

SPORT PSYCHOLOGY IS KEY TO A SUCCESSFUL OLYMPIC COMEBACK

Competitors Overcome Injuries and Age to Build Confidence and Focus on Goals

MADISON, WI – February 2010 – The Winter Olympic Games will feature a number of American and international athletes making comebacks on the ice and in the snow after short- and long-term absences. Two prominent examples are the Austrian Nordic combined skier Felix Gottwald, winner of three Olympic medals in Torino and the American speed skater Jennifer Rodriguez, four-time Olympian and winner of two bronze medals in Salt Lake City. Another highly successful Olympians making a comeback attempt for these Games is Todd Hays, the Olympic Silver Medalist in men's bobsled from Salt Lake City. These athletes have battled physical challenges to reach the Olympic Games, but will also need to overcome mental barriers to be successful.

Peter Haberl, Ed.D., a senior sport psychologist for the United States Olympic Committee and AASP (Association for Applied Sport Psychology) member shared his views on sport psychology issues athletes face and need to overcome to be successful. He provides individual and team consultations and counseling sessions to various resident and national teams and athletes at the Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs. He has supported athletes at many Olympic Games and worked in a wide range of sports including women's ice hockey, triathlon, diving, synchronized swimming, women's volleyball and water polo.

Why make a comeback?

According to Dr. Haberl, there are many different personal reasons why an athlete who has been away from the sport would decide to defy the odds and return to elite competition. "Some reasons include the singularity of purpose, the clear goal (and subsequent knowledge of the result); the benefits that come with being able to identify oneself with being an athlete; the enjoyment that comes with the narrow focus and purpose; some extrinsic rewards such as being in the limelight again and the perks that come with that; and sometimes it is a case of unfinished business such as not having achieved a certain goal."

What are the major disadvantages that individuals making a comeback must face?

"Disadvantages can include dealing with the realization that physical skills have deteriorated, the potential difficulty relating to much younger teammates, and after years away from the sport, time doesn't stand still. Athletes may also lack familiarity with new techniques and equipment. Another challenge is dealing with other life roles taking a back seat to the sport as outside life circumstances compete for time and attention," he explained.

Like the varied reasons for returning to competition, the sport psychology approach and techniques are always individualized, said Dr. Haberl. "I would pay particular attention to how comeback-related thoughts and emotions interfere or facilitate the necessary performance focus."

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What advantages does an athlete returning to elite competition have?

“These athletes have a sense of perspective that puts the competitive outcome in its proper place. The athlete’s sense of self is no longer at stake, thereby eliminating a potential performance barrier. They also have a renewed sense of ‘wanting to’ vs. ‘having to’ compete which is a potential advantage. The major benefit of returning is the joy of competing and being immersed in the pursuit of a clear goal.”

“While mastery of a technique is a question of dedicated training, rather than age, the older athlete may have an advantage in perspective and wisdom which come with age. This aids in diffusing the interfering attention distractions, which are plentiful for any Olympian right before the Olympic Games.”

Dr. Haberl concluded, “My advice to these athletes is to embrace the experience and let the outcome take care of itself.”

The Association for Applied Sport Psychology

The Association for Applied Sport Psychology (AASP) promotes the ethical practice, science and advocacy of sport and exercise psychology. Founded in 1986, AASP is an international, multidisciplinary, professional organization that offers certification to qualified professionals who practice sport and exercise psychology. With more than 1,200 members in 28 countries, AASP is a worldwide leader, sharing research and resources with the public via its Web site, www.appliedsportpsych.org.

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