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The Road to the Olympic Games: A Four-Year Psychological Preparation Program

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ABSTRACT

Elite athletes are required to spend several years in preparing themselves for world-caliber international sporting events such as the Olympic Games. This preparation is comprised of physical, technical, tactical – and psychological – training. The purpose of this paper is to describe the four-year psychological preparation program given to Israeli elite athletes whose goal is to participate in the 2008 Olympic Games. The paper provides the general psychological framework used in each of the four years of preparation. The objectives of the three psychological programs used during the psychological preparation – the Five-Step Approach, Specific Psychological Training Program, and Response Training Program – are described. Specific examples of the use of the psychological program in judo and rhythmic gymnastics are given. Two practical tips are suggested for sport psychologists who engage in multi-year preparation of elite athletes for the Olympic Games.

Introduction

The Olympic Games are perceived as one of the most glorious sporting events by elite athletes, both in individual and team sports. Although financial awards are not given to the winners in the Olympics, as in other numerous international sporting competitions, athletes strive to be part of the Games – in most cases primarily for the sake of participation and not only for

winning a medal. Elite athletes from all over the world are required to spend several years preparing themselves for the Games. Many of them see the participation in the Games as the peak of their sporting career (Gould, 2001; Hemery, 1986), and therefore are willing to prepare themselves as much as necessary for this event.

It has been well documented in the literature on methodology of training that effective preparation for an international sporting event such as the Olympics can take a few years (Bompa, 1999; Matveyev, 1981; Zatsiorsky, 1995). Elite athletes are required to carefully plan this preparation in order to reach their peak in such events. They have to take into consideration not only the physical, technical, and tactical aspects of their preparation, but also the psychological one. Interrelationships should exist among all four preparations if elite athletes expect to benefit most from the entire preparation program.

The purpose of this paper is to describe how sport psychology interventions were provided to Israeli elite athletes whose aim is to participate in the 2008 Olympic Games to be held in China. The paper focuses on a four-year psychological preparation program given by one sport psychologist (male; approximately 30 years of experience in applied sport psychology, including extensive consultation to elite and Olympic athletes) to elite athletes from two different sports – judo and rhythmic gymnastics. It was our intention to present the main principles of the psychological preparation given to the athletes in each year, as well as to describe the framework in which the interventions were given. Since we presented the general framework of a multi-year psychological preparation in this paper, we did not describe in detail the psychological interventions used each year and the rationale for using them. Specific information on our psychological approach to elite athletes and the specific psychological interventions we used in each phase of the training program can be found in Blumenstein and Lidor (2004), Blumenstein, Lidor, and Tenenbaum (2005), and Lidor, Blumenstein, and Tenenbaum (2007a, b).

The paper is composed of four parts. The first part describes the criteria which elite athletes in Israel are required to meet in order to be included in the category of "Olympic athletes." This part also describes the professional support provided to those athletes included in this category. The second part presents a short overview of our psychological approach to elite and Olympic athletes, and the third part introduces the main principles of the interventions given to the elite athletes during the four-year psychological preparation. The fourth part provides two psychological tips for sport psychologists who work with Olympic athletes.

Becoming an Olympic Athlete: Criteria and Support

Olympic sports in Israel have been supervised by the Elite Sport Department since its establishment in 1984, and are sponsored both financially and ideology by the Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture and the Israeli Olympic Committee. The main objective of this Department is to provide elite athletes, and particularly Olympic athletes, with the optimal physical and psychological conditions required to attain a high level of athletic excellence. Elite athletes in individual sports such as fencing, judo, kayaking, sailing, surfing, swimming, and wrestling are the main beneficiaries of the Department. The professional services, including psychological consultations, given by the Department are offered not only to the athletes but also

to their coaching staff.

The Elite Sport Department has established several performance criteria for elite athletes who aim to participate in the Olympic Games and seek the necessary support to attain the high level of proficiency in order to achieve this goal. Two types of criteria were set by the Department: the Elite Sport Department's criteria and the Olympic criteria. The Elite Sport Department's criteria were established for the first two years – Year 1 (2004-2005) and Year 2 (2005-2006) – within the four-year preparation for the Olympic Games. In order to meet the Department's criteria and obtain its financial and professional support for Years 1 and 2, the athletes were required to take between the first and the tenth place in a world championship according to the type of sport, or between the first and fifth place in a European championship. Winning medals (2 to 3 each year) in major international tournaments is a criterion as well.

For the third and fourth years within the four-year preparation program – Year 3 (2006-2007) and Year 4 (2007-2008) – Olympic criteria were set. In essence, these criteria were similar to the Elite Sport Department's criteria (e.g., taking between the first and the tenth place in rhythmic gymnastics in a world championship). However, these criteria had to be met in a time period that was closer to the Olympics. From a practical perspective, the level of competition demonstrated in sporting international events during Years 3 and 4 of the athletes' preparation was considerably higher than the level demonstrated during Years 1 and 2, because Years 3 and 4 were closer to the beginning of the Olympic Games. Therefore, although the criteria were similar to the ones set for Years 1 and 2, it was more difficult for the athletes to meet them as they progressed in their preparation. In addition, the achievements obtained by the athletes during Year 3 and particularly Year 4 reflected their current athletic ability as well as their physical and mental readiness for the upcoming Games. The financial support given to the athletes who met these criteria, and therefore ensured their participation in the Olympic Games, was higher compared to the support given to them during Years 1 and 2. Those athletes who would be competing at the Olympics were members of what the Elite Sport Department termed "The Golden Group" – the official Israeli Olympic athletes.

In addition to the financial support given to the individual athlete and his or her coach, the Elite Sport Department provided the athletes and their coaches with the services of a large team of professionals, which included a physician, a physical therapist, a nutritionist, an orthopedic surgeon, an athletic trainer, a conditioning and strength coach, and a sport psychologist. This team regularly worked with the athletes who had met one of the criteria and their coaches.

Psychological Approach to Olympic Athletes

The main foundations of our psychological program for elite and Olympic athletes have already been presented (e.g., Lidor et al., 2007a). There are five foundations to our program: (1) the sport psychologist should be one of the members of the professional staff who works on a regular basis with the individual athlete or the team; (2) the sport psychologist should discuss his or her psychological plan with the coaching staff; (3) the sport psychologist should meet on a weekly basis with the coaching staff in order to exchange ideas on how the psychological program can contribute to the athlete's or the team's success; (4) the psychological consultation should be utilized in three settings: (a) laboratory settings (controlled and sterile conditions), (b)

practice settings (authentic and real conditions), and (c) home settings (quite environment); (5) the sport psychologist should be ready to consider any request coming from the coaching staff, the individual athlete, or the team during the time he or she provides the consultation. Further details on the philosophy and professional foundations of our psychological program for elite individual sports can be found in Blumenstein and Lidor (2004; canoeing and kayaking) and Blumenstein et al. (2005; judo), and for elite team sports in Lidor et al. (2007b; basketball).

In our program, mental skill techniques such as imagery, focusing attention, relaxation, and self-talk are regularly used to help the athletes overcome psychological barriers. Among these barriers are low level of motivation, lack of concentration, mental fatigue, and the need to overcome injury. The psychological program reflects the objectives of each critical phase of the annual training program – preparation, competition, and transition (Blumenstein et al., 2005; Bompa, 1999). In the preparation phase, the athlete develops a general framework of the physical, technical, tactical, and psychological preparations for the upcoming season. In the competition phase, the athlete has to reach his or her peak, both physically and psychologically. In the transition phase, the athlete relaxes physically and psychologically, however he or she attempts to maintain an acceptable level of physical activity.

Each training phase – preparation, competition, and transition – is composed of four fundamental preparations – physical, technical, tactical, and psychological (Bompa, 1999). The main objectives of the physical and technical preparations are to develop the relevant fitness components required for the specific sport and to perfect the movement patterns and their components. The objective of the tactical preparation is to provide the athlete with the strategic knowledge required to perform at a high level the technical skills he or she has acquired in real-competition/game situations, as well as to develop a game plan or competition strategy. The objective of the psychological preparation is to provide the athletes with task-specific psychological techniques that can help them overcome mental barriers, for example fear of failure, high anxiety, and low self-confidence. The objectives of our psychological program are in line with those discussed in the literature (e.g., Bompa, 1999; Matveyev, 1981).

According to our psychological approach, the sport psychologist should take into consideration the specific objectives of other preparations in the training program, namely the physical, technical, and tactical. To achieve a high level of proficiency, an effective interaction among these preparations should exist within each of the critical phases of the training program – the preparation, competition, and transition. The psychological preparation should be linked to the physical, technical, and tactical preparations of the training program and reflect the unique needs of the individual elite athlete (Blumenstein et al., 2005).

A Four-Year Psychological Preparation Program towards the Olympic Games

In this part we describe how our psychological program was implemented over a four-year period, taking into account two parameters – time and content. The program is presented on a yearly basis – Year 1, Years 2 and 3, and Year 4 – and for each year the specific psychological emphases are described. Two sports, one individual and one team, were selected to demonstrate the use of the psychological program: judo and rhythmic gymnastics. The rationale for the selection of these sports was that several Israeli male judokas have already qualified for the 2008

Olympic Games, and the Israeli rhythmic gymnastics team has also qualified for the 2008 Olympics.

Judo has become one of the most popular individual sports in Israel (Blumenstein et al., 2005). Israeli judokas won two medals in the Olympic Games in Barcelona (1992) and one medal in Athens (2004). In addition, a number of medals were awarded to Israeli judokas in World and European championships in the present decade.

Although the sport of rhythmic gymnastics became popular among Israeli gymnasts only during the last decade of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st century, it has established itself as one of the strongest team sports in the country. For example, several medals were won at international events and the team reached a number of finals in the 2007 European championship.

Year 1 – Analysis, Orientation, and Basic Foundations

The psychological preparation for the 2008 Olympic Games started about two months after the end of the Athens 2004 Games, when the sport psychologist began working with several elite athletes and their coaches. The athletes were classified into one of the following three categories: new athletes (NA), continuing athletes (CA), and returning athletes (RA). The NA category was composed of athletes who had met the Elite Sport Department's criteria for the first time, and therefore were not familiar with the foundations of the psychological preparation. The CA category included those athletes who were part of the Golden Group for the 2004 Olympic Games and achieved the Elite Sport Department's criteria for the year 2005. These athletes were familiar with the psychological program as well as with the interventional techniques presented to them during their preparation for the 2004 Games. The RA group consisted of athletes who did not participate in the 2004 Games, but had achieved the Elite Sport Department's criteria for the year 2005 and therefore were eligible for the Department's support. These athletes had gained some experience with several of the psychological interventions during their preparation for the 2004 Games; however, they required some time to readjust to the protocols of the psychological program and its specific interventions.

The psychological preparation in Year 1 had two objectives. First, to examine the contribution to the athlete's success of the psychological preparation given to the CA and RA during the previous year (i.e., the Olympic Year of the previous four-year cycle of preparation). This examination was undertaken through deep and repeated discussions between the athletes and the sport psychologist. It was the aim of the sport psychologist to understand how the athletes perceived the contribution of various psychological interventions, such as imagery and focusing-attention, to their actual performance. This information was used by the sport psychologist to develop his psychological program for Year 1 in the new cycle. The second objective was to provide the athletes with the psychological preparation they needed to achieve their athletic goals. For the NA, the objective was to provide them with the program's psychological orientation, and to teach them the basic foundations of several interventional techniques. For the CA and RA, the objective was to enhance the psychological skills they had already practiced, and to teach them new techniques.

Our psychological program was composed of three-sub programs: The Five-Step Approach

(5-SA; Blumenstein & Bar-Eli, 2005), the specific psychological training program (SPTP), and the response training program (RTP; Blumenstein et al., 2005; Lidor et al., 2007a). At the initial steps of the psychological program, namely during Year 1 of the four-year psychological preparation period, the 5-SA played a major role, and a considerable amount of time was devoted to the acquisition of the technique's basic principles. However, for the majority of the program – Years 2, 3, and 4 – all sub-programs were performed for an almost equal amount of time.

The Five-Step Approach. The 5-SA is a self-regulation technique incorporating biofeedback (BFB) training. The technique enables athletes to transfer the psycho-regulative skills performed in sterile laboratory settings to real practice and competition settings, utilizing testing and different simulative materials (Blumenstein & Bar-Eli, 2005). The 5-SA is composed of five stages: (a) introduction – learning various self-regulation techniques (e.g., imagery, focusing-attention, and self-talk), (b) identification (identifying and strengthening the most efficient BFB response modality), (c) simulation (BFB training with simulated competitive stress), (d) transformation (bringing mental preparation from the laboratory to the field), and (e) realization (achieving optimal regulation in competition).

There were three reasons for the selection of the 5-SA as the basic technique in our psychological program. First, this technique has been subjected to a fair amount of scientific scrutiny (e.g., Bar-Eli & Blumenstein, 2004; see also a review on series of studies examining the effectiveness of the 5-SA on different sports in Blumenstein & Bar-Eli, 2005). Second, the application of the program was based on accumulated practical experience by elite Israeli athletes in various top-level events, such as the Olympic Games, and European and world championships in various sports (Blumenstein, 2001). Third, according to the principles of the 5-SA, it is not always necessary to start with the first step in every psychological session. The athlete, together with his or her sport psychologist, defines his or her current psychological state and selects the most appropriate step with which to begin.

The Specific Psychological Training Program. The SPTP was composed of mental skill techniques – focusing attention, imagery, self-talk, and relaxation – that were developed by the sport psychologist throughout many years of professional practice. These techniques have also been used by other applied sport psychologists who work with top-level athletes (e.g., Henschen, 2005; Moran, 2005), and they have also provided empirical support (see Abma, Fry, Yuhua, & Relyea, 2002; Short et al., 2002). When performing this technique, the current physical and psychological states of the athlete and the specific phase of the training program were taken into account. For example, at initial parts of the program the techniques were performed in laboratory sessions, namely in controlled and sterile conditions, in order to enable the athletes to acquire the basic foundations of each technique. When progress was made in the laboratory settings, the techniques were then applied in actual practice sessions where the athletes were exposed to more authentic situations and real-life distractors. In another example, relaxation was performed first for short periods of time (e.g., intervals of 1 to 3 min) to help the athletes recover from early-season practices, and then imagery and focusing-attention were used in order to help the athletes cope with the specific tactical demands of the training program.

The Response Training Program. The main objective of the RTP was to enhance the athletes' (judokas) responses under real-life settings (e.g., combat). The program consisted of several

reaction time tasks (Blumenstein et al., 2005). A computer-simulation setting was used and several factors were adopted during training in order to expose the athlete to more real-life competitive situations. Among the factors were a video demonstration of actual combats, external distractions such as noise, and competitions between two judokas performing the reaction time tasks at the same time (see Blumenstein et al., 2005 for a description of specific protocols of the RTP as used by Olympic judokas).

Table 1 presents the psychological preparation for male judokas in Year 1, and Table 2 presents the specific psychological interventions and their protocols performed by the judokas during this period of time. As can be seen in Tables 1 and 2, the psychological preparation started in October 2004, about 2 months after the end of the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens. Different emphases were made for the NA, CA, and RA categories. For example, the NA began to acquire the fundamentals of basic psychological techniques such as focusing attention and self-talk. The CA, who had already performed these techniques, were not required to re-learn their psychological training; they performed the interventional techniques in special situations such as competition-simulated conditions.

Table 1. General Psychological Preparation for Male Judokas in Year 1

Main goal: European championship, May, 2005 and World championship, September, 2005	
<u>Preparation Phase</u>	
October, 2004	NA – learn basic techniques +++ CA – improve techniques +-
November, 2004	NA +++ CA – +
December, 2004	NA – CA – (two weeks training camp abroad)
January, 2005	NA –++ CA +++ RA – improve techniques –++
February, 2005	NA – +++ CA – improve techniques in special situations ++++ RA ++
<u>Competition Phase</u>	
March, 2005	NA ++ CA +++ RA – (international competition)
April, 2005	NA ++++ CA ++++ RA –+++ (international competition) – develop individual competition mental plan
May, 2005	NA –+ CA –+ RA ++ (training camp, European championship, 2005)
<u>Transition Phase</u>	
June, 2005	NA, CA, RA ++
<u>Preparation Phase</u>	
July, 2005	NA, CA, RA –+++ (training camp abroad)
<u>Competition Phase</u>	
August, 2005	NA –+++ CA ++++ RA –+++ (international competition) – improve individual competition mental plan
September, 2005	NA ++++ CA –+++ RA –+++ (World championship, 2005)

+ – psychological session
 NA – new athletes
 CA – continuing athletes
 RA – returning athletes

Table 2. Specific Psychological Interventions for Male Judokas in Year 1

Month	Main Psychological Intervention	Procedure	Phase and Competition Event
(2004)			
October	Psychological analysis – relaxation	1-2 times (30-40 min each); Laboratory sessions	Preparation phase
November	5-SA (steps a-c)	4-6 times (50-60 min each); Laboratory sessions	
December	5-SA (steps c-e)	4-6 times (50-60 min each); Practice sessions	
(2005)			
January	Self-regulation techniques: imagery, self-task, focusing-attention	4-6 times (50-60 min each); Laboratory sessions	
February	SPTP	6-8 times (50-60 min each); Laboratory sessions	Competition phase International tournaments
March	RTP	6-8 times (50-60 min each); Laboratory sessions – practice sessions + home assignments	International tournaments
April	Self-regulation techniques + RTP	6-8 times (50-60 min each); Laboratory sessions + practice sessions + home assignments	International tournaments
May	Self-regulation techniques + RTP	6-8 times (50-60 min each); Practice sessions + home assignments	European championship Transition phase (last week in May)
June	RTP, 5-SA (steps b-c), SPTP	4-6 times (50-60 min each); Laboratory sessions + home assignments	Preparation phase International tournaments
July	Self-regulation techniques – RTP	4-6 times (50-60 min each); Laboratory sessions + home assignments	Competition phase
August	RTP	6-8 times (50-60 min each); Practice sessions	International tournaments
September	SPTP	8-10 times (50-60 min each); Practice sessions	

5-SA – Five-Step Approach
 SPTP – specific psychological training program
 RTP – response training program

Years 2 and 3 – International Experience and Advanced Practice

During Years 2 and 3 of the preparation for the Olympic Games, the athletes spent a considerable amount of time taking part in training camps abroad as well as in international competitions in order to gain international experience. The athletes practiced with world-class international athletes and competed against the best in the world. The main objective of the psychological preparation in Years 2 and 3 was to teach the athletes specific intervention techniques that could be effectively used in practice sessions, multi-day competitions, and tournaments. At this stage of preparation, each athlete had developed his or her repertoire of

psychological techniques, and used it regularly. All three sub-programs of the psychological preparation – the 5-SA, SPTP, and RTP – were practiced as well, however with a heavy orientation towards the competitive events. For example, our elite judokas conducted a relaxation procedure for about 3 to 5 min while imagining themselves performing in an actual combat, since the length of the combat was 5 min (Blumenstein et al., 2005). Techniques such as imagery and self-talk were performed during warm-up sessions before the beginning of the official competition in order to help the judokas prepare themselves tactically for the upcoming combats. In addition, the athletes were provided with home assignments so they could practice the psychological techniques during their free time.

According to the foundations of our consultation program, the sport psychologist traveled with the athletes quite often during these years, not only to the international competitions but also to the training camps. Daily psychological sessions were conducted during the training camps. Both individual and group sessions were held, depending upon the request made by the coaching staff.

Table 3 presents the general psychological preparation for male judokas in Year 3 and Table 4 presents the general psychological preparation for rhythmic gymnasts in Year 3. Two observations can be made based on the psychological programs presented in Tables 3 and 4. First, the main objective of the psychological preparation was to prepare these athletes to meet the Elite Sport Department and the Olympic criteria. Second, psychological sessions were conducted on almost a daily basis in the preparation and competition phases in both sports, to provide the athletes with the required psychological techniques to meet these criteria.

Table 3. General Psychological Preparation for Male Judokas in Year 3

Main goal: European championship, May, 2007 and World championship, September, 2007	
<u>Preparation Phase</u>	
October, 2006	improve psychological techniques ++
November, 2006	improve psychological techniques +—
December, 2006	improve psychological techniques +—+
January, 2007	improve techniques under different conditions +—++ (training camp abroad)
February, 2007	+—+—++ (international competitions)
<u>Competition Phase</u>	
March, 2007	+++++ (training camp abroad)
April, 2007	+—++ (international competitions)
May, 2007	+—++++ (training camp abroad: European championship, 2007)
<u>Transition Phase</u>	
June, 2007	+—
July, 2007	+—++ (training camp abroad)
<u>Preparation Phase</u>	
August, 2007	+—++++ (international competitions)
<u>Competition Phase</u>	
September, 2007	+++++ (World championship, 2007)

+ — psychological session

Table 4. General Psychological Preparation for Rhythmic Gymnasts in Year 3

Main goal: European Cup (Olympic Criterion 1), September, 2006	
<u>Preparation Phase</u>	
February, 2006	+--+ learn basic techniques (laboratory sessions)
March, 2006	++-++-
April, 2006	--+--+ (training camp abroad; international competitions)
<u>Competition Phase</u>	
May, 2006	++-+++ (international competitions: "Grand Prix", World Cup)
June, 2006	--+--+ (international competitions: "Grand Prix", World Cup)
July, 2006	++-+++ (improvement of techniques under different conditions – individual and group sessions) (training camp, Israel)
August, 2006	++-+++ (training camp, Israel; international competition: "Grand Prix")
September, 2006	++-+++ (training camp, Israel; international competition: "European Cup")
October, 2006	--+- (international competition: "Grand Prix")
November, 2006	++- (international competition: "World Cup")
<u>Transition Phase</u>	
December, 2006	++

+ – psychological session

Year 4 –The Olympic Year

The final year of the four-year preparation was the most crucial for the elite athletes, since it was their last opportunity to meet the Olympic criteria. The athletes had to cope with a stressful year on and off the court, due to the fact that not only their coaches and the entire professional staff but also the public at large anticipated that they would qualify for the Olympics. The psychological preparation provided to the athletes during this year had three objectives. First, to help the athletes ready themselves for several key competitions in which they had to "bring everything together" and perform at the height of their abilities in order to meet the Olympic criteria; second, to continue the psychological preparation of those athletes who had already met the criteria and whose participation in the Olympics was assured; third, to help those athletes who failed to meet the Olympic criteria, and therefore would not participate in the Olympic Games, cope effectively with their feelings of deep disappointment and failure.

As in Years 2 and 3, the sport psychologist traveled to the key competitions with the athletes who had to meet the Olympic criteria, in order to be in close proximity to them during this stressful time. The psychological interventions were given mainly in individual sessions so that the sport psychologist could focus solely on one athlete at a time. Each athlete was provided with individual and unique psychological preparation he or she consistently maintained during Years 2 and 3. During the key competitions, daily meetings were conducted between the sport psychologist and the entire professional staff, particularly with the coaching staff, in order to obtain updated, relevant information on the current physical, technical, and tactical preparations of the athlete, and to select the most appropriate psychological intervention for the athlete in these

crucial moments. Table 5 presents the general psychological preparation for rhythmic gymnasts in Year 4. The competition phase was a long one, since many international competitions were scheduled in order to provide the gymnasts with enough opportunities to meet the Olympic criteria. During this phase, daily psychological sessions were given to almost every gymnast. Home assignments were provided as well, to help the gymnasts develop their own responsibility for mastering the psychological techniques.

Table 5. A General Psychological Preparation for Rhythmic Gymnasts in Year 4

Main goal: World championship (Olympic Criterion 2). September, 2007	
<u>Preparation Phase</u>	
February, 2007	--+---+++ improve techniques (individual and group sessions)
March, 2007	+++ (training camp. Israel; international competitions)
<u>Competition Phase</u>	
April, 2007	++---++ (training camp, Israel; international competition: World Cup)
May, 2007	---+---++ (training camp, Israel)
June, 2007	+++ (training camp. Israel; international competition: World Cup)
July, 2007	--+---+++ (training camp, Israel)
August, 2007	+++ (training camp. Israel, international competition: "Grand Prix")
September, 2007	++---+- (training camp. Israel; international competition: World championship)
<u>Transition Phase</u>	
October, 2007	-

- - psychological session

A specific psychological program was also developed for the athletes who had already met the Olympic criteria during early months of Year 4. Since no additional international competitions were required for those individuals who had met the criteria, the main objective of the psychological preparation given to them during this period was to prepare them for coping with the challenges they would inevitably face during the Olympic Games, such as living in the Olympic village, being interviewed by the national and international press, and the exposure to a high level of stress. In this final stage of preparation, the 5-SA, STPT, and RTP were also used. Several athletes met with the sport psychologist only twice a week, while others preferred to consult him on a daily or almost daily basis.

Special attention was given to those who did not succeed in qualifying for the Games. The sport psychologist met with these athletes several times in his office. During these meetings, the sport psychologist created an informal and pleasant atmosphere, and discussed with the athletes their future plans, not only in sport but also in their other endeavors. A relaxation technique was used to help them to cope with their disappointment in not meeting their athletic goals.

Concluding Remarks and Practical Tips

Working with elite and Olympic athletes for a four-year period of time is a complex and demanding process, requiring that sport psychologists effectively plan their psychological preparation, exhibit a high level of commitment, and create a positive and trustful climate between them and the elite athletes and their coaches. Based on our experience of providing psychological interventions to elite athletes in individual (i.e., judo) and team (i.e., rhythmic gymnastics) sports, two practical tips for sport psychologists who work with top-level athletes are suggested.

First, sport psychologists should focus on what they are capable of doing best (Lidor et al., 2007b). Sport psychologists have a variety of psychological interventions available in the literature on sport and exercise psychology, and they can adopt various approaches of consultation. However, we suggest that sport psychologists develop their own approach based on their individual experience, expertise, and professional knowledge. The psychological preparation given to our athletes was composed of three main programs – 5-SA, SPTP, and RTP – which have been developed throughout many years of experience and empirical inquiries. These psychological programs were used consistently by the sport psychologist during the four-year period of preparation, taking into account the specific needs of the athletes in each phase of the training program.

Second, sport psychologists should cooperate regularly with the rest of the professional staff working with the elite athletes. Psychological preparation is only one type of preparation in the domain of sport. There are other preparations, such as the physical, technical, and tactical, which are probably perceived by the athletes and coaches as more important as the psychological one. Therefore, sport psychologists have to cooperate with other professionals such as coaches, athletic trainers, physicians, and conditioning and strength coaches who are working with the elite athlete. They have to understand the objectives of each of the other preparations and listen carefully to requests made by the other professionals, particularly the coaching staff. It is our contention that the psychological preparation should be naturally synthesized into the training program of elite and Olympic athletes if cooperation between the sport psychologist and other professionals is to exist. This cooperation should be maintained throughout the entire preparation period and be evaluated every several months by those involved in the preparation process.

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