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Reflections from the Canada Winter Games

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The best performers in the world draw lessons from their competitive experiences and then use these lessons to modify future preparations and approaches to performance. Numerous lessons can be drawn from the Canada Winter Games 2003 experience in Bathurst-Cambleton, New Brunswick that both parallel and expand our understanding of how to best prepare for a multi-sport games. The goal of this article is to highlight some of the major lessons learned from two Team BC coaches in attendance at the Games.

Learning from Experience

Dr. Terry Orlick (1996) suggests that constructive evaluation is one of the critical elements of mental excellence in high-level performers.

Excellence requires that you develop an effective process for personal evaluation, and that you act upon the lessons drawn from these evaluations. Constructive evaluation includes looking for the good things and targeting areas for improvement in yourself, your performance, your environment and your experiences.

Unfortunately however, constructive evaluation is often not given the attention it deserves. Planning, preparation, and then performance are demanding tasks and by the end of most competitions, athletes and coaches find themselves physically and mentally drained. As a result, evaluations may often be brief, rushed through, or may not even occur at all. Valuable lessons, on both a personal and group level, may go lost and their benefit to future performance underutilized.

In order to draw the lessons emerging from the Canada Winter Games experience, two head coaches were interviewed and asked to reflect on their team's preparation leading up to, and performance during, the Games. One coach was from a team sport and the other was from an individual sport. The two groups of athletes were extremely successful and in both cases, the coaches felt their teams exceeded their performance expectations. These interviews are part of a larger more comprehensive study examining the Canada Winter Games experience.

Preparation Reflections

The Canada Winter Games occurs every 4 years and for many sports a significant amount of time and energy is placed on the planning and preparation leading into the Games. Some sports select their final rosters over a year in advance, while others carry a long list of athletes and then make selections closer to the Games. The preparation period can often be limited by numerous factors such as the location of the athletes around the province and the amount of money that has been allocated to support the program.

Money often arises as an issue related to preparation. Coaches often have to make choices regarding their preparation based on the financial reality of the situation. This point is highlighted by this comment from the team sport head coach:

We could have had the opportunity to play some of the teams [going to Canada Winter Games] had we gone to a tournament in Toronto in November. But for just one tournament in Toronto, we could basically have four training camps here for the same cost, so we chose to have the training camps. I had to give up some things in order to get other things. If we had had more money then we could pretty much have the perfect world -- we could have the training camps and go to the tournaments. (Team Sport Head Coach)

Being a part of Team BC and the Canada Games program did have some financial advantages. Sports were provided with some additional funding and access to sport science support that would not normally be available. This additional support allowed for some flexibility in planning and exposure to additional preparation tools.

There is a direct link between resources for improvement, individual effort and commitment of athletes and coaches, and performance. Our team had a great deal of attention from the coaching staff and access to resources that would normally not be available to them. Body assessments, mental training and massage are not normally regular components of athlete preparation for competition in our sport. We had funds and were able to hold more camps giving us an increased number of opportunities to develop skills. The increased funding available and access to sport science tools that are not normally available to us definitely contributed to our ability to perform well above original expectations at the Games. (Individual Sport Head Coach)

Both coaches mentioned the importance of the sport science support that was provided to the teams and its impact on individual and team development and preparation for the Games. Coaches in the Team BC program had access to a Sport Science Specialist with expertise in the area of periodization and planning; physiotherapists and doctors, who conducted physical assessments and identified areas of concern and recommendations for improvements for athletes; strength and conditioning specialists, who helped with physical preparation strategies based on group needs; drug education experts, who provided information on banned substances and the drug testing procedures, and mental trainers, who provided team and individual support in the development of mental skills and team development. Indeed, many of the lessons emerging from Olympic coaches at Atlanta and Nagano Olympics (Gould et al., 2001) fall into these support areas provided by Team BC.

Further to the services available to BC coaches and athletes was the consistency of that support and of the personnel providing the support within the Team BC sport health program.

Well I think having a mental trainer and the sport science stuff really helped us a lot. Being able to work with a mental trainer previous to the Games was awesome. If we could have had her at every training camp that would have been better, but obviously

that is not possible. I think just the consistency of having the mental trainer before and during the games was great. It wasn't just someone walking in that the athletes had never met before or hadn't had any discussions with. It was the same with the medical liaison. He came and did quite a bit of stuff with us and then was there at the Games. The athletes were familiar with some of the faces so I think that helped relax them a bit. Also having access to the strength and conditioning specialist was great. (Team Sport Head Coach)

Team BC athletes and coaches for the Canada Winter Games were also the first group from British Columbia to have access to the online diary, a web-based monitoring device with diary entry capacity and sport health information, skill development resources and communication tools. Both coaches mentioned the diary as a potentially valuable tool. The Individual Sport Head Coach mentioned how the athletes really took control of the diary as a communication tool and sent encouraging words and positive comments to each other. It ended up contributing to the development of team unity and cohesion within a group of athletes that were spread throughout the province. The coach also found the ability to monitor athlete training and progress a valuable tool. The Team Sport Head Coach that there were also some challenges with the tool.

We were one of the initial groups and all the bugs weren't worked out yet....and I didn't really push it afterwards because I realized how long it was going to take for me to try and find stuff and respond. It was just too time consuming for me to do that....I think there was only three of the athletes that ended up using it. I do however think it could be a pretty useful tool (Team Sport Head Coach).

Access to additional resources such as the online diary and sport health practitioners coupled with a more comprehensive preparation schedule also provided some additional challenges to coaches and athletes. Both coaches mentioned athletes who struggled with “buying-in” to the program. For example, the Team Sport Head Coach placed significant emphasis on strength and conditioning in preparation for the Games. Regardless of the emphasis on, and support for, this component the coach still witnessed athletes who struggled to commit fully to the program.

There were a few athletes that really took it seriously. I would say that over half of them improved their strength and conditioning over the year. At nationals they pretty much weren't playing in the gold medal game because they were tired by the time it came to the semi-final. So we gave them the tools. We brought in the strength and conditioning specialist, we brought in a cardio coach. We brought in people to help them and to basically say, here's what you need to do, so go home and do it. And probably half of them actually went home and did it and it showed at the Canada Games. Those were the athletes that got to play. Those were the people that were healthy and ready to go. I think mentally they were more confident because they knew that they were fitter and stronger....It would have been great if they could have all done it, but a few of them did and that is a small step I guess. (Team Sport Head Coach).

The individual sport head coach also highlight how the lack of buy-in affected team dynamics:

We had one team member with an extremely negative attitude and who was not meeting expectations in terms of the required training commitments. That attitude had a negative impact on several team members. I feel it really prevented us from being a totally unified group. It also caused friction because several team members expressed concerns to the coaching staff and suggested that they did not want to room with this individual. (Individual Sport Head Coach).

Understanding the needs of athletes and developing cohesiveness within a group, were mentioned by both coaches as necessary parts of the preparation period. Both coaches tried to create opportunities for athletes to get to know each other. As well the coaches invested significant time getting to know each athlete individually.

The preparation for the Canada Winter Games was much more focused and much more time was spent together with individual team members and coaching staff. Normally, as a coach I work with a larger number of athletes and the individual time that I am able to spend with athletes is limited. However, with a smaller group of athletes and three coaches assigned to this group, each athlete had the opportunity to receive a significant amount of feedback from, and form relationships with, each of the coaches. Having the opportunity to really focus my efforts as a coach on a smaller group, I really felt like I was able to have a significant impact on this group, their technical skills, the way they approached their training and competition, and how they reflected on this process afterwards. (Individual Sport Head Coach)

The team members were really spread out this year and lived in two main locations. We did two camps where I went to one location and worked with half the kids there and then went to the other location where the rest of the kids attended, so we weren't always together as a full team. I think that was actually good for me to build relationships with everyone. In the first two or three years of the program, we have a large group of athletes and not the regular team size so it is a bit harder for me to spend that one-on-one time with everybody in a larger group. So I think it was really good for me to be able to go and work with the smaller groups and for them to get an idea of what was happening and how I ran things and what my expectations were for them. (Team Sport Head Coach)

Given the amount of time that athletes spend together leading up to and at the Games themselves, it is inevitable that some conflict or disagreements will occur. Therefore, it is particularly important to have a process for dealing with issues as they arise. Team building activities that provide opportunities for discussion and a heightened awareness of individual differences and teammate needs can be valuable in this regard. One of the biggest lessons emerging from Olympic athletes and coaches was to spend more time developing team cohesion as it can have a significant impact on performance.

Finally, both coaches mentioned the importance of creating opportunities to simulate competition prior to the Games. Olympic athletes and coaches also stressed the importance of this preparation component. The Individual Sport Head Coach had the athletes attend a simulation competition in the Interior. The team also traveled to a major competition prior to the Canada Games where they were very successful. This trip was the head coach's first glimpse at

just how well prepared the athletes were and indication of how well they were capable of performing at the Canada Games:

Originally, the trip to Toronto was intended to provide our athletes with an out of province tournament experience prior to the Games. It was an opportunity for them to compete against athletes from eastern Canada who they were likely to compete against at the Games. None of them had very much competitive experience and I wanted to simulate conditions prior to attending at the games such as the experience of jet lag, air travel, and the atmosphere of participating in a higher-level event. Also I wanted to assess where they were in terms of their preparation and identify areas they needed to refine leading up the Games. However, when we went many of the athletes exceeded my expectations in terms of performance with many of them winning medals. This made me feel as though we had a realistic opportunity of doing well at the Games and that we were, in fact, one of best teams in Canada. (Individual Sport Head Coach)

Unfortunately, for the team sport, finances were not available to allow for opportunity to compete against the teams that would be involved at the Canada Games and this lack of opportunity provided some challenges to the team's preparedness at the Games. To compensate, the Team Sport Head Coach used competition opportunities locally to simulate the Games environment.

During the camps and tournaments we worked at a lot on team building and a lot on team strategies. We tried to look at teams in tournaments as opposition we would face at the Canada Games. I would say, okay this is Saskatchewan and this is so and so and this is number 5. We tried to use those opportunities and make them more game like to what we would be doing in the Canada Games....It was a bit tough though because when we arrived at the tournament we hadn't seen some of the teams. We weren't familiar with some of the players. I was, but just because of my experience and having been around in the sport so long. But some kids hadn't had that chance and I think they were a bit intimidated by the unknown...It would have been good to have the opportunity to have a bit more competition against some of the other teams prior to.

Games Reflections

The multi-sport experience is unique. Athletes and coaches become part of a festival of sport where they have the opportunity not only to compete, but also to meet other athletes and coaches from a variety of sports and to watch their performances. However, most athletes also come to the Games with high expectations regarding their performance. Similar to the Olympic coaches, both BC coaches highlighted the importance of finding a balance for the athletes, allowing them to experience the Games as well as perform to their expectations.

I decided that my team was going to have some time to relax and to socialize and to just enjoy the experience, meet some other athletes, do some other things. So we had team meetings and when we did do things I made it clear, okay you have some free time here. This is what time the meeting is. Be there on time. And they were good. If we were having a team dinner or whatever, they would show up on time or 5 minutes before. I think

giving them a little bit of freedom and the opportunity to make some of their own decisions like what time they were going to go to bed, and what they were going to eat and those things, made them respect the other things a little bit more. (Team Sport Head Coach)

I wanted to make sure that as the Head Coach of my team that my focus would be on facilitating an environment where athletes felt relaxed, were able to enjoy their Games experience and were able to focus on the process rather than the outcome...We had a schedule to keep them on track as many of them were younger athletes and that schedule included their free time blocks. Bu. we also scheduled many non-sport activities that we did with them such as bowling, swimming, movie nights and having team dinners. I think that this helped emphasize the importance of enjoying the process surrounding the whole competition and evaluating the experience as a whole instead of just focusing in on what goes on inside the competition area. It also helped keep the athletes busy and allowed them to get used to the times when they would be competing as we scheduled many of these activities at the same times when the competition would be taking place (Head Coach, Individual Sport)

Both coaches also acknowledged that at times, some of the younger athletes needed more guidance or structure as they learned to make healthier choices around their performance. For one coach, it was even necessary to bring in an expert to help emphasize the importance of healthy choices.

I wanted to treat them like adults and let them make their own decisions, but for some of the younger athletes those choices were challenging. For example, one of the younger athletes, on the first day that we got there, drank seven glasses of Pepsi in the cafeteria. So then I had to say, okay no more pop. That is the rule. For some of them, just because they are younger, I had to watch out for that a bit. (Head Coach, Team Sport)

I remember the first morning when we sat down for breakfast with the team, it was at a buffet the morning after we arrived and we as coaches were shocked with the athletes' food choices. Their plates were piled high with hash browns, sausage and bacon and very few opted for cereals, fruits and eggs. We addressed this with our athletes at a team meeting however, we didn't really notice any change in their choices. We asked Team BC's sport science liaison to come and speak with our team about the importance of nutrition and how it relates to performance and it was only after his presentation that we noted significant changes in their eating patterns.

Making good choices can be a challenging task for any performer. However, given the age and stage of the athletes attending the Canada Winter Games, it may be an important challenge worth noting, along with the kinds of strategies that might help athletes learn how to make better choices.

Often the biggest challenges at a multi-sport games are the number of distractions such as living conditions, travel, media, entertainment, unlimited food choices (Gould et al, 2001). However, one of the unique distractions identified by these two coaches for their particular

athletes was, simply put, “boys and girls” and the attractions that developed. In a “teenage hormonal sort of way” is how the individual sport head coach described the distraction of other competitors from other sports. The Team Sport Head Coach was a little more explicit:

I think the biggest distraction for the boys were the girls. We tried to prepare them for that, but really it is really a really difficult thing to do, especially with boys that age and all these young girls walking around in their little tank tops and tight sweat pants. 24/7 those guys have girls on their mind. I was like, can you guys just think of something else for just a second. I guess I have forgotten what it is like to be a teenager. That was a major distraction, all the time.

Both coaches mentioned the cold and travel time to venues as major distractions. Some athletes, even though the information was communicated to them, did not bring proper winter clothing. Additionally, the travel time from the athlete village to the competition sites varied for teams from 30 minutes to 1 hour depending on weather. For the Team Sport Head Coach, the travel time was the only time where team friction was observed, especially as the week went on although it seemed to always get resolved without incident. Finally, the cafeteria food was also a distraction as there were limitations on amount of food athletes could consume and there were also limits on the amount of water available.

Distractions are part of the Games experience and a regular part of competition. Both coaches acknowledged the importance of the mental training support and preparation in helping athletes focus for competition and deal with the distractions and challenges as they arose.

Just having a mental trainer there to support us was a big factor. I mean we didn't spend that much time with her but just knowing that she was there was very comforting for a lot of those athletes. They really enjoyed the information and tools given to them. A lot of them took that opportunity to start implementing them. It would have been good if they had started using them when they were originally talked about it, but they actually did use it. It was great to see the athletes off sitting in the corner having a quiet moment or listening to their music or doing whatever they needed to do to get ready, and I saw them doing it before every game. To have developed a routine even in that short time was a real benefit to them. (Team Sport Head Coach).

One of the factors that positively influenced our performance at the Games was having the support of a mental trainer. I was able to consult with, and/or refer athletes to her in situations where I was unsure of how to meet specific athletes' needs. In one particular case, I asked the mental trainer to work with an athlete to help her refocus after a loss. The mental trainer met with the athlete and then gave me feedback that I was able to use to help support the athlete. The athlete was able to turn it around and perform very well. Personally, I do not feel that I had the necessary skill set to get this athlete refocused and I credit this success to the work done with the mental trainer. The mental trainer also was able to support us in dealing with some of the group dynamics that arose.

Staying in the moment and focusing on the task at hand is challenging for even the most seasoned performers. Distractions, whether related to competition or to the environment

surrounding the competition, take performers out of the moment and focus their attention on irrelevant cues or on elements that cannot be controlled. Both coaches recognized the importance of athletes trying to stay in the moment during the games and they tried to emphasize that type of focus through their communication and actions. The Individual Sport Head Coach emphasized the idea of focusing on the process and not the outcome. As well, the coach tried to model patience surrounding the various distractions as they presented themselves.

I feel I demonstrated a lot of patience surrounding difficult issues and other distractions and obstacles that arose throughout the Games. I felt quite positive about this because it made me feel as though I had matured as a coach. I remember at time when I was quite reactive to things, and lacked patience in these types of situations. I think athletes pick up on that, so it felt good to be able to know I had improved in this area and that I was able to model that behaviour around the athletes. (Individual Sport Head Coach)

The Team Sport Head Coach highlighted the importance of letting go of mistakes and focusing on one step at a time:

I just sort of have this attitude, not that it is not important, but that it is not going to be the end of the world if we lose a game. It is just we are here to play and have a good time so lets do that. And so I just keep emphasizing that and not trying to make a big deal out of if we didn't play that great in one of the games. We just need to play better tomorrow so let's just take what we did well in that game and think about those things. Don't think about errors or missed opportunities. That game is finished so let's just start thinking about the next game. We just really followed a step-by-step process, which is something that I really learned from my coach, not focus on the outcome and just take it day to day. That was a real benefit for us because I think Ontario was focusing on the outcome and I actually used them as a good example after we beat them in the semi-finals because they were already playing the gold medal game the next day. They weren't even thinking about us. And we came out there focusing on what we were doing right then and we did what we had to do to win the game. (Team Sport Head Coach)

Both coaches also mentioned team cohesion as being a significant factor related to their performance at the Games. The results emerging from successful and unsuccessful Olympic team performances suggest that dynamics within a team during a competition can make or break team performances (Gould et al., 1999). Often an issue within a team can create a "TSN Turning Point" that can take a team to a higher level of performance or allow for a complete unraveling of team cohesion. One strategy that the team sport head coach used to maintain cohesion was talking circles:

We had a lot of circles before games, after games, and during meetings where we talked about all kinds of things. One of our circles we talked about the sacrifices we had made to come to the Canada games, the choices that we made or the things that we may have given up to go to the games, and the different things that people had left at home. I think it was a real eye opener for some people to realize what other people actually did in preparation and in order to come to the Games. It was important for us to know each other's level of commitment. I think on a team where you only come together for one

major games and where you don't have a chance to work together for a long periods of time, it is good for coaches and especially for the other athletes to realize those things about other people. It is a teambuilding thing. (Team Sport Head Coach)

For the individual sport team, a conflict between team members occurring during the Games almost caused them to withdraw from the team competition. However, the issue was addressed in a group meeting and the team emerged as a stronger and more cohesive group through the process.

The day before there had been huge dissention within the team to the point where we almost considered pulling out of the event. We had a team meeting to resolve the issue. The next day we were tied with Team Alberta and our team captain was randomly chosen to compete in the tiebreaker. She was to compete against a girl who defeated her both in the individual competition, and in the team event earlier that same day. Many young athletes would have given up in this situation or lacked the confidence needed to pull out this important win for the team. Many other teams would have seen team members roll their eyes or looked defeated when this girl was chosen to determine the fate of the team., but not this girl, and not our team. With the team behind her 100% she went on to defeat her opponent and give our team a birth into the semi-final. This made me extremely proud to be involved with this group. To see that maturity, growth, determination and the support that they showed for one another was definitely the highlight of my Games experience. (Individual Sport Head Coach)

A final element that both coaches highlighted from their Games experience was the importance of having a supportive and competent coaching staff. An effective coaching staff can provide an important support network that can allow the Head Coach to be more effective and allow the team to function at a higher level.

I had the support of an excellent coaching staff. They complimented my weaknesses nicely. I think it is important to surround yourself with competent people who bring out the best in each other. I also felt totally confident in delegating things to them, which minimized my stress and allowed me to focus on the things that I needed to do. (Individual Sport Head Coach).

I just go with my gut feeling a lot of the time. Sometimes it is hard on the other coaching staff because I will just make a decision and do something, and they are like, that is not on the schedule. Where did that come from? Oh I just feel like we need to do this right now. And they were good because they just completely supported me whatever I did or said. That was one of the things that was really beneficial, having a good coaching staff. We were all on the same page. It didn't matter what I said or did, I knew I was completely supported at all times, even when I wasn't there. It was great because then we had consistency throughout. (Team Sport Head Coach)

Lessons Learned from Canada Games Experience

A number of lessons emerged through this experience for both coaches. A number of these lessons have already been highlighted through their reflections in the previous sections. However, it is worthwhile to briefly note the major lessons for future reference.

Lesson #1: Take advantage of the sport science resources. Team BC offers many sport science resources to athletes and coaches through the Canada Games program. Many of these resources are not normally available to provincial teams. Both coaches felt that teams need to maximize the use of those resources as much as possible as they had a very positive impact on performance and they also help educate athletes and coaches regarding the many factors that contribute to performance.

Lesson #2: Expose athletes to sport science tools earlier. Both coaches felt that it would be beneficial to introduce the sport science resources and tools to athletes earlier in the preparation process so that they can develop the tools in a more comprehensive and progressive fashion. One coach recommended following a four-year cycle of support for Canada Games where skills and strategies can be introduced and then integrated in a more effective way.

Lesson #3: Get to know your athletes well. Both coaches felt that it is important to know your athletes well going into an experience like the Canada Games. This knowledge helped them respond more effectively to athlete needs, be open to athletes' feedback and comments, and better support the team process.

Lesson #4: Spend more time on team building activities. Team cohesion plays a significant role in team performance. Both coaches emphasized the importance of incorporating these types of activities and opportunities into the preparation period in a more structured and meaningful way.

Lesson #5: During competition focus on process as opposed to outcome. Both coaches highlighted the importance of keeping athletes focused in the here and now and on the components of their performance rather than simply on the outcome. A Games environment challenges that focus even further and therefore it becomes even more important to find ways to engage athletes in the experience in a positive and helpful way.

Lesson #6: Following competition, take time to reflect on the lessons. Part of focusing on the process is making sure to evaluate the process after each competitive situation. Both coaches felt it was necessary to learn from the lessons of each competition or game and then make adjustments for the next performance. Opportunities to draw these experiences from performance need to be consistent and independent of a win or a loss.

Lesson #7: Surround yourself with a good coaching staff. Coaching effectively at any event requires energy and focus. Both coaches felt that an effective coaching staff that supports the process allows that energy and focus to be maximized.

Lesson #8: Take everything in and enjoy the experience. Enjoyment is infectious. Part of the focus for both of these coaches was to provide opportunities for athletes to find that balance between enjoying the experience and performing at their best.

I really wanted them to have a good time and to have a great experience there. Not so much the result of whether we won or lost or anything, it was more important for me that they had a really good experience. And they all did. I had the most fun with them out of any team I have ever coached. I just love that team. I was so proud of them. I just really enjoyed them and the opportunity I had to make some of them become better players and some of them even to become better people. That to me is really what it is all about. It doesn't really matter about the medal. That is not necessarily what I am going to remember if someone ask me about the 2003 Canada Games team. I think it really renewed my passion for coaching.(Team Sport Head Coach)

Conclusion

The two coaches interviewed for this article have highlighted a number of key lessons emerging from their experiences at the Canada Winter Games. These lessons provide some insight into factors to consider when preparing for such an event. The hope is that these lessons will also spark a discussion around the commitment and support that needs to occur in order to develop high performance athletes in this province. We are already seeing the impact of the Team BC program and the resources, education and support it provides to BC athletes and coaches. The question is: Can we use these the lessons emerging from these coaches and from others within the system to become even better at what we do?

All people who excel are masters at drawing lessons from their experiences. Without ongoing reflection and assessment there is little chance for ongoing growth.
--Terry Orlick (1998)

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