

Dream Big, Have Faith, Do Your Best, and Let it be; the Sky is Your Limit

Imprints of Sport Psychology at Rio 2016 Olympic Games

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Short Title: Imprints of Sport Psychology at Rio 2016 Olympic Games

Abstract: *Sport practice is not only a perfect means of promoting physical health but also it can improve mental health and the overall quality of life of any individual. Applied Sport Psychology is the branch of science that is used to train athletes on different psychological skills and how to use them efficiently whether during competitions or in their regular lives. Olympic Games represents an occasion to demonstrate the pivotal role of such science in the remarkable achievements of many athletes who always prove without any doubts that nothing is impossible for strong will, fighting spirit, and unshaken faith. To conclude, the precious lesson which can be learnt from the inspiring stories of many athletes throughout their careers is simply that in order to achieve our goals in life, not only in sports, we have to dream big, have faith, believe in ourselves, do our best, and be sure that we can.*

Keywords: Sport Psychology, Olympic Games, Rio 2016 Olympic Games, energy management, goal setting, imagery, self-talk, anger management

1. Introduction

Like billions all over the globe; I have enjoyed watching Rio 2016 Olympic Games for 2 weeks. It was really amazing to follow all these competing athletes from more than 200 countries doing their best to deserve the glory of winning Olympic medals in different sports and honoring their countries by raising their flags and hearing their national anthems played at Rio by the organizers of that great event; in cases of snatching gold medals. It was really an extraordinary chance for many of those athletes to show people all over the world how strong will, fighting spirit, and unshaken faith can do miracles when hopes fade away and winning seems to be impossible.

2. Historical Overview of Olympic Games

The ancient Olympic games held in Olympia, Greece BC was the inspiration behind the modern Olympic games that are one of the most prestigious sporting events all over the world in which athletes representing different countries compete to win Olympic medals in a wide variety of sports [1]. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) was founded by Baron Pierre de Coubertin in 1894 to rule the Olympic Movement in its modern era. Nowadays, there are different types of Olympic Games: Summer Olympic Games every four years alternating with Winter Olympic Games (for ice and winter sports) but two years apart, Paralympic Games for disabled athletes, and Youth Games for teenagers [2, 3].

Over time, Olympics have shifted from pure amateurism to permitted sharing of professional athletes and from limited resources to huge involvement of sponsors and event

commercialization benefiting from the worldwide spread of mass media. Political imprints were evident in cancellation of the games during the first and second world wars and limited participation during the cold war due to large boycotts [3-6].

3. RIO 2016 Olympic Games; Mission Accomplished, Nothing is Impossible

"I am the happiest man alive", "Throughout our bid to host the 31st Olympiad, we always said that Rio was ready, and now we can declare it; we did it, we made it". These were the words of Carlos Nuzman, the president of Rio 2016 organizing committee during the farewell ceremony of the great Olympic Games [7].

Rio de Janeiro has all the right to celebrate the success of the Olympiad in its closing ceremony as Brazilians really delivered spectacular Games in spite of their suffering from the worst economic recession in decades, the deep political crisis in their country, and the concerns about security and Zika virus. Furthermore, Rio promised the world of an athletic forest to be planted after the games using seeds planted by the participating athletes during the opening ceremony in which the Brazilians honored their past and reflected their intention to have a greener future [8, 9]; **Fig (1).**

4. Sport Psychology and the Olympiad

Olympic Games is an occasion to demonstrate the pivotal role of Applied Sport Psychology in the remarkable achievements of many athletes who snatch medals and or make new World or Olympic Records in different sports.

Volume 5 Issue 9, September 2016

www.ijsr.net

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Sport psychology is a branch of science that is concerned with studying the interaction between sport and Psychology emphasizing the ways by which psychological make-up influences athletic performance and how engagement in physical activities and sports affects the psychological and physical milieu of an individual. Such science is of prime importance in dealing with athletes, coaches, and parents in order to give them the professional advice regarding how training of psychological skills can enhance performance, motivation, and communication with others and help them, in cases of injury, periods of rehabilitation, team formation, and career planning [10-12].

It is vital for professional athletes to learn how to deal with the extreme stress of competition and how to focus on performance in the presence of any distraction as screaming fans or hostile or aggressive competitor or competitor's trainer. On the other hand, the application of sport psychology to make physical exercise an integral part of improving physical health and quality of life of non-athletes is one of its crucial domains [11, 12].

5. Historical Overview of Sport Psychology

The first laboratory for sport psychology was that of Carl Diem in Berlin, Germany, 1920. Later, in 1925, Puni and Griffith established another two laboratories in Leningrad and Illinois respectively [13]. When Griffith's lab was closed in 1932, the interest in research in the field of Sport Psychology significantly regressed till it revived again in the era of the cold war between the Soviet Union and the United states because of the competition in snatching medals in Olympic Games. During the Eighties of the 20th Century, Sport Psychology has become a vital scientific branch with an important role in finding ways to enhance athletic performance and improve quality of life of non-athletes [10-13].

6. Applied Sport Psychology's Imprints on Athletic Performance

Applied Sport Psychologists have many techniques to train athletes on different psychological skills besides how to use them efficiently during competitions and in their regular lives. The most frequently targeted skills which are used solely or in combination are energy management, goal setting, imagery, pre-performance routines, self-talk, and anger management [14].

Energy management (arousal regulation) means starting and maintaining an ideal state for performance both cognitively and physiologically. Such skill could be achieved by implementation of different interventions as relaxation techniques in cases of anxiety (breathing exercises, meditation, listening to music, etc.) [15]. Meditation in particular has been proven to be very useful for athletes specially mindfulness as an integral part of MAC Theory (Mindfulness, Acceptance, Commitment Theory) aiming at maximizing the individual's ability to reach self-actualization and have satisfactory and valuable life [16, 17].

In general, and in sports in particular, doing your best goals, have been found to be insufficient to set criteria for performance improvement. Accordingly, **goal setting** which is planning to accomplish certain achievement during a specific time period defines goals as "specific, measurable, difficult but attainable, time based, and recordable achievements". Goals are classified into short term and long term goals; with short term goals progressing in their difficulty to end with achieving the long term ones [18, 19].

On the other hand, **Imagery** means the use of different senses (smell, sight, motor activity, etc.) to vividly simulate an experience or a task performance in an individual's mind. The more lifelike the imagery is, the more its efficiency in improving performance and psychological status of an athlete especially if it is used the day before the competition [20-23].

Pre-performance routines include what athletes classically do to prepare themselves for a sport event; all physical and mental routines they experience before the execution of a performance. Such actions and behaviors are very helpful for acquisition of consistency and predictability which are essential for the brain and skeletal system to improve motor control [24].

Meanwhile, **Self-talk** means words an individual says to himself in his mind and things he thinks about before doing a task. Although the unconscious mind can be awakened by a single positive word, self-talk, whether positive or negative, can enhance attention and focusing to improve performance depending on the way of its interpretation by an individual [25,26].

Finally, **anger Management** entails interventions that enable an individual to control excessive anger and aggression and learn how to deal with his intense emotions. Interestingly, it has become an important psychological skill for athletes to develop for improving their performance and enjoying an athletic spirit in cases of winning or losing a game [27].

7. Factors Influencing Athletic Performance

Despite the fact that training for acquisition of the foregoing psychological skills has been proven to enhance athletic performance, the individual variations do have their significant impact on the outcome of such training. These individual variations include some personality characteristics (e.g. mental toughness and motivation) and athletic age and gender. In addition, parenting in cases of young athletes, coaching, and team mechanisms play important influential roles in sport performance [28].

Mental toughness is a psychological challenge that leads to constant high performance. It is characterized by strong self confidence in one's ability of high performance, intrinsic motivation for success, the ability to ignore any distraction and focus on one's goals, feelings, and thoughts, and finally the capacity to perform under pressure [28, 29]. On the other hand, **motivation**, which could be intrinsic or extrinsic, is the will to do something. Intrinsic motivators are those coming from within an individual such as self-enjoyment and or feeling contented on performing a particular task while

extrinsic motivators include materialistic benefits as winning prizes and gaining others' attention [30].

The age of the athletes practicing sports on the competition level is an important factor; with positive and negative repercussions, if those athletes are children (i.e. under the age of 18 years). On one hand, it promotes their physical health, helps them to avoid health risky behaviors and habits, improves their self-confidence, and maximizes their potentials for significant achievements at a quite young age [31]. On the other hand, it might lead to burnout which is characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and regressed perception of the value of achievement. Burnout in sports could be due to the obsession of perfection, boredom, physical injuries, over-training, and parental pressure. Unfortunately, burnout is not unusual in children practicing different sports and it might end with their withdrawal from all sporting activities [32].

Parents do affect their children experience in their favorite sports. They can be very encouraging and supporting to their kids but unfortunately, sometimes they might be handicapping for them if they insist on giving technical instructions to their children on the sports they did not practice or when they are very demanding and over-protective [33].

Healthy **coach-athlete relationship** is a cornerstone for a successful career of any athlete. Coaches can say or do a lot to improve the performance of their athletes. They can create a motivational environment for them enhancing their individuals' goals. Such motivational climate can be task directed (e.g. skill building, doing the best, perfection, etc.) or ego targeted (e.g. super abilities, competitiveness, etc.). Furthermore, they can improve the performance and communication skills of their athletes by constructive feedback, rewarding behavior, and being a positive model to follow [34, 35].

Teams in sports represent an important factor that must be put in consideration while planning for a successful performance. Team cohesion is mandatory for achieving team goals as a group and not as individuals. It means the ability of the team members to remain together and act in a synchronized manner during their journey to achieve their aims. Team members liking one another is called social cohesion while task cohesion is their ability to work together to fulfill their aim. It is worthy to lay stress on the fact that a collective efficacy of a team is the shared belief by the team members as a whole and not the sum of their self-efficacy beliefs as individuals. Finally, leadership of a team is a crucial behavioral process that directs the team members during their way to attain their goals [36, 37].

Gender was found to influence performance in male athletes which was interpreted in an evolutionary point of view. Changes in testosterone level with the changes in the state of a male athlete was found to be associated with changes in performance that were described to be similar to the conflict situations in non-human primates. The dominant and competitive behavior was found to be reduced when testosterone level decreases as in cases of avoiding fighting competition to prevent injuring a loser. On the other hand,

testosterone level increases prior to competitions especially if they are prestigious and challenging [38].

8. Yes we can; Inspiring Stories from Rio 2016 Olympic Games

Rio 2016 Olympic Games was full of inspiring stories of many athletes who came to the competitions to chase their dreams of winning Olympic medals and honoring their countries in such a prestigious sporting event. Among those, were Vinh from Vietnam, MajlindaKelmendi from Kosovo, Fiji Rugby sevens team, and the Egyptian Taekwondo Fighter HedayaMalak.

Veteran Hoang XuanVinh snatched the first ever Olympic gold medal for Vietnam in the men's 10m air pistol event at Rio. Vinh suffered from psychological shortcoming, in order to overcome it, he practiced a posture of standing still and saying nothing for 2 consecutive hours daily for a year. Also, he had a limited budget for training because of the economic conditions of his country. In spite of all difficulties, he became an Olympic Champion with lifetime memories [39].

MajlindaKelmendi, on the other hand, made history for Kosovo by winning her country's first Olympic gold medal in its first time to share in the Olympiad as Kosovo has been officially recognized by the IOC in December 2014. MajlindaKelmendi scored a yuko in the final and snatched the gold medal in Judo's women's 52 kg at Rio and gave Kosovo a moment to treasure. She commented on her achievement by these words "That means a lot. Many people, especially kids, look at me as a hero in Kosovo. I just proved to them that even after the war, if they want to be Olympic champions, they can be. Even if we come from a small, poor country"[39].

Meanwhile, **Fiji Rugby sevens team** got the first ever Olympic gold medal for their country which is suffering from poverty and its population does not exceed 900,000. They have beaten Great Britain 43 points to seven at Rio and made history [39].

Lastly but by no means least, the Egyptian Taekwondo Fighter **HedayaMalak (Fig 2)** secured a third Bronze Medal for Egypt at Rio after beating RahelehAsemani of Belgium by the golden kick. She had a remarkable run in her way to have a medal as she has beaten Patino Marin from Colombia 13-0 in the 16th round before defeating the World Champion Mayo Hama from Japan by another golden kick in the quarter finals [40].



Figure 1: Fantastic shot from the opening ceremony of Rio 2016 Olympic Games [9]



Figure 2: The Egyptian Taekwondo Fighter *Hedaya Malak* who secured a third Bronze Medal for Egypt at Rio with the other medalists of her weight [40].

9. Conclusion

Sport psychology is the branch of science that is concerned with studying the interaction between sport and Psychology. Olympic Games represents an occasion to demonstrate the pivotal role of Applied Sport Psychology in the remarkable achievements of many athletes who show the whole world that nothing is impossible for strong will, fighting spirit, and unshaken faith. Finally, one can say confidently that in order to achieve our goals in life, not only in sports, we have to dream big, have faith, believe in ourselves, do our best, and let it be; "yes we can, the sky is our limit".

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