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Sport psychology at the Olympics: The case of a Danish sailing crew in a head wind

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Performing your best at the Olympic Games is a unique and stressful challenge for all involved, including athletes, coaches, and sport psychology practitioners. This paper provides a descriptive account and personal reflections of a sport psychology intervention aimed at helping a sailing crew perform at the ultimate event. The paper describes the specific strategies the sport psychology practitioner used to help the two sailors prepare for, and perform at, the Olympics as well as to cope with their disappointment after the Games. While the preparation went smoothly, the crew experienced a significant head wind (metaphor for adversity) during the Olympics. The present case is an example of the scientist–practitioner. The intervention was based on a clear theory, the cognitive behavioural tradition, and came from an evidence-based perspective. After the Games, the intervention was evaluated methodically. Based on this evaluation (alongside several similar ones), the sport psychology team of Team Denmark has decided to assess the integration of mindfulness and acceptance-based approaches into service delivery and to include these perspectives in the team’s professional philosophy. Key components of such interventions include staying in the present moment, accepting the multitude of thoughts and feelings that arise without necessarily acting on them, and clarifying personal values alongside a commitment to act on these values. These processes are no less important for the sport psychology practitioner who is expected to remain calm and focused—and to never bend even in the strongest wind.

Keywords: Olympic Games; sailing; sport psychology service delivery; cognitive therapy in sport; mindfulness acceptance commitment approach
freedom to move, boredom in the village, stressed coaches and managers, being part of a multi-sport national team, selections, etc. all add to the pressure (Birrer et al., 2012; Greenleaf, Gould, & Dieffenbach, 2001; Wylleman, Reints, & Van Aken, 2012).

Also, for the sport psychology practitioner, the Olympic Games have a special lure. There is an acute shortage of credentials that allow access to the Olympic village and to the Olympic events, and distributing these credentials is a political as much as a practical process. International elite sport has been likened to a “global arms race” (Fletcher & Arnold, 2011) and the number of experts who support athlete performance is ever increasing (Heinilä, 1982). This means every country has to delicately balance the selection of Olympic officials and performance support staff (including medical doctors, physiotherapists, sport psychologists, physiologists, and others). Alongside the privileged status of being selected as part of the Olympic staff, working with athletes at their primary “time to shine” (Greenleaf et al., 2001) in a setting where “everything is a performance issue” (McCann, 2008), means that the sport psychology practitioner consults under considerable pressure (Pensgaard, 2008). For these reasons, consulting at the Olympic Games presents a unique challenge for the sport psychology practitioner.

Denmark is a small country (5.5 million people) with large ambitions in international sports. In 2012, Denmark won a total of nine Olympic medals, which is the best result since 1948. The 2012 medals were all won in sports where Olympic success is paramount and in which the athletes are less accustomed to intense media interest (badminton, rowing, sailing, track cycling, and shooting). Four medals were even won by Olympic debutants, which only underscores the importance of these athletes’ ability to perform in a uniquely stressful setting. As stated by McCann (2008): “This awareness, that the next performance is the most important thing the athlete has ever done in sport, raises intensity, uncovers hidden vulnerabilities, and puts all kinds of issues on the table” (p. 268).

Historically, sport psychology consultants in Denmark have not been an integrated part of the Olympic staff. However, after the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, a large-scale evaluation of the performance support system revealed that athletes wished for an increased focus on sport psychology support. Therefore, Team Denmark decided to enhance the quality and consistency of applied sport psychology services in the Danish elite sports by employing a permanent staff of sport psychology practitioners. The team began its work by formulating an overarching professional philosophy (Henriksen, Diment, & Hansen, 2011). This professional philosophy has been widely implemented in the Danish elite sports, which has led to a more unified service delivery across Denmark and to the fact that sport psychology services are demanded more than ever in Danish elite sports (Henriksen & Christensen, 2013). This has also led to an increased awareness of the potential contribution of sport psychology to Olympic success, which is directly visible by the fact that three sport psychology practitioners provided on-location support for the Danish 2012 Olympic team.

It is very important for an institution like Team Denmark that their experts work from theoretically and scientifically grounded principles. Therefore, the sport psychology team works from an eclectic approach that draws mainly on cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) principles (Alford & Beck, 1997), existential psychology (Nesti, 2004), and systems theory and ecological perspectives (Bateson, 1973; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Henriksen, Stambulova, & Roessler, 2011). This paper will present an intervention that has its starting point in a classic or second-wave cognitive behavioural approach (Gardner & Moore, 2006). It goes beyond the scope of this paper to describe such an approach in detail, but it is worth noting that a classic CBT approach in sport psychology: (a) is a short-term intervention approach, (b) builds on the idea that cognitions are major determinants of how we feel and act, and that psychological problems stem from faulty
thinking, making incorrect references, and failing to distinguish between fantasy and reality, (c) aims to change dysfunctional patterns of thought–emotion–behaviour interactions into more functional ones, and (d) devotes significant time for psycho-education and skill-training (Beck, 1995). Classical CBT approaches aim to teach athletes to control their internal states, for example, to engage in positive thinking and regulate arousal, in other words to deliberately enter their individual ideal performance state.

Recently, there have been criticisms of classical (second-wave) CBT approaches in sport psychology (Gardner & Moore, 2006, 2007). From an existential psychological perspective, it has been put forward that “…joy, elation and a sense of achievement go hand-in-hand with difficulties, defeat and failure” (Nesti, 2004 p. 7), and in a similar vein, research has shown that optimal psychological states are experienced very rarely (Ravizza, 2002). These ideas and observations alongside others have stimulated the introduction of third-wave cognitive behavioural approaches in sport psychology, such as acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) (Hayes, Strosahl, Bunting, Twohig, & Wilson, 2004) and mindfulness acceptance commitment (MAC) (Gardner & Moore, 2007). Researchers from these traditions highlight that thought suppression and control techniques can trigger a metacognitive scanning process (Purdon, 1999), and that excessive cognitive activity and task-irrelevant focus (self-focused attention) disrupt performance because functional performance demands task-focused attention. Gardner and Moore (2007) conclude:

… it is not the presence or absence of negative thoughts, physiological arousal, or emotions such as anxiety or anger that predicts performance outcomes; rather, it is the degree to which an individual performer can accept these experiences and remain attentionally and behaviourally engaged in the performance task (p. 16).

In an ACT or MAC perspective, we should therefore not help the athletes engage in the futile task of managing and controlling internal states but rather introduce an agenda of willingness to accept negative thoughts and emotions in pursuit of valued ends. While it goes beyond the scope of this paper to present third-wave cognitive approaches in any detail, it is worth mentioning three key aspects of such interventions: (a) teaching athletes to open up, to accept, and to be willing to experience the full range of thoughts and emotions that are a natural part of pursuing an elite sports career as they are of life itself; (b) teaching athletes to mindfully engage in the present moment, including task-focused attention; and (c) helping athletes formulate the values that they would like to guide how they live their life and manage their sport career, and help them engage in committed actions towards these values.

In this paper, I will provide a descriptive account of a sport psychology intervention aimed at helping a sailing crew perform at the biggest event in their career: the Olympic Games. The aim is neither to describe a specific sport psychology programme, nor to provide objective measures of the effect of such a programme. Rather, the aim is to present a detailed description as well as professional reflections on the delivery of sport psychology services in connection with the ultimate event. In this regard, the paper reflects a single case design with the potential to educate and enlighten but also lacking in control and rigour (Barker, McCarthy, Jones, & Moran, 2011). The paper is not an attempt at evaluation research but at evaluation of practice in an uncontrol-lable and naturalistic setting (Anderson, Miles, Mahoney, & Robinson, 2002). The writing style will include passages of a first-person perspective (Jones, 2002) and elements of creative fiction (Gilbourne & Richardson, 2006) since such accounts have the potential to “encourage readers to reflect on the effectiveness themselves … [and] illuminate aspects of practice that might be ‘hidden’ from the spotlight of (scientific) evaluation” (p. 326). The focus of the tale will be a two-person sailing crew and, more specifically, a sport psychology intervention aimed at
helping the two sailors prepare for the Games, perform during the Games, and cope after the Games.

The narrative has been constructed on the basis of several sources of “data”: (a) the athletes’ case record (case notes), (b) notes from the group supervision sessions in which members of the Team Denmark sport psychology team and a supervisor discussed several cases of service delivery at the Olympics, (c) the sailing crew’s post-Olympic evaluation, and (d) the sport psychology practitioners’ diaries from the Olympic Games. The case presentation will not cover the full extent of the sport psychology support the crew received in connection with the Olympics but focus on selected parts of the intervention.

Preparing for the Olympics

Sarah and Lynn have been sailing most of their lives. Leading up to the 2008 Beijing Games, they missed the qualification. They worked with the same sport psychologist for several years (the author), typically comprising periods of intense work (meetings every other week and presence during training and competition) interspersed by periods of little contact. At the world championships in December 2011, eight months before the Olympics, they performed well below their usual level and missed the qualification and it became very clear that the crew had an issue with performing under the intense pressure of important championships. With the coach and federation, we initiated a sport psychology project with a focus on “championship performance” and with a declared goal for the crew to perform at least as well during important championships as they would normally do during a less important event. More specifically, the crew had one last chance to qualify for the Olympics: the World Championships in May 2012.

Because CBT has a significant evidence base for the treatment of anxiety disorders, it was decided to intervene from a CBT perspective. Therefore, the project started with a cognitive analysis of thoughts, emotions, bodily sensations, and behaviours in anxiety-provoking situations. In a cognitive-behavioural perspective, performance anxiety is an instance of social anxiety (Beck, 2005), in the sense that athletes do not fear the bad performance itself but rather the negative evaluation they are likely to experience from their surroundings in case of a bad performance. A classic CBT approach for treating performance anxiety in sports will involve (in some form) the following elements: (a) mapping negative automatic thoughts and measuring the athletes’ beliefs about these thoughts, (b) investigating how these thoughts interlink with emotions and behaviour, (c) gathering data that confirm these thoughts, (d) gathering data that challenges these thoughts, (e) re-measuring the athletes’ beliefs about the anxiety-producing thoughts which will often have reduced drastically, and (f) formulating more rational beliefs/thoughts.

The two sailors had previously been trained in noticing thoughts and emotions as a first step for dealing with them and were good at it. After explaining to the sailors the nature of performance anxiety, I asked them to write down all the negative statements and remarks they believed people were likely to say about them if they were to miss the qualification for the Olympic Games in their second and last attempt. The sailors spent a few days noticing and noting and were surprised by the number of thoughts and globalised assumptions that were obviously detrimental to their performance. As an example, they wrote down that people were likely to say they were mentally weak, had gone about their training wrong, and never should have been financially supported. Following evidence-based recommendations, we gathered data to support or challenge these beliefs. Competitive sports can be a harsh environment and it was quite likely that people would indeed say these things. And no matter how many examples we found of successful athletes who once missed a qualification without being seen as mentally weak or losing financial support, the sailors still partly held on to their counterproductive beliefs. Therefore, in unison, we formulated answers to counter these thoughts (Table 1). Slowly their thinking became less
black-and-white, and belief in the new thoughts increased. As a by-product, the process came to include discussions about the values and commitment of the two sailors. We had lengthy discussions about the values they would like to have as guiding principles in their sport as well as in their lives in general. These discussions took on a philosophical and existential character. During ongoing evaluations, the sailors both expressed that they experienced a transformation into much more grounded athletes. Still we held on to the cognitive principles, and for the coming events, the athletes trained their ability to notice their automatic anxiety-producing thoughts and to replace them with more functional ones.

Part of the cognitive analysis involved looking at differences in thoughts, emotions, and behaviours between successful and less successful races. The sailors were no different than most athletes in the sense that success or lack thereof influenced the way they behaved towards each other. These differences in behaviour could not be attributed to any one athlete but were co-created unknowingly by the team. Therefore, a second strategy was inspired by systems theory regarding the idea that most phenomena must be considered complex systems that cannot be disassembled into parts without losing their central quality, which is their wholeness (Bateson, 1973).

On a training camp that included races against other international top-level crews, we held a meeting and discussed the sailors’ behavioural and communicative patterns meticulously during a number of races: one race at a time. We picked out the most and least successful parts of the races in a minute-by-minute fashion looking for patterns. The sailors were genuinely surprised that it was easy to distil distinct patterns. We did not look for starting points, causes, or who was to blame. Rather we looked for the ways in which each sailor would contribute to creating and/or maintaining a successful or less successful pattern. The results were astonishingly simple. In less successful races, Sarah would perhaps ask Lynn in subtle ways if everything was under control on her end (e.g. “what does the compass show?”). Lynn would unknowingly consider this as a sign of mistrust and be afraid Sarah was not focused on her own task. This led Lynn to devote attention to Sarah’s tasks (to help). This would backfire as Sarah thought Lynn was unfocused and attempted to keep an extra eye on Lynn’s tasks. In this way, their negative pattern was one of weak communication, mistrust, and not being adequately focused on one’s own task. The positive pattern, on the other hand, was one of trust in the other person’s

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thought</th>
<th>Rational answer</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Only a world championship medal or an Olympic participation would look</td>
<td>In a job interview we will be the ones to tell our own story—and we can easily tell a story of goal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>good on a curriculum vitae and would justify all our years of sailing in</td>
<td>directedness and dedication, which are things any employer would appreciate. Following high ambitions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the eyes of a future employer</td>
<td>(not reaching goals) is what makes me who I am</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If we do not succeed our whole careers will have been a waste of time</td>
<td>Our careers have not been a sacrifice—they have been a lifestyle we have chosen freely. We have</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>learned a lot through our sport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If we do not take a medal, it means we do not (and will never) have</td>
<td>Handling pressure is a skill that we can learn, and we are training to master it. Besides, not taking a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>top-performance mentality</td>
<td>medal is not necessarily a mental issue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If we do not succeed it means we have handled our training wrong and</td>
<td>Everything is easy in retrospect. We are not responsible for the federation’s policy. We were</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the financial support should have been given to another crew</td>
<td>supported because we worked hard and did our best—which is what can be expected of ambitious athletes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Examples of the sailors’ irrational anxiety-provoking thoughts and their rational responses.
observations, of daring to formulate observations in a clear language (e.g. “I see pressure to the right”), and keeping focused on one’s own task. The sailors saw this as a breakthrough. From this analysis, we described specific “positive actions” in which each sailor could engage to initiate and maintain a positive pattern.

In the months that followed, the two athletes practiced initiating positive communicative patterns and noticing and answering their disruptive and anxiety-producing thoughts. The sailors found that the ability to counter-argue anxiety-producing thoughts alongside a clear image of what they were striving for (their good patterns) increased their commitment and decreased their anxiety about the tasks ahead (the last chance to qualify). As a result of this (and of high-quality training and more), at the World Championships the crew not only qualified for the Olympics but also had their best result ever at a World Championship.

During the last months leading up to the Olympics, the crew focused on practicing the acquired skills continually. The sailors felt that knowing their optimal performance patterns improved their sailing and they wanted to work on this in more depth. We therefore agreed to look for specific actions that were involved in such patterns of optimal performance. To arrive at this end, the sailors interviewed each other about previous optimal performances and discussed the nature of their actions during the most successful parts of every training and races. Through a lengthy but also very enriching distillation process, we arrived at five “key value actions”. These behaviours were: “We dare to follow our first impulse”, “We make sailing simple”, “We focus on our own tasks”, “We fight for every inch”, and “We have positive communication”. Each of these key statements was described in a little more detail on a poster with a photo that illustrated the behaviour. These posters were now placed in their apartments, in their boat trailer, and in their hotel room when travelling.

The sailors often experienced anxiety when thinking about the up-coming Olympics and engaged in rumination about all the things that could go wrong. To help them feel more prepared and at ease, we made a list of the kinds of adversity they might encounter during the Olympics and a plan to handle such adversity. The plan consisted primarily of specific behaviours derived from their key valued behaviours described above. Examples are provided in Table 2.

Alongside the preparation of the Danish sailors for the upcoming event, the Danish Olympic Committee worked to set up the on-site support system. It was by no means a given that the sport psychology practitioners would receive credentials or opportunities to provide on-site support during the Olympics. Still, such decisions had a significant impact on the optimal organisation

Table 2. Excerpt from the two sailors’ adversity plan.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adversity scenarios</th>
<th>Why would this be problematic?</th>
<th>Solution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Another crew protests against us</td>
<td>We get stuck in thoughts about the past (the protest) for the remainder of the race and thus forget to focus on the task</td>
<td>We acknowledge the adversity verbally and remind each other of our key valued behaviours, particularly focusing on our own tasks and fighting for every inch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside top 20 after the first 2 races (out of 10)</td>
<td>We doubt our own abilities Focus on results instead of the task at hand (sailing fast) which makes us take excessive risks</td>
<td>We acknowledge the adversity verbally and remind ourselves that everything is still possible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We experience wind shifts we do not understand</td>
<td>Self-pity. We get stuck in past bad decisions. We start sailing hesitantly</td>
<td>We “start from scratch”. Focus on boat handling and sailing fast rather than tactical positioning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
of the remainder of the preparation, specifically whether we should prepare for a remote set-up (e.g. Skype) or a face-to-face set-up that allowed interactions immediately before and after racing. The final decision was made approximately two months before the onset of the Games.

In the month to follow, we developed an evaluation form with a few key points for each of the valued behaviours, and the sailors would evaluate every race and every training session according to how well they managed to engage in these behaviours and how it affected their sailing. During a training camp with international crews at the venue of the upcoming Games, the coach and sport psychology practitioner would plan and induce adversity into the training. This involved calling a false start, giving false information, changing training plans without prior notice, setting their starting time two seconds after that of their competitors, etc. The athletes would afterwards evaluate their ability to maintain on-task focus and to stay engaged in the valued behaviours despite adversity. In sum, when the crew left for the Olympics, they had high confidence and felt well prepared.

At the Olympics

As a compromise between few credentials and a large support staff, the psychological set-up for the sailors was as follows. In the week leading up to the onset of the Games (during which the athletes lived and trained in the village) and throughout the first week of the Games, the sport psychology practitioner lived in a hotel outside the Olympic sailing village in Weymouth and had a day pass that granted access to the village every day from 9 am to 9 pm. A sailing competition is organised as a series of races spread out over 5-7 days. When the first sailors finished racing after about a week and a coach thus no longer needed his credentials, the sport psychology practitioner took over these credentials, which granted full access to the Olympic village.

A plan for sport psychology service during the competition had been drafted prior to the Games for each athlete who requested support and in collaboration with the coaches. For Sarah and Lynn, the plan also involved evaluation meetings every day after racing where the coach would focus on technical and tactical aspects and the sport psychology practitioner would direct the sailors’ attention to how they managed to combat negative thoughts and stay committed to their positive communication patterns and to their valued actions. We had planned that each meeting should end by setting two process goals for the next day.

A few days before the first race we held a meeting. We took our time and introduced nothing new but simply went through the strategies that had proven successful for them so far, including their rational thoughts, their positive communication patterns, their key valued actions, and their adversity plan.

Sarah and Lynn started their races several days into the Games. At this point, most of the other Danish sailors were already half way through or had even finished their events and the atmosphere in the camp had been focused and intense for what felt like a long time. Although they found waiting difficult, Sarah and Lynn managed to maintain good daily routines including training and high-quality recovery. The evening before the first race, the sailors started to get nervous and contacted the sport psychology practitioner. In an informal talk over coffee, it became clear just how unfamiliar they found the situation. In their own view, in every race throughout their entire career, there had always been “the next event”. They had always wanted to achieve good results, but they had also seen every race as part of their long-term learning and development. Now they felt they had reached the end of their destination. The Olympics might well be their last race ever together, and only the results mattered. The sailors were caught in dysfunctional thinking such as black-and-white thinking (everything is different now), and prediction (long-term focus used to give us ease and clarity, and with a short-term focus we will not be able to perform). After discussing how having such thoughts was both understandable and normal, we made an attempt to revise the thoughts following the classic CBT approach (as
presented above), to which they were accustomed including: measuring the sailors’ belief in their anxiety-producing thoughts, investigating how these thoughts interlink with emotions and behaviour, gathering data that confirm and challenge these thoughts, and formulating more rational thoughts. The sailors agreed that it was not so much the long-term focus but rather the task orientation that had previously supported their performance. This realisation only supported their goal of focusing on the key value actions.

During the first days of racing, the girls had trouble finding a good rhythm. Outside of sailing, they did everything right (e.g. setting goals, evaluating, prioritising high-quality recovery, turning off Facebook), but on the sailing course things went less smoothly. They found it hard to stick to the plan. Based on months of observations and training in the area and on advice from other Danish sailors, their strategy involved taking the risk of sailing almost to the edge of the course. Yet, they often ended up sailing defensively and up the centre of the course. They were quick to argue that it is not always possible to choose your route freely as you may be forced into a specific direction by other boats. When they deviated from the plan, they found it hard to engage in their key value actions and to maintain control over internal states (thoughts and feelings). The lack of success in combination with an outspoken focus on results from the surroundings (e.g. staff and media) increased their anxiety and unease.

A truly difficult challenge for sport psychology practitioners during championships and particularly big events is to remain calm and mindful of their own behaviour. When everybody else (media, family, the athletes, and often the staff) get swept away by the importance of results, it is even more important for the sport psychology practitioner to maintain focus on the task and take an interest not only in the athletes’ results but also in their performance and well-being. The importance of this challenge is only accentuated when the results do not come. As so beautifully described by Williams and Andersen (2012), it is difficult to remain therapeutic and mindful when every fibre in your body desperately urges to fix it. It is a key challenge for the sport psychology practitioner in such situations not to look for new and magic solutions but instead to be calm and to sit with his or her inner distress while taking a real interest in the athletes not only as athletes but also as whole persons.

This challenge is accentuated when taking into account the multitude of issues a sport psychology consultant is faced with during the Olympics beyond the planned interventions. Every day, unexpected events would occur and often the sport psychology practitioner is seen as the one with the skills and the time to take care of such things. As an illustration of the multitude of unplanned issues a sport psychology practitioner is expected to deal with, Table 3 represents a list of issues that arose during the Games. The list is not limited to the sailing team but is derived from the diaries of the three Danish practitioners who were present at the Olympics.

After five days of racing, it was clear that the crew would not make it to the final, which changed the focus of the intervention. The aim was now to help them deal with the disappointment and to bounce back. This work involved three main strategies. First, their experience was normalised. Many sailors before them have had a difficult first Olympics and being disappointed is a normal reaction. Second, we agreed on specific actions to minimise the risk of becoming depressed (e.g. maintain circadian rhythm, keep activity levels high, join in cheering for teammates). Third, we addressed the “lie of the Olympics” (that the Olympics is always a unique and positive experience and the only thing that really counts in an athlete’s career). Despite their disappointment, the sailors managed to be happy on behalf of those teammates who won medals and enjoy the remaining days in the village in London.

After the Olympics

Just as winning the ultimate event can ultimately change your life, failing at the ultimate event may cause great disappointment and potentially even depression. With this in mind, the Team
Denmark sport psychology team included four questions about the athletes’ current well-being in the general evaluation of the Olympics that was undertaken by the National Olympic Committee shortly after the Olympics. The last of these questions was: “Do you wish to be contacted by a sport psychologist who can help you bounce back to everyday life?” Further, the team contacted all national coaches, told them that post-Olympic blues is a normal reaction, and asked them to contact the sport psychology team in case they thought an athlete could use help. Only a few athletes took up the offer, but each of these athletes expressed gratitude that “the system” still took an interest in their well-being after the event was over even though they failed to reach the goals.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Examples of issues</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Family</strong></td>
<td>Family members call the athlete and ask them to pull some strings and get tickets. The athlete is unable to do so and has a guilty conscience. A team sport athlete has a visit from a girlfriend and the other team members find it disruptive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Media</strong></td>
<td>Journalists from a media project pressure an athlete to tweet more often. Journalists do not respect the athletes’ rhythm but ask the athletes to be available at specific time slots. The athletes find it hard to prioritise. A journalist has written negatively about a team’s mentality and the sport psychologist is asked to explain to the journalist about the team values. An athlete is frustrated that he cannot wait to meet the press until he is ready.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Life in the Olympic Village</strong></td>
<td>An athlete finds it hard to perform towards the end of the Games as some athletes celebrate and others are leaving. An athlete is bored, has no privacy, and is disappointed already before his competition begins. An athlete’s routines were planned meticulously and now she cannot follow them. An athlete is disappointed she cannot attend the opening ceremony. She knew this in advance but is still overwhelmed by disappointment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Competition, plans, and goals</strong></td>
<td>An athlete secretly has a goal that is more ambitious than the official one and finds it hard to “lie” to the media. An athlete over-performs during the qualifying rounds and feels too satisfied. As the competition begins, an athlete starts to think he must over-perform just to reach the final. An athlete has a really bad start and needs help to refocus. A long and intensive protest situation is won. The athletes have a hard time getting their focus back on their game. An athlete cannot sleep days in advance of the final.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Coach support</strong></td>
<td>A coach is disappointed in an athlete’s performance which leads to serious irrational self-blame. A coach spends considerable energy to avoid losing financial support after a disappointing performance from an athlete. It drains the staff. A coach has to leave and another takes over. The two are uncertain how to handle possible inquiries from the press. Some athletes are very preoccupied with following the competitors’ results. A coach is very uncertain and asks for advice on how to handle this.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Team issues</strong></td>
<td>An Olympic debutant is called to London to replace an injured teammate. The athlete is unsure what is expected. Athletes on a team are in conflict because some athletes were given more tickets for family members than others. A key player in a team sport is injured. The rest of the team become insecure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Private issues</strong></td>
<td>An athlete receives a letter of rejection for his preferred education during the Games. An athlete falls in love in the middle of the Games.</td>
</tr>
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</table>
One of the athletes who had trouble adjusting to life after the Olympics was Lynn. This became clear when we evaluated the sport psychology project about one month after the Games. Unlike Sarah who was still annoyed about the outcome but also fully engaged in university studies, Lynn suffered from a case of post-Olympic blues. She felt she was in a void now that the ultimate event was over and because the crew had decided to take a break from sailing. She experienced a lack of energy and initiative, and she found it hard to fully engage in school and other activities. She had been looking forward to finally having time to just relax, but found that relaxing did not give her the positive feelings she had expected.

Over a few weeks, we addressed Lynn’s issues in three ways. First, Lynn was provided with specific action guidelines to minimise the risk of developing clinical depression (e.g. maintain circadian rhythm and activity level, initiate a new project). Second, although Lynn now understood why they had performed poorly, she still had trouble accepting their performance. This inspired us to discuss, at a more existential level, the basic human issue of forgiving oneself and of self-compassion. We discussed how it is both understandable and normal to find it hard to bounce back after receiving a lower than expected result at a very important championship. Lynn talked to other athletes who had suffered similar experiences. Finally, we listed specific worries that needed to be addressed (should we sell the boat?) and worries that were counterproductive to address (should we have trained differently?), and we discussed strategies to distinguish between the two. A fourth step would have been registering and nuancing specific depressing thoughts, but Lynn recovered after only a few sessions before we got to this point.

Discussion and conclusions

With two medals and many “personal bests”, the Danish sailing team overall performed above expectations and there were successful stories to tell. However, this paper recounts the story of two sailors who were disappointed and lived up neither to their own expectations nor to the set goals. Working with athletes who do not succeed can leave a sport psychology practitioner in doubt about his or her own performance. Although Sarah and Lynn were disappointed with their result, they were much less nervous, achieved a markedly better result, and handled adversity better than at the world championships only eight months earlier, despite the fact that the Olympics were a much more difficult arena in which to perform. This only illustrates the difficulty of evaluating the effectiveness of sport psychology interventions and how such difficulty can stimulate practitioners to get caught up in dysfunctional thinking (e.g. overly positive or negative) about their own performance, much like the athletes.

After the Olympics, the sport psychology team engaged in thorough evaluations and discussions of individual cases and intervention methods. While self-reflections are critical to the success of the sport psychology practitioner, these reflections must be combined with discussions with colleagues (Cogan, Flowers, Haberl, McCann, & Borlabi, 2012). In accordance with the team’s formulated professional philosophy (Henriksen et al., 2011) many interventions involved cognitive analysis, the recording of automatic irrational and anxiety-provoking thoughts, and the formulation of more realistic and rational responses to these thoughts. While some athletes reported to have found this extremely helpful, others still found themselves unprepared for the thoughts that arose at the Olympics. As described, the day before starting the races, Sarah and Lynn got caught in anxiety-provoking thoughts for which they were unprepared. Dysfunctional thoughts included that this was their final race, which put everything in a new perspective, and that for this reason they would not be able to remain calm and focused. Somehow the massive importance and impressive set-up stimulated thoughts they did not expect. Some Danish athletes reported that they managed to apply the cognitive methods to thoughts they were unprepared for whereas other athletes reported an increase in nervousness because they felt they had prepared for
the wrong scenarios. For some athletes, like Sarah and Lynn, this led to a highly increased cognitive activity and a battle to manage and control their internal states (thoughts and feelings) in order to be able to perform.

These observations correspond well with recent criticisms of second-wave CBT approaches in sport psychology (Gardner & Moore, 2006, 2007), emphasising that thought control techniques can trigger a metacognitive scanning process (Purdon, 1999), which can be disruptive for performance. Whereas a classic CBT approach will aim to help the athlete change the content of thoughts to make them more realistic and less dysfunctional, an ACT intervention will aim at changing the process of how the client’s relates to the thoughts:

Clinically we want to teach clients to see thoughts as thoughts, feelings as feelings, memories as memories, and physical sensations as physical sensations. None of these private events are inherently toxic to human welfare when experienced for what they are. Their toxicity derives from seeing them as harmful, unhealthy, bad experiences that are what they claim to be, and thus need to be controlled and eliminated (Hayes et al., 2004 p. 8).

In the sport psychology team’s evaluation of the Sarah and Lynn case, a hypothesis was formulated that an ACT or MAC approach might have suited the crew better. While the two sailors expressed the view that they benefited substantially from formulating what we termed “key valued actions” (corresponds to values and committed action), the formulation of rational responses to automatic thoughts backfired and increased cognitive activity, especially when they were surprised by the thoughts that emerged during the Games. During the post-Olympic evaluation, Sarah explained: “While competing, I often got caught up in thinking about results, potential consequences of results, and previous races. I see now that I wasn’t really focused and present”. This remark suggests that if she is to compete again, present moment mindfulness training might be beneficial for her.

The evaluation of several specific interventions conducted at the Olympics has given rise to a number of discussions within the sport psychology team. While no solid evidence to determine the effects of the interventions is available, the team members’ reflections concur as regards the fact that many athletes experience the Olympics as an event that is unlike anything else and therefore difficult to prepare for, and that some athletes did not manage to control their thoughts and feelings. In line with the scientist–practitioner model (Lane & Corrie, 2006) this evaluation has stimulated the team to develop their professional approach, to include ACT and MAC approaches more deliberately in the service delivery, and to engage in further education and training in these approaches. It is important to state that we have no evidence for the efficacy of these approaches in preparing athletes for the Olympic Games and that we need to test and evaluate them before we apply them to Olympic preparation.

**Sport psychology at the Olympics**

A second point of discussion regards the role of sport psychology during the Olympics. Although the members of the sport psychology team are looking for avenues to optimise service (as reflected in this paper), the overall Danish evaluation of London 2012 by coaches and athletes highlighted that sport psychology services were considered to have made an important contribution during the events. The Olympics are a magnifying glass for the multitude of emotions and issues that arise during any important event. Besides all the planned interventions, a multitude of unexpected events and issues arise (Table 3) that often result in boundary blurring (Williams & Andersen, 2012), and require skilled interventions to prevent such inevitable problems from becoming critical (McCann, 2008). We also found that the athletes who were already or had previously been involved with one of the sport psychology practitioners were confident and
comfortable in contacting a practitioner even with minor issues. On the other hand, athletes who had no prior experience with sport psychology and did not know the practitioners were much less inclined to do so. This points to the importance of inviting all the athletes who qualify (and who are not already receiving services) to a one-on-one meeting with the sport psychology practitioner during which the athlete can get to know the practitioner and learn a little about the kind of services the practitioner can provide during the Olympics.

Conclusion

This paper presents a sport psychology intervention with a sailing crew aimed at helping the sailors prepare for, perform at, and bounce back after the ultimate challenge of their career; the Olympic Games. Despite systematic and thorough preparations, the athletes experienced a significant “head wind” during the Games and did not reach their set goals. The sport psychology practitioner’s own reflections on the case alongside discussions with fellow practitioners of similar cases have led the Danish sport psychology team to expand their intervention services to include acceptance and mindfulness-based approaches. The efficacy of this new initiative remains to be determined.

Notes

1. It goes beyond this paper to map out the on-going discussion about differences and similarities between traditional and acceptance-based cognitive therapy (Hayes, 2008; Hofmann & Asmundson, 2008).
2. These are not their real names. Throughout the text, the athletes have been anonymised and details in their tale have been altered. The athletes have read and approved the paper knowing that a few people with special knowledge might recognise them.

References


