Service Delivery to Olympic Teams in the USA over a 30-year Period

Richard D. Gordin
Utah State University

This article describes my involvement with the service provision to Olympic teams over the past 30 years. Every service delivery program in the field of applied sport psychology begins with a service delivery philosophy. I have developed and evolved this philosophy over the years and have written in previous journal articles describing in detail the model that I have used (Gordin & Henschen, 1989). However, this article will describe more recent developments that have been implemented in my work with both Olympic level athletes and professionals.

Philosophy of Service Delivery

First, an applied sport psychologist must realize that he or she is a consultant to a team or individual. In effect, this person serves as a close advisor to all involved in the athletic environment. However, it is my belief that the athlete is always the client. When I have been employed as a sport psychologist to numerous Olympic teams over the years, I have always spent my initial contact tying to establish a trusting relationship. Since you are invited into the team it’s about service not self-service. It’s about being off stage not center stage and it’s about education not clinical issues. I was initially involved in the development of this philosophy when I began working with the USA Track and Field team in 1987. We, as a group of sport psychologists, all agreed to these principles. We have seen others in the field fail because of violation of these principles. For instance, if a mental health provider enters the arena of sport as a promotion seeker, he will soon find himself unemployed. These athletes and coaches are the major focus of our attention and we need to understand that whatever they accomplish or do not accomplish is a reflection on their ability to incorporate what we advise and do in a very high-pressure environment.
It has been a goal of mine for many years to initially gather intake information that is both useful and relevant to the athlete and the coach. Many years of psychometric evaluation has pinpointed several areas that need assessment. These areas include but are not limited to self-confidence, self esteem, ability to focus, achievement motivation, mood state, anxiety characteristics (especially in pressure situations), and learning style. I have used many inventories over the years but recently, since the early 90’s, the Competitive Styles Inventory (CSI) and the Learning Styles Inventory (LSI) have been used exclusively (Ogilvie & Greene, 1997).

The author has found that nothing is more trust building with the athlete than a well placed, accurate observation about his/her performance tendencies. With consensual validation of these inventories an avenue for future performance enhancement can be developed. All athletes bring considerable talents with them to the consulting relationship. However, it seems imperative to me to pinpoint rather quickly the area that needs further refinement and development. It is also important to share much of this information with the coaching staff, if the athlete agrees to this procedure. The coach will spend considerable time with the athlete in performance development, and therefore it seems relevant to have all involved to be as informed as possible regarding the plan. I have found the Learning Styles Profile (LSP) to be especially useful in helping the coach/athlete communication process in training situations.

After these evaluations, the next step is to gather more information about the team dynamics and the relationships within the organization. Typically, National Governing Bodies (NGB’s) are run from a central administration model. However, the best entry to this relationship is through the coaches and the athletes. Within our model with USA Track and Field (USATF), it was imperative to provide service at coaching clinics, national conventions, junior development camps and coaching certification courses. In this manner, we were able to make contact with coaches and athletes in an environment where our services were highly valued. The added benefit was that we were able to get to know the athletes at a very early age and at the start of their athletic careers. Team travel for national and international events was introduced after these relationships were
established. When a medical staff was assigned for team travel both coaches and athletes viewed sport psychology as a vital part of the staff and often requested us to accompany the team. In high-pressure situations, it was important to have trust developed so that any intervention was accepted as part of team dynamics and not as some outside mandated action. For instance, in high-pressure situations like the Olympic Games, behaviors can be manifested that would only occur at these times. If trust had not been established prior to this time, then the coaches or athletes might have rejected any actions on the part of the sport psychologist. We are often called upon to help solve issues or problems that have arisen during extreme pressure situations. In my career, I have had to intervene on numerous occasions to provide guidance on decisions that involve organizational decision-making at the Games. The skills of an organizational psychologist are often very helpful.

**Types of Services Provided**

It has been important to provide a systematic range of services to the athletes and coaches. Many types of services have been provided such as relaxation training, hypnosis, focus training, attitude development, anxiety control, emotion management, and goal setting. Team development has also been provided to the organization. Prior to leaving for the Olympic Games, coaching staffs have met and developed a code of conduct for the trip. This is an important step, as many times although these coaches know each other, they have never cooperated as a functioning staff before this assignment was made. During international events, the typical athlete experience is altered significantly. In the case of track and field, the athlete is now traveling as a team member rather than an individual athlete. What has been considered normal travel behavior before has been significantly altered and coaching staffs are now in charge of the day’s events such as practice schedules, meal arrangements etc. This change might be very disruptive to the athlete if he or she does not have the requisite skills to handle this adaptation. A sport psychologist can help this athlete by adjusting expectations without disrupting a
routine that has been altered. Installing a sense of control, within limitations, is a valuable skill to be taught to the athlete. It might seem that this skill would be a natural transitional skill, however, I have seen times when high profile athletes have been disturbed enough to separate themselves from the team and make their own hotel arrangements outside the village. When this happens the team dynamics can be interrupted and relay events and practices can be influenced negatively. Also, coaching staffs that have been appointed now clash with athletes, personal coaches and agents and the entire delegation suffers because of it.

It is also important to realize that when you are traveling with an Olympic team that you are on call 24 hours per day. When I was with our team in Athens I would often receive call or pages in the middle of the night because an athlete could not sleep or was having anxiety related issues that caused insomnia and reoccurring dream related problems. The team coaches and medical staff requested the same services provided to the athletes. In reality, I was serving a delegation of 125 athletes, 20 coaches and 5 medical staff personnel in this trip. To be a sport psychologist in this type of environment requires both stamina and ingenuity to provide the best services possible. The major part of my work is educational in nature, as started earlier, but some clinical issues do arise in situations such as the Olympic games. Track and Field in the USA is not a team sport. The athletes compete individually and are coached by personal coaches. However, the team must reach agreement on issues such as relay team membership. This situation may differ in countries where athletes train together all the time, but in the US we have very few athletes that have made our team in the past several Games that have resided full time at our Olympic Training Center in Chula Vista, California.

It is important to meet the athlete as a unique individual and not subject them to a packaged approach to sport psychology. Each athlete brings a subset of skills, both physical and psychological, to the relationship. It is our job to do a fair amount of observing, asking appropriate questions and giving some questionnaires to determine the specific strengths and weaknesses of the athlete. If the athlete feels you understand his or her unique needs, a great deal of trust might be immediately developed. I spend a lot of
time initially just being present and observing behaviors. If you ask the right questions usually the athlete will respond with his needs. It then becomes our job to provide the suggestions, support and information to help positive change to occur. I have found that it takes a time to determine specific plans of action but the more time you spend with the athlete the better the plan develops. This is why it is important to start working with athletes and coaches years in advance of the Olympic Games.

It is my belief that, we as sport psychologists can make many significant contributions to improve the performance levels of athletes and coaches. In order to so do, we must enter the relationship with respect for all involved and understand that we are invited into their world. We must respect the coach/athlete relationship and understand that we are truly consultants to this relationship. It is not our place to either impose upon them or make all participants follow a specific program. Instead, we must take their lead and follow up on specific requests.

In closing, this article has mentioned some of my beliefs about what could make a sport psychology consultant not only a valued member of an Olympic staff but a life-long advocate for the athlete and coach. The relationships that are developed long outlast the number of medals won. Life long relationships are a special benefit of the significant investment of time that is put into these consulting ventures.

References