriately on the same page. Such common communication and shared mental models (Cannon-Bowers, Salas, & Converse, 1990; Mascarenhas & Smith, 2011) are crucial in the pressured environment of a major event, whether solely between sport psychologists (Portenga et al., 2012) or the wider support team (Collins & Collins, 2011; Sharp et al., 2014).

Concluding comments

In our experience of applying the approach presented within this paper, all who have completed it feel more capable and confident in their capacity to meet the significant challenges of performance at a major event, including knowing that help is always available and precisely where from (cf. Williams & Andersen, 2012). Indeed, reflecting the excellent “cross boundary” approach of Williams and Andersen (2012: although this is not necessarily our epistemological stance), the perspective we have shared here emphasizes and structures the essential “all in it together-ness” that invariably characterizes successful performance. Importantly, while our perceptions are locked to our work in British sport, the individualized nature of the presented framework and common role of support teams suggests that this may hold some potential for cross-cultural application. We consequently commend the use of this

tool, either by or through the psychologist in collaboration with other support practitioners, but certainly for application across both the performance and support team environment.

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Figure 1. Exemplar Olympic Games preparation strategy template (as used for the Beijing Olympics, 2008)

PHASE 1: Travel and Acclimatization (INSERT FLIGHT TIMES AND DURATION)

Coach: [name]

Performance Manager: [name]

Athlete: [name]

Event(s): [name]

Designated Coach: [name]

		PHYSIOLOGICAL²	MENTAL/ORGANIZATIONAL	TECHNICAL/TACTICAL	PHYSICAL/MEDICAL
DAY 1 TO DAY 3	Depart UK to Macau preparation camp	Hydration Strategy: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> See nutritionist early to plan strategy Purchase fluid for plane after check in Note hydration strategy pre, in and after flight 	Mental Preparation Plan: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Distraction techniques (e.g. good book, DVD, cards) Time slipping towards Macau in advance – check with PM for data from practice trips Expect and prepare for ‘last minute’ media attention 	Technical Plan: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What do I need to do to qualify? Climatic influences on planning 	Training <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Training loads before departure Training schedule for Macau Timing of training sessions <p>(Consider and act on NGB guidelines)</p>
		Nutrition Strategy: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Book appropriate flight meals Bring snacks for flight? Avoid tea/coffee/alcohol 	What to Pack: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Baggage allowance (30 kg) GB kit check Essential items for main bag and hand luggage? Read NGB travel guidelines! Passport valid for 2008? Note travel kit instructions from BOA 	Tactical: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The challenge of the Beijing timetable! Details of potential opponents taken to facilitate planning and consideration What to say publicly about tactical plan 	Medical Plan in UK: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Complete NGB medical form Dental Check Drugs requirement for TUE / Update Anti-Doping Whereabouts
		Travel and Acclimatisation: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Follow previously developed sleep plan NGB aim is for 2 – 3 days acclimatization process Use data from previous trips to confirm 	Personal Coach: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited accreditations in Beijing Estimated cost for PC to attend £2.5 - £3k Check chances of access with PM 	Training Load: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Danger of over training What is the aim of your training in the tapering phase? 	Vaccinations Summary <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Read NGB guidelines Action - see NGB doctor PM to check with central medical database
		Recovery from Travel: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Walk around hotel and local area on arrival to get your bearings Sleep late with curtains closed for first few days Breakfast delivered late to room 	Currency: INSERT EXCHANGE RATES <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hong Kong (HK\$) can be used in Macau China (Yuan or CNY) in Beijing 	Training Details: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider issued plans and schedules for training Use of Macau track, running trails, golf course run and twin weights facilities 	Medical Plan for Far East: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Physiotherapy Massage Ice Baths
		Weather Reports: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> www.smg.gov.mo Liaise with members from last year’s world team for details of venue, weather, etc. 	Sharing a room with a team mate (unavoidable!): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Simple rules of sharing Healthy living Use hand gel regularly 		Medical Team: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Drs. XXX and YYY Physios ZZZ, AAA, BBB & CCC Soft tissue therapist WWW

“Long journeys cause *tiredness* and *fatigue* even without changes in the time zone. Simple strategies, preparation and being well organized may help reduce this and *enhance your performance on arrival.*”

² Develop this section with athlete/staff member through reference to NGB guidelines

PHASE 2: Macau Preparation Camp (INSERT STANDARD AVAILABLE TRAINING TIMES)

		PHYSIOLOGICAL	MENTAL/ORGANIZATIONAL	TECHNICAL/TACTICAL	PHYSICAL/MEDICAL
DAY 4 TO DAY 10 (APPROX)	Macau (Westin Resort)	Hydration Strategy: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ NGB will provide Powerade / bottled water • Implement your agreed hydration strategy • Discuss with NGB performance and medical teams. 	Refinement of Mental Preparation: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Practicing for day of competition ▪ Running through plan B's ▪ Counteracting boredom 	Technical Plan: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preparing for IAAF Competition Rules • Personal, specialist event and other coach input? 	Monitoring your Travel Adaptation: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete daily your am/pm urine assessments • AM body weight pre breakfast • Complete daily brief jet lag questionnaire • Review daily feedback and modify training / fluids
		Nutrition Strategy: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintaining or adapting normal diet to meet Far East conditions • Danger of over eating? • Confirming Nutritional Pack for competition on day? 	Distraction Plans to be employed: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recreational & leisure activities • www.macautourism.gov.mo • Group and individual mentality • Trips to town 	Training Plan: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Tapering ▪ "Competing" at pre-set competition time ▪ Confirm or adapt warm up (timing and content) 	Medical Plan for Macau: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Physiotherapy? ▪ Massage? ▪ Regeneration sessions?
		Essential Behavior <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Carry and drink bottle fluid ▪ Caution with uncooked food, cold food and salads 	Team Meetings: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insert expected schedule Media <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insert expected schedule 	Tests: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formal or Informal? (decide your taper test) 	Medical – General Health <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Insect repellent / cream ▪ Wear appropriate clothes at dusk! ▪ Gastroenteritis – take sensible precautions – wash / gel hands regularly! ▪ Carry personal hand gel
		Recovery / Cooling Strategy: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For training site • For hotel room (air conditioning) • For leisure time 	Communication Plan for Significant Others!! <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keeping in touch with personal coach • Keeping in touch with family / friends in the UK 	Review: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ...of prep camp with personal or team coach 	Anti-Doping <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At least one visit likely • Note that IN competition rules apply from opening of Village so almost all affected
		Environmental: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Sunburn ▪ Humidity ▪ Exhaustion ▪ Pollution 	Preparing for Beijing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Washing kit • Packing bags for departure • Competition kit check 	Media <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aware of media visits to training on two scheduled days 	NO LOCALLY PURCHASED MEDICATION!! Remember Alain Baxter!!

PHASE 3: Departure for Beijing (INSERT FLIGHT TIMES AND DURATION)

	PHYSIOLOGICAL	MENTAL/ORGANIZATIONAL	TECHNICAL/TACTICAL	PHYSICAL/MEDICAL
Depart Macau	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hydration Strategy Nutrition Strategy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Packing and baggage drop off times Distraction plan for flight Essential items to hand baggage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Training on departure day? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Individual medical support plan

PHASE 4: Arrival in Beijing (INCLUDE STANDARD ‘SITE RECCE’ PROCEDURE)

	PHYSIOLOGICAL	MENTAL/ORGANIZATIONAL	TECHNICAL/TACTICAL	PHYSICAL/MEDICAL
FROM 2 TO 3 DAYS TO EVENT	‘First Shock’ Strategy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hydration on landing and STAY COOL!! Potential wait for visa check, even with Olympic lanes Bag carrying is covered – let them/us do it! 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Village Familiarisation Olympic atmosphere Visit Stadium What should I look for? Team Meeting time (subject to Tech Meeting) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Final pre comp team meeting (includes number distribution & final instructions) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Add current heat and final time Review qualifying requirements on publication When will I know my heats? Tactics? 	Physio /Massage? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> As normal? What is normal for you? Check with nominated event physio
	Recovery / Cooling Strategy: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> At track side In Village 	Preparing for Day(s) of Competition (bringing it all together on a repeated basis): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Walk the routes – check warm up to stadium times, access, times to toilets, etc. Check out the facilities, announcements, etc. 	Influences on Warm up Strategy – TO BE PRACTISED <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Travel time to stadium? Call room times? 	Warm Up: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Timing & content
	Environmental: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pollution Sunburn 	When to Rehearse? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Schedule / timing When to relax?? 	ANY practice? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What will be allowed within stadium? How intense to practice? 	Massage warm up/down? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> As normal? Check run through with nominated physio/team or personal coach

N.B. Cascade communication strategy in case of team emergency procedure

PHASE 5: Competition Day³ (INSERT TIMES, ROUNDS, AND PROGRESSION RULES AS APPROPRIATE)

	PHYSIOLOGICAL	MENTAL/ORGANIZATIONAL	TECHNICAL/TACTICAL	PHYSICAL/MEDICAL
Segment the day as appropriate for each individual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hydration Strategy for Competition Day • Nutrition Strategy for Competition Day • Round timings – intervals and potential for refueling/downtime 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Double check access and timings with Personal/Team Coach • Follow pre-agreed schedule – ask if concerned: NO SUCH THING AS A SILLY QUESTION!! • Deploy warm up preparation routine/use ‘holding techniques’ for delay (are you happy with these?) • Use Press Zone contact to structure post event interviews • You can play a ‘red card’ to postpone interviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • KNOW the progression rules – what do I need to do in THIS round • Check race/round plan as YOU need to • Check coach location if appropriate to event (previously set but check anyway!) • Info on possible appeals to Press Zone contact (info to be radioed asap) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accompanying coach has physio/medical access, locations and radio • Let Press Zone contact know about Doping Tests – Medic to accompany • Post event/round check at warm up/in rest room

N.B. LOTS of additional info based on individual plan

³ Needs careful thought for multiple events (i.e. rounds, qualifiers) AND INTERVEENING DAYS AS APPROPRIATE!!

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