

IN THE SPOTLIGHT

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It's often the case that many Olympic athletes are all but forgotten for the majority of the four years between the Olympic Games; then they become the focus of huge media attention as the Games near. So how can athletes deal with the Olympic hype and manage the pressure that can go along with that hype? Here are a few tips that can help you stay level-headed amid all the fuss.

MAINTAIN NORMALCY

Maintain normal routines as much as possible. If you are headed to the Olympic Games then you are an elite-level athlete and have likely developed mental and physical preparation routines that have helped you get to where you are – continue to follow these routines. Some athletes decide to radically change their routines and pre-event mental preparation because they are at the 'Games'. For some reason the usual routines that they have used to get to this point become doubted and some athletes begin to lose trust in the familiar. Trust yourself and your routines, and stick to your normal training and competition procedure, and maintain normalcy in your everyday life. Obviously, there will be changes and new responsibilities in the time period leading up to the Games. However, continue to maintain your social, emotional, spiritual, and daily routines as much as you can. This can mean doing the usual things such as following your normal sleep-wake cycle, hanging out with your friends and family, following your usual training routines, etc. In a nutshell, keep it real.

AVOID THE HEADLINES

Avoid getting pulled into the headlines and the drama that is the media. The Olympic Games brings with it a host of media attention, online and in press. Public expectations and increased media attention can place some athletes under tremendous negative stress. If you (and/or your sport) are not usually in the media spotlight, it may be prudent to avoid reading all the headlines. Think of it this way, the media hype is to get the general public (i.e., everyone else other than the actual athletes) excited about the Olympics, to bring them up to speed with what's going on and to give them a preview of what to expect at the Games. The stories in the papers and online are just that, stories. You know what's going on in your life; you don't need to read up on someone else's interpretation of your life. Any drama created by the media is for the interest of the public, to get *them* interested and hyped up about the Games. For some athletes, reading about themselves gets them psyched up and excited about the upcoming games. For some, it results in the opposite: massive stress. Reading the headlines and following the media hype is a 'double-edged sword'; it can provide motivation for training and competition, but it can also generate enormous pressure, stress and anxiety that can hinder performance. So, it's important to know and trust what works for you, which brings me to the next point.

KNOW THYSELF

No one else knows you more or better than you do. You have been an athlete for a long time and you have developed some amazing coping and management strategies (you've had to

otherwise you would not have achieved the level that you have). You know what works for you: how to prepare, what to eat and when, how much to sleep, etc. As an Olympic-level athlete, recognizing what level of emotional arousal works best for you is key for optimal performance and confidence, so make sure to check-in with yourself often in order to maintain the right level for you. If you're not where you need to be (too high or too low) use your mental skills and tools to get there (e.g., relaxation techniques, imagery, self-talk, etc.). Also, avoid comparing yourself to others, even if they have been to the Olympic Games before. Yes, by all means ask them questions and learn from them, but just because something works for them doesn't mean it will apply to you. For many athletes, the Olympic Games are a new experience so it's natural to have to manage novel things. That's why it's important to use your internal gauge and internal compass: Listen to your inner self, trust what you know.

FOCUS ON THE PROCESS

If you have not been in the spotlight since the last Olympic cycle or if this is your first time, take things slowly and focus on the process. Enlist the support and help of other athletes who have "been there, done that" and learn from their experiences of coping with the hype of the Olympic Games and their lead-up. Keep things in perspective – keep your eye on the prize but remember that to get there you have to focus on taking it one step at a time. A common difficulty is managing the shift that almost inevitably goes towards focussing intensely on outcomes or results thinking. Because the Olympic Games is a culmination of years of training and because there is intense interest in results by everybody – media, sport organizations, athletes and coaches – many athletes often struggle to stay focussed on performance objectives and the process, even more so than usual. Even if athletes have some understanding of the shift that occurs within them, they can find it hard to discipline their thinking back towards essential and more controllable performance issues.

ENJOY THE MOMENT

Last, but certainly not least, enjoy the moment. These are the Olympic Games and for a select few this is a once-in-a-lifetime experience! Don't forget to bask in the glory – the Olympic Games are a momentous occasion and wonderful accomplishment. You have worked hard to get to this point. This is a culmination of countless hours of dedication and commitment to excellence. Savour it; it is a form of reward for your accomplishments. Keep the newspaper clippings, keep the program, keep the ticket stubs and all the other little things that only come around every four years. This experience is yours – enjoy it

Remember that no matter what, nothing is ever perfect. Sound preparation will give you the best chance of success, but nothing is guaranteed – especially in sport. Prepare to the best of your abilities, manage the stressors as best you can, and trust yourself. When you look back on your life you will remember the journey – the experiences, the friendships, and the life lessons – enjoy it because it's your life!