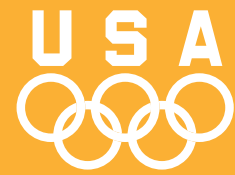


MIND GAMES

60-SECOND SUMMARY

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OLYMPIC COACH

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ON THE COVER

Clockwise:

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Giant Slalom Skier- Ralph Green (photo by Lars Baron/Getty Images)
Individual Pursuit Cyclist- Paul Martin (photo by Brian Bahr/Getty Images)
Wheelchair Tennis player- Sharon Clark (photo by Tom Shaw/Getty Images)
Wheelchair Rugby athlete- Brenet Popen (photo by Milos Bicanski/Getty Images)

Message from the
USOC's
CHIEF OF SPORTS
PERFORMANCE
by
STEVE ROUSH

"Probably the only sustainable competitive advantage you have is the ability to learn faster than the opposition" Arie De Geuss

Elite level coaches are constantly looking for ways to improve their coaching, tips that will assist them in conveying information to their athletes or methods to "pull more" out of their athletes. If you have the opportunity to listen to a group of elite coaches discussing their sports, as we did recently with some of the country's top endurance coaches, you will be amazed at the breadth of knowledge and the variety of areas that are discussed.

The questioning of "traditions" and/or paradigms of training is important to the understanding of sport and the improvement of performance. I am not suggesting that one throws out the "baby and the bath water", but asking — is what I am doing the best way to accomplish an improvement in performance is a crucial.

Paradigms can change and sometimes very quickly. For example, two athletes (Dick Fosbury and Debbie Brill) changed the technique of the High Jump in track and field. It is an anomaly for an athlete to use a technique that faces the bar (which was the standard until 1968) as almost every athlete now goes over the bar backwards.

What are some of the traditionally training methods in your sport? Do you ever wonder why you do certain things in training? Was it the way you were coached or even they way your coach was coached? As Tony Robbins said, "If you do what you've always done, you'll get-- what you've always got."

Coaching is coaching is coaching to paraphrase Gertrude Stein. Whether you are coaching abled-bodied athletes, disabled athletes, elite athletes or beginning athletes, coaching is a rather consistent skill with a consistent objective. How can I help this athlete(s) to become better?

This issue of Olympic Coach has a focus on coaching Paralympic athletes. There maybe unique challenges with working with Paralympic athletes, but it is not in the coaching of them.

We ask Keith Blase, coach of the Bronze medal Sled Hockey team, to talk about the training and development of that team. Peter Haberl, USOC Sport Psychologist, worked with Sled Hockey and he has provided his insight. April Holmes talks about being an elite level athlete.

This is just a snapshot of Paralympics. The issue is meant to stimulate your thoughts about working with all types of athletes. After all, coaching is coaching and athlete dreams do come true.

You will also find a report on Beijing preparation. Three issues are of concern for those training athletes for 2008: environmental issues, food and transportation. Sean McCann writes of the importance of being a credible coach and we finish off the issue with an overview of "perceptual expertise".



A ROAD MAP TO TORINO

OUR PARALYMPIC JOURNEY

by Keith Blase,
2006 Paralympic Head Coach for Sledge Hockey

Ice Sledge Hockey is the Paralympic version of Ice Hockey and, since its debut in the Paralympic program in the Lillehammer 1994 Paralympics; it is quickly becoming one of the biggest attractions for spectators at the Paralympic Winter Games. It is fast-paced, highly physical and played by male athletes with a physical disability in the lower part of the body.

Ice Sledge Hockey is practiced by athletes in about 10 countries and is governed by the IPC through the International Paralympic Ice Hockey Committee. It follows the rules of the International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF) with a few modifications. Instead of skates, players use two-blade sledges that allow the puck to pass beneath. They also have two sticks with a spike-end for pushing and a blade-end for shooting.

In May of 2003, I was offered an opportunity by the US Paralympics, a division of the USOC, to become the Head Coach for the U.S. Sled Hockey National Team program. I had limited knowledge of Sled Hockey and no previous experience working with disabled athletes, but extensive experience on the “able bodied” side with USA Hockey. The opportunity to coach disabled athletes at the “elite level” was both appealing yet at the same time a bit unsettling.

As I'm sure we have all experienced in our daily lives, there is an uncertainty as to how to best interact with members of the disabled community, so it was important for me to educate myself as best I could. This meant visiting with and getting to know our veteran athletes, as well as talking to others who had previous experience in coaching disabled sports. I also spent considerable time reviewing video of the 2002 Paralympic Winter Games in Salt Lake City, where the team won the Gold Medal. In the end, however, it was up to me to find a level of comfort with the athletes and the sport. I was determined to let my previous coaching experience define our approach to preparing our athletes and staff for competition rather than be guided by “fears” of uncertainty that might arise out of not knowing the sport or the athletes - in other words, it was still the game of hockey; played on ice by gifted, determined and dedicated athletes - and we would approach the development of the athletes and the TEAM the same way I had previously done!

As the Head Coach, I felt it was my primary responsibility and number one priority to establish the “VISION” and set the “VALUES” for the program as we moved forward with our ultimate goal being to bring home another Gold Medal in 2006!

It's difficult to provide an overview of our approach to developing our three year plan without at least briefly mentioning some of the challenges we faced upon arriving on the scene in 2003. We had a number of veteran players making a decision to leave the program. In addition to that, with the transition of the program to governance by the U.S. Paralympics, a year without a National Team program had passed. These two factors shaped many of the decisions that were made with respect to the program format and our plan leading up to 2006.

DEFINING OUR APPROACH / STRATEGY

Probably the most important first step was to learn about our athlete pool and the “culture” of our sport which I believe to be closely integrated. The athletes that have been a part of this sport over the past decade or more have helped to shape the sports growth and define its “culture”. It was important to learn as much about them individually and collectively as possible in order to determine how the sport had evolved and the “politics” that existed. We can talk about eliminating the politics from sports all we want, but the existence of “politics” is a reality (particularly in a sport such as sled hockey which had never been governed by a “true NGB”). I believe that it is important for the coach to understand the politics, if they are to be successful in the long term. This process was also critical to identifying the needs of the athletes and the program.

From a player personnel perspective, we quickly determined that the words “character” and “TEAM” would define our program over the next three years and help to guide our decisions. From a technical and tactical standpoint, we would learn the sport in order



to identify its subtle differences, but we would approach our team development as we would any ice hockey national team program.

Finally, with the governance and support of U.S. Paralympics, we would establish a sense of “professionalism” that would drive and guide everything we did from staffing the program, to travel, and to providing (and/or seeking to develop new types) appropriate equipment and clothing for all participants.

ESTABLISHING A PLAN

Establishing a plan is an important first step for any successful coach and program - this experience was no different. As with any plan, I had identified a number of short term and long term objectives that I felt were critical to our success in Torino. Our focus would be to provide the athletes with the “tools” necessary for them to be successful.

Having learned as much as possible about the sport; its athletes and its “culture” I began to identify a number of important **“short term” goals and objectives:**

1. Bring on board two Assistant Coaches that would not only compliment my coaching style and skills, but that also possessed the expertise in skill development that I knew would be so important as we brought new young players into the program. We would then define the roles that each coach would play in the overall preparation plan.
2. In order to supplement the “core coaching staff”, we would bring on “coaching specialists” that would help our overall development in the areas of Strength and Conditioning, Sports Psychology, and Goaltending. It is important to note that these additional coaches played just as important a role in the program as the Head Coach and Assistant Coaches, however, they were with us for training only — not competition.
3. In order to provide adequate training opportunities and program continuity we needed a “Home Base” — the Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs became that base of operations - it afforded us access to all the facilities we needed from the ice to the weight room and was home to U.S. Paralympics and the USOC.
4. Since “teaching” was such an important part of our “vision” for the future success of the program, we developed a “Team Manual” that was distributed in a notebook to each player and included important information on the elements of skill development (on and off the ice), team concepts and our strength and conditioning program. As our USOC Sports Psychologist, Peter Haberl, met with our team each month he provided additional material and exercises to be added to each player’s notebook.
5. In order to secure the future growth and success of our program, it became clear that an important element for success needed to be the creation of an “Under 20 Select Team” that would serve as a “feeder” program for the National Team for years to come. With the help of USA Hockey, such a program was created as the developmental “foundation” for the future.

Once our coaching staff was in place we began to focus our attention on the development of our **Long Range Plan and our Goals and Objectives**. We began by mapping out a three year schedule that included annual tryouts; monthly training camps and competition against other nations.

1. Establishing our monthly training camp schedule and teaching the athletes “how to practice and train” was an important initial step since it was clear that they had not participated in “hockey practices” as we knew them to be. Our monthly training camp format was typically an arrival on Wednesday night and departure on Sunday morning with six on - ice practices; several off - ice sessions for strength training and / or physical testing; sport psychology sessions and / or team meetings for the purpose of learning team tactics or concepts.
2. In the early phases of our plan, we focused on Skill Development. We had identified during our early review of game tapes and initial tryouts, a number of “core competencies” that we believed needed to be improved upon if we were going to compete successfully against the best teams in the world. They included but were not limited to improving: skating speed and sharp turning; becoming ambidextrous or developing puck skills such as stick-handling, shooting and protecting the puck with either hand.
3. Every Training Camp had a “theme”. As coaches, we divided the responsibilities for each practice session into segments that each of us was responsible for. This helped to insure that every practice remained fresh and included the presentation of new drills to teach the skills and team tactics. Our approach also allowed us to adjust from practice to practice and camp to camp as we identified areas that needed concentration.
4. As we raised the skill level of our athletes, we would phase in the “team tactics” and game concepts that our players needed to learn — we referred to this as teaching “Game Understanding”. I am not sure if this is a problem with many disabled sports, but with Sled Hockey we found that most of our athletes had no prior participation in the able bodied sport of ice hockey before becoming disabled. This meant teaching them not only the skills of the sport but the “Game” as well. Over the three year period, we would transition our teaching of the fundamental skills as individual components to skills within the tactics of the game.
5. With respect to our competition schedule, our philosophy was simple — if you want to be the best you must play the best, so we identified the countries that challenged us to be the best and found or created opportunities to compete against them. Each year our planned schedule underwent revisions and updates but our philosophical approach remained the same. One of the interesting dynamics we discovered was apprehension among some of the athletes with respect to this approach — we found that some would have preferred a “feel good” approach — playing lesser competition and winning more - as opposed to playing stronger competition in order to raise our overall level of play.
6. As with most Paralympic Sports, our athletes are part time athletes. They go to school, hold down full time jobs and have

families. Understanding this and having limited training and competition opportunities with them as a team, we needed to place a priority on the need for training on their own by providing them with the necessary “tools” for them to be successful. Some of the things we did for them included providing them with an off-ice strength and conditioning program and staff assistance to manage it. We also provided them with “stickhandling balls” and “weighted pucks” for them to improve their puck skills off the ice. We then, with the help of the USOC Strength and Conditioning staff, monitored progress and results through a battery of tests that were administered periodically over the course of the three year program. Because of its importance, this is an area that will require additional attention in the future.

7. Because of some of the inappropriate “team dynamics” that had plagued previous teams, we placed a high importance on finding “character players” that would compliment each other and create a positive team dynamic. In order to further meet this objective we made Peter Haberl of the USOC Sports Psychology department an important member of our staff and with his on-going classes and mentoring he provided invaluable support in creating a positive environment for our team to grow.

Part of that challenge involved the application of the age old coaching principle — “equal vs. fair”. Because of the age diversity we couldn’t always be equal in our treatment of players and the application of rules, but we tried to be fair.

A PERIOD OF TRANSITION

The period from 2003 through the Paralympic Winter Games in March of 2006 can best be described as a “period of transition” for the US Sled Hockey program. The program underwent a series of important changes, but the biggest and most noticeable was the transformation from “older” to “younger” athletes. By the time we competed at the 2006 Paralympic Games in Torino, nine of our 15 players were new to the program and eight of the nine were under the age of 20.

The age difference posed many challenges for our coaching staff. The most significant was in the area of communication. Our team had players from the age of 15 to 50 years of age, so the diversity of needs, levels of trust and responsibility, rules & rules enforcement, learning styles and the techniques that we needed to utilize posed many different and exciting challenges. Our ability as coaches to communicate or demonstrate this and for the athletes to understand it was always a topic of discussion.

Part of that challenge involved the application of the age old coaching principle — “equal vs. fair”. Because of the age diversity we couldn’t always be equal in our treatment of players and the application of rules, but we tried to be fair. One example that stands out is the way we pushed our younger players versus the older players - we indeed had a double standard. Why, because we knew that if we were going to be successful it was up to us to raise the level of play for our younger players — they were the key — and we needed to push them to excel.

In addition to the challenges though, it was also exciting to watch the personal growth and development of these players as “young adults” and it is exciting to think of what the future holds for each of them individually as well as collectively.

PREPARING FOR THE PARALYMPIC EXPERIENCE

As a coaching staff, we all had experience at various levels of International competition including the Olympic Games, so we felt it was important to “tap those lessons learned” in preparing our team for Torino. So, before arriving in Torino, our staff developed a detailed plan that was designed to consider all aspects of our pre-preparation and competition.

We carefully considered our travel plans, training sessions and “practice games”, tapering prior to our first competition, our use of video, pre-scouting process and preparation for each opponent, allocation of “free time” and sightseeing, allocation of time for “family and friends”, meal schedules, identifying potential distractions and most importantly - time for sessions focused on “mental preparation” and dealing with the “stress factor” at the Games.

We arrived in Torino seven days prior to our first competition. We did this for a number of important reasons. We wanted to:

- Get physically acclimated before our competition began.
- Get accustomed to the Paralympic village life and our sport venue.
- Test the local transportation system for potential issues.
- Have several days of quality training prior to the start of competition.
- Play several tune-up matches against teams which we had not had the opportunity to play since the World Championships in 2004 and were in our “pool / bracket.”
- Provide for final opportunities to prepare mentally for the Games.

As coaches, we felt that we had a good plan; had communicated it effectively and executed it properly during the three years leading up to Torino. We also felt that we had done a very good job of preparing the athletes for the psychological and emotional elements of the Games. But, that’s the beauty of sports and coaching - you just never know until you “play the game.”

We began the competition the day after the Opening Ceremonies and played Germany, a team we had never lost to and had beaten a month earlier by the score of 9 to 1. Unfortunately, our youth; the euphoria of the Opening Ceremonies; a touch of “complacency” and a few “bad bounces” led to a 2 to 1 opening game loss for us — this was a hole we had to dig ourselves out of if we were going to move on to the Medal Round.

Fortunately, we rebounded well with important victories over Japan and Sweden that advanced us into the Medal Round as the second seed - although disappointed that we were not going in as the number one seed from our bracket, we knew in advance of the competition that we would need to beat both Canada and Norway in the other bracket to win the Gold Medal, so we didn't care which team we faced first. We had competed successfully against both in our lead up to the Games. We drew Norway in our semi-final match and lost a great game by the score of four to two setting up a rematch against Germany for the Bronze Medal.

It may sound strange but playing for a Bronze Medal can be a difficult test for a team - having to fight off the disappointment of not being able to achieve your goal of a Gold Medal can sometimes be devastating - it was a real challenge for us, particularly since we were the defending Gold Medalist from 2002 and had such a young team that had no previous experience in situations like this. Character prevailed however and we beat Germany in a tough game for the Bronze Medal.

We did a lot of things right in preparing our team, but there was just no way to predict how our players would respond when the puck was dropped - in the end we were extremely proud of their accomplishments!

LESSONS LEARNED

As with any coaching experience, it is important to take a step back and reflect upon the challenges you faced and the lessons you learned during your journey. Although I won't deal with the specific nature of the lessons we learned, I want to touch upon several from a general standpoint in the hope that all coaches may take note.

- Communication is a key element for success. There will always be a need to strike a balance between too much information and

input versus not enough, but it is important to allow the athletes an opportunity to be involved in the planning and decision making process if you want their eventual "buy in" to your strategic plan. The extent to which you involve them is somewhat a function of the age of your leaders on the team or the age of your individual athletes.

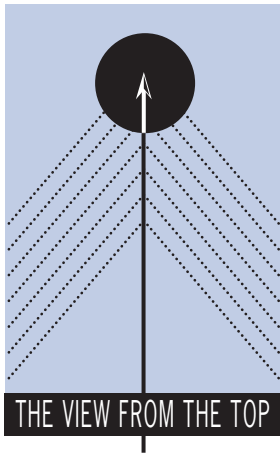
- Know your athletes and "tune into" their individual needs - specifically in terms of the way in which they each learn best. This is of particular importance when you have a diverse age group like we did.
- The application of the "Equal vs. Fair" principle
- Be organized, consistent and detail oriented in your plan, particularly your practices and game / competition preparation, if you want to earn the respect of your athletes. Once you have a solid plan it is always easy to make the necessary adjustments.
- Create a FUN learning environment and be positive!

In the end, this three year journey was a tremendous experience for our entire staff and we are proud of our many accomplishments:

- The establishment of an "Under 20 Select Team" that will serve as the foundation of our programs for years to come.
- The implementation of a "Professional" approach to the National Team program.
- The first ever Medal (SILVER) at an IPC World Championships in 2004
- The first back to back Medals (GOLD & BRONZE) at the Paralympic Winter Games in 2002 and 2006.
- Ten out of 15 returning players - eight of whom are under the age of 20.

In the end, I believe that if you can safely say that the program is better today than when you started, that should be the most important measure of success!





The View From the Top: April Holmes

April Holmes is one of the top female U.S. Paralympians in the sport of track and field. She won a bronze medal in the women's long jump as well as setting two new World records in her classification in the 100 meters (12.98 seconds), 200 meters (27.20 seconds) and 400 meters (63.85). In the Paralympic Games, April has to compete in a combined classification (due to the number of participants) which is mostly composed of arm amputees, which puts her at a disadvantage. An extremely busy athlete, speaker and director of the April Holmes Foundation (developed to promote more opportunities for individuals with physical and developmental disabilities), we were able to provide us with a snapshot of what it is like being a Paralympian.

TELL US A LITTLE ABOUT YOUR SELF AND YOUR COMPETITIVE HISTORY.

I have been participating in track & field since I was five. My mom firmly believes in the idea of keeping a child busy and their mind occupied and they will stay out of trouble. Therefore, I was in everything from track to basketball to piano to ballet classes. Luckily for me I ended up being good in the sports, because I

hated piano lessons and don't know what I would have done if I had to keep playing.

My uncle started a track club in Camden City, so I was able to learn the nuances of track, meet new people, and travel all over the country at a young age. My talents and efforts were instrumental in getting me a full track scholarship to Norfolk State University in Norfolk, VA. During which time I achieved All-American and All-CIAA honors numerous times. My coach and mentor, LaVerne Sweat, helped prepare me for life after college by pushing education as well as athletics.

After graduating from NSU, I successfully landed a job and settled into the workforce. Five years later, I was in a train accident which resulted in the amputation of my left leg below the knee. I was very fortunate to have a doctor that knew about the Paralympics and he felt it his duty to introduce me to the next phase in my life which was Paralympic track & field. After four years of competition, I hold the 100, 200, & 400 meter world records. I also just became the first woman signed to the Jordan Brand so that has enabled me to train full-time instead of trying to work and train. The road here has not been easy but I have managed to put it together when it comes time for competition.



WHY DID YOU CHOOSE TRACK AND FIELD?

Track & Field was more like a process of elimination. The sport has provided me so many things and opportunities that I didn't get from other activities. It was more challenging and physical than ballet or piano. It allowed me to be out in the sun and meet new people.

WHAT IS A TYPICAL DAY LIKE FOR YOU?

I usually wake up to the tune of my cell phone going off as the start of the millions of phone calls and text messages I get during the day. Then after grabbing a quick bite to eat I call my coach, Al Joyner, and head to the track for the workout. Practice usually lasts for about two hours on the track, and depending on the day of the week it also includes some extra drills or weight training.

The day does not seem to run quite right unless I take a nap, so I try my hardest to make sure I get one. The evening time is reserved as April time where I try to have a good dinner, listen to some music, take a bath, and talk to my mom, guy friend, and best friend. Before going off to bed I read some Biblical scripture then pray.

DOES YOUR DISABILITY LIMIT YOU IN TRAINING?

The only time I have known my disability to limit my training is if I am having mechanical issues or skin irritations. Otherwise I prefer to train with able bodied athletes because technically and mechanically my form must mirror that of an able bodied athlete instead of running like I have a prosthesis. I have been afforded the opportunity to train alongside Olympians who push me to run faster and train better.

AS YOU SEE IT, ARE THERE ANY SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCES BETWEEN BEING AN ABLED ATHLETE V. A DISABLED ATHLETE?

There is and should not be a significant difference. When we are finished working out, they change their shoes, I change out my leg. The only other thing is time; however, technological advances are aiding in the advancement of prosthetic components.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO A COACH WHO MAY BE CONSIDERING WORKING WITH DISABLED ATHLETES?

Train them alongside and treat them equal to your able bodied athletes.



Sport Psychology and Paralympic athletes — an experiential perspective

by Dr. Peter Haberl, USOC Sport Psychologist

The USOC Sport Psychology Department provides direct, applied services to US Olympic and Paralympic Teams and athletes. While there are a lot of scholarly articles available that address service provision to Olympic Teams and athletes, little has been written on this topic for Paralympians. Thus, this present article, in an attempt to begin to address this dearth of information, is offering some reflections on working with individual Paralympians (2004 and 2006 Paralympic Games) and a Paralympic Team sport (2006 Paralympic Games) from a sport psychology perspective.

A famous dictum in personality psychology is Murray & Kluckhohn's (1953) statement that:

Every MAN is in certain respects

Like all other men

Like some other men

Like no other man.

This viewpoint on human personality provides a useful framework for looking at Paralympic athlete and sport psychology service provision in this article. So to paraphrase, when working with athletes with disabilities, it will be useful to keep in mind that:

Every Paralympic athlete is in certain respects

Like all other athletes

Like some other athletes

Like no other athlete.

We begin by looking at how Paralympians are just like other athletes ("every Paralympian is like all other athletes"), then offer some thoughts on how they possibly differ yet still overlap in certain areas ("every Paralympian is like some other athlete") both collectively, as well as individually and then look at how possibly each Paralympic athlete is unique ("like no other athlete"). Within this framework the importance of the coach in the triangle between athlete, sport psychologist and team will also be addressed.

EVERY PARALYMPIAN IS LIKE ALL OTHER ATHLETES

How is working with Paralympic athletes like working with able-bodied athletes? An obvious similarity is the fact that the Olympic and Paralympic Games present the highest forms of competition, the biggest stage, so to speak, that is available for both groups of athletes in their respective sports. Performing to one's potential at such a competition, is no easy feat. Research (e.g. Hardy, Jones & Gould 1996; Gould, Guinan, Greenleaf, Medbery, Strickland, Lauer, Chung, & Peterson 1998) and our own experience while working with Olympic athletes at many Olympic Games, tell us that successful athletes engage in rigorous mental preparation for

this competition and that the Olympic Games will certainly test this preparation in often unexpected ways. Many athletes who weren't as successful at their Olympic Games state that if they would have a second chance, they certainly would spend more time with psychological preparation. Given the level of competition, the need for mental preparation to optimize performance is the same for Paralympians, as it is for Olympic Athletes.

The Paralympic Games are the biggest stage in disabled sports, these athletes will have spent considerable time and resources to get to this place, the crowds are the biggest ever, and much is at stake. The Paralympic village, and the Paralympic competition sites are not only in the same actual venues as the Olympics, but they actually look very similar. The atmosphere is just as colorful and festive. The Games presents a 'once in a lifetime performance' opportunity, making it challenging to stay focused amid a plethora





of distractions while trying to perform to one's capability. Staying focused on this highly charged competitive environment requires a set of mental abilities such as confidence, concentration, composure and commitment (and in a team setting, cohesion). Sport psychology certainly plays a vital role in developing these abilities and in identifying and removing potential barriers that get in the way of optimal performance, both for Olympic and Paralympic athletes. So in this regard, when it comes to mentally preparing for the competitive environment and performing optimally, there is no difference between Olympic and Paralympic athletes. While it is very hard to peak at the right time, and while there is no cookbook approach to optimal performance, both Olympic and Para-

lympic athletes can and do benefit from psychological preparation and engage in such preparation.

THE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE COACH

Another area where working with Olympic athletes, particularly Olympic Team sports is exactly like working with Paralympic Teams and Team sports is the relationship between the coach, the coaching staff and the sport psychologist. Certainly, this relationship is a crucial piece of the puzzle of effective sport psychology service delivery, particularly when working with intact teams and team sports.

The coach not only needs to be on board, but also very much in the driver's seat when it comes to delivering sport psychology services to an intact team. At times in the past, team sport coaches were on occasion wary of having a sport psychologist work with their team as they were concerned about giving up control of the team. As a coach you have full responsibility for your team's performance, thus you want to be in complete control of your team. Letting a sport psychologist work with your team can feel like you as a coach are relinquishing control. It's a bit like handing your child over to a stranger, and not knowing what will happen when you get the child back. That can be a scary thought indeed. It requires trust on the part of the coach; a trust that is often not easily gained but easily lost. The sport psychologist also needs to interact effectively with the rest of the coaching staff and the medical support staff. Often these staff members informally have played some of the roles that a sport psychologist might occupy, such as being a supportive listener, and the sport psychologist can easily be perceived as a threat here. Having a clear understanding what the coach is looking for and what the sport psychologist can and cannot deliver, and can and cannot do is a prerequisite for making this



relationship work. This entails open communication around goals, responsibilities, roles, boundaries and confidentiality. The sport psychologist needs to put in the time, learn about the sport and its culture, and show an understanding and appreciation for the pressure the coaching staff often finds itself under. These are essential building blocks besides the subject matter expertise and play a role irrespective of the type of athlete and team one works with.

In our service model, we want to be very involved with the teams we work with, which means that we attend practice and often join teams for major competitions to provide a continuation of services at the time it matters the most. This time commitment is also one of the key ingredients of building relationships, of building trust. After every quad, as a department, we also elicit feedback from our teams and our athletes. And one of the characteristics we try to assess is “trust”. The coaching staff’s score on “the consultant proved to be trustworthy” was a 9.50 out of a possible 10, numbers that are very similar to the Olympic Coaches. Trust obviously also matters with the athletes, in order to effectively work with both groups one needs to have the trust of both groups (athletes and coaches). The athlete’s rating was a 10 out of 10, indicating that the perceived level of trust for the consultant was very high.

SO HOW IS WORKING WITH PARALYMPIC ATHLETES SOMEWHAT LIKE WORKING WITH OLYMPIC ATHLETES?

The Paralympians are still truly amateurs, not earning a living from being an athlete (such as through prize money, sponsorships, NGB funding, etc). Olympic hopefuls find themselves in a similar situation, with some exceptions in certain sports. This situation requires

considerable sacrifice from the athletes but also from their families. Athletes spend considerable time away from work and family to travel, train and compete with their teams. These life stressors, just like for other athletes, certainly can impact performance in a negative way. Helping to manage such stressors also can fall into the responsibility of the sport psychologist.

One area where the Paralympic athletes (and really the Paralympic experience) is somewhat like the experience of Olympic athletes is the experience of the Paralympic village. Both Olympic and Paralympic athletes used the same village in Torino. The only outward difference is that all the IOC signage was replaced with IPC signage. However, whereas during the Olympic Games, the Torino Village was very busy, overflowing with athletes and staff from many different countries and many sports, the atmosphere during the Paralympic Games was much more quiet and serene, as there were only two sports in the village (sled hockey and wheelchair curling). Certainly from a personal perspective, this was an interesting learning experience. Not just with regards to the “feel” in the village, but also from the change in perspective between the able bodied athletes and the disabled athletes. It served as a powerful reminder of the fragility of the human condition as well as the resilience of the human spirit. On a personal level, seeing all these Paralympians from different countries compete with such passion was certainly an inspiring experience.

SO HOW IS EACH PARALYMPIAN LIKE NO OTHER ATHLETE?

There is some research that indicates that after experiencing a traumatic accident that leaves one disabled (e.g. becoming a



quadriplegic) the individuals mood level will after some time return to the same level as before the traumatic accident (returning to a happiness set point). While this may indicate less of an impact of the disability on mood and possibly performance, it is important to look at each individual athlete as a unique human being, just as Murray and Kluckhohn expressed (“each Paralympian is like no other athlete, each Paralympic team is like no other athletic team”). Both from a team and from an individual perspective, each Paralympian and each Paralympic Team needs to be addressed from such an individual perspective. The fact that the athletes are living with a disability needs to be taking into account.

From a team perspective, this becomes most obvious when employing an activity based team building approach to facilitate a cohesive team environment. While both groups of athletes clearly seem to enjoy these often physically challenging activities (“*The little games made things fun and kept me interested - Paralympian*”) and praise their usefulness (“*I like the team games; they were fun and brought about good discussion - Olympian*”) some modifications are necessary for the Paralympians. Many of these activities/games require movement and a certain amount of space which necessitates careful planning in activity selection and choice. If two thirds of your team is in wheelchairs and the other third is walking with crutches, or prosthetics the space requirements change drastically and the selection of activities used is probably reduced or the activity needs to be modified. Just the act of getting from a typical classroom setting with a table set up, towards open space can be more time consuming when so many athletes are in wheelchairs. The movement itself during the activity also needs planning. What further complicates things is that room assignments can often change at the last minute, requiring flexibility and certainly (as always) a number of back up activities to adjust to such a changing environment. Each Paralympic team will be unique in this sense (e.g. blind athletes in goalball rather than wheelchair athletes in sled hockey or basketball). It is important to take such an individual, ideographic approach both with teams and with individual athletes and not employ the same cookbook recipe approach to all athletes encountered.

On an individual level this requires to get as much of an understanding of the complete individual, their individual story, the role the disability plays in their lives and their performance history as possibly. Often this can be quite challenging not just because of staffing shortcuts as previously addressed, but also because when providing services at the Olympic and Paralympic Games sport psychologist will be asked to consult with athletes with whom they don't have a long term service relationship, with whom you meet for the first time at the Games. While the focus of our work in sport psychology at the Games is usually on performance, various life situations impact performance sometimes in a positive, sometimes in a negative way. Certainly the disability can play into this picture and needs to be taken into account. Understanding the type of disability, it's developmental history in the life of the athlete and how the disability affects the athlete and impacts him or her is helpful. Sometimes as a consultant you meet with an athlete just once, e.g. at the Games, and the intervention is often helpful

and perceived as effective by the athlete, at the same time, more work could be done with the possibility of further contact. And sometimes, particularly when you work in training center environment, you have to luxury of regular contact with the athlete. A particular challenge when working with a Paralympic Team sport, and an area where “Paralympians are not like any other athlete” is the individual work with team members. The Paralympic Team is often together only for extended weekends, which are filled with regular practice sessions, weight room sessions, etc.. As mentioned this necessitated a group based approach. This environment, combined with a hectic service schedule with other Summer and Winter Olympic Teams made it impossible to provide individual services and attend practices and competition on a regular basis (as is standard practice in our service provision model for Olympic Teams).

While the Sled Hockey team perceived the services as effective, both individually and collectively (+4.43 on a scale from -5 [hindered/interfered] to +5 [helped a lot]), the athletes expressed a dissatisfaction with the amount of time spent at practice (4.47 on a scale from 0 to 10). A number of athletes also expressed a desire for extra time for individual meetings (e.g. “*I would like to see more one-on-one interviews*”) besides the group meetings. The group meetings with an emphasis on team building and preparation for handling the competitive environment of the Paralympic Games were rated very favorably by the athletes (e.g. “*I really enjoyed the sessions and felt they were extremely helpful for the team.*”; “*Your sessions have pulled us through some tough times and made us better.*”; “*I think what Peter did was great. Continue to prepare teams for distractions, emotions, etc*”). So similar to Olympic athletes, Paralympians perceive sport psychology services as effective overall, and usually ask for more service provision, both individually and collectively, rather than less or none at all. Yet, because of the lack of personnel resources individual services to team members couldn't be provided prior to the Paralympic Games.

For future Paralympic Games, particularly on the winter side, it would be most effective to have a designated sport psychologist work with the athletes and teams leading into the Games and then providing services at the Games, very much with the same service model that we employ for the Olympic Games, so that indeed, at least in the area of effective sport psychology service provision, the “Paralympians are like other Olympians”.

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Any Where, Any Time, We Will Be Ready: Planning for

B

by Dr. Randy Wilber, Karen Daigle and Catherine Sellers, USOC Coaching and Sport Sciences

THE BEIJING OLYMPIC GAMES will have very unique challenges for the American athlete, coach and spectator. The concerns regarding these Games will not be about the readiness of the facilities. Approximately 60% of the stadium appears to be done with the Chinese using over 110 thousand tons of steel and over 2,000 welders per day working on the “Bird’s Nest” design. In fact, the designs for the facilities are spectacular with the majority of the competitions taking place in the “Olympic Green”, a green space of parks and lakes with one of the world’s largest re-forestation projects taking place.

After a recent visit to Beijing by national team coaches and team directors, the USOC has identified three critical areas of concerns that will need to be addressed by NGB’s, coaches and athletes:

1. Environmental issues
2. Food
3. Transportation

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Beijing appears to be one of the most polluted cities in the World. According to Dr. Randy Wilber, USOC Senior Physiologist, the pollution is a combination of dust, carbon monoxide, nitrogen dioxide, sulfur dioxide and ozone. The dust comes from two

sources. The first source is the Gobi desert. Just days prior to our visit, over 30 tons of dust was dropped on Beijing by a Gobi dust storm. Typically, these storms hit in the spring, so they may not be a factor during the Games. The second source is caused by the amazing amount of construction being done in Beijing. It was reported that over 50% of the world’s largest building cranes are located in Beijing. All the building leaves piles of dirt around the city, which they try to control by covering the mounds with green tarps, but none the less they are a significant source for dust.

Carbon monoxide is the major concern in regards to athlete performance. It’s colorless, odorless and tasteless and has the potential to destroy an athlete’s hard worked for competition.



Dr. Wilber’s samples of Beijing air at various venues show pollution levels in the 6-7 range on a scale of ten, the Olympic Green was tested with a range of 4 to 5 and some of the outlying venues were below 5. To provide you with a comparison, Los Angeles is around 5.

However, China does have a plan to reduce the pollution levels. They will shut down factories prior to the start of the Games and they have mentioned the “seeding” of clouds for rain to reduce the dust. Cloud seeding may not be necessary as August is the month with the most rainfall. Typically, Beijing receives over seven inches of rain. Rainfall does lead to the next problem of high humidity.

Combining high humidity and heat provides the second major environmental issue. The average temperature in Beijing in August is 85.1 with a relative humidity of 69%. When the temperature and humidity is placed into the Heat Index Chart, it falls into the “Caution” category.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Don’t arrive in Beijing too early due to the environmental issues.
- Look at using a “Activated Carbon” Filtration mask and nasal irrigation to try and limit the effects of the pollutants.
- Make sure that your Olympic athletes have Pulmonary Function Testing (PFT). The conditions in Beijing may trigger Exercise Induced Asthma (EIA).

FOOD

Rice is one of the very few American Chinese foods that is actually similar to Chinese food found in China! For the most part, Chinese food will not be familiar to you or your athletes, so making intelligent food selections will be difficult. Identifying a familiar carbohydrate or protein source will be almost impossible when faced with the food options that will be available. Familiarity is key to performance nutrition at the elite level. You wouldn’t try a new competition strategy at the Games, so you certainly don’t want to try a new food product or nutrition strategy at the Games! Although there are a few familiar American restaurant chains in Beijing, relying on these few options are not the best nutrition plan.

Foreigners are not allowed to drive. In addition to that problem, large trucks are only allowed into Beijing between midnight and 6am, so delivery of equipment will be late (or early depending on your perspective).

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Get help! If you don’t have a nutrition professional working with your team, identify a point of contact to coordinate nutrition issues.
- Have a plan. Once the menu has been made available, make sure someone qualified looks it over to ensure it will meet your team’s nutritional needs. Be prepared to supplement this menu with easily transportable products, if needed.
- If living out of the Village Food Service, consider hiring a personal chef for your team.

TRANSPORTATION

For Americans who use the freedom of driving during competitions in Europe, this will be a challenge in China. Foreigners are not allowed to drive. In addition to that problem, large trucks are only allowed into Beijing between midnight and 6am, so delivery of equipment will be late (or early depending on your perspective).

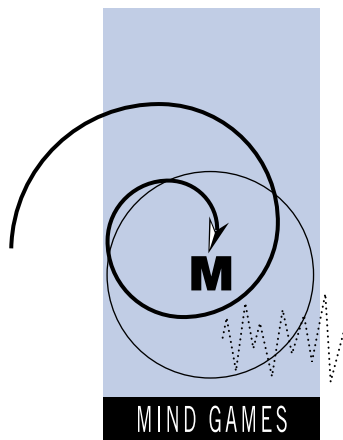
Planning and scheduling transportation, along with drivers will be another consideration for team leaders and coaches. It may be necessary to develop a check list, so that the athlete and coaches will have all necessary equipment on hand when you leave the village or housing location.

Beijing has a metro system, although not very extensive. They will have a line built before the Games that will have a terminal in the “Olympic Green” area.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Plan travel with a built in cushion of time.
- Use Kirk Milburn’s adage of “Go early, be safe, and go early”.
- Prepare methods to communicate with drivers, who may or may not speak any English.
- Learn to use public transportation effectively.

The challenges of China may seem tremendous, but it will be offset by the amazing culture, rich traditions and the Olympic Games history of exciting competition. With adequate planning and understanding of the challenges, the athlete, coach and spectator can make the challenges work for them. As a current USOC slogan states, “Any Where, Any Time, We Will Be Ready.”



The Importance of Coaching Credibility

by Sean McCann, Ph.D.
USOC Sport Science and Technology

“Be more concerned with your character than your reputation, because your character is what you really are, while your reputation is merely what others think you are.”

John Wooden

While searching for new ideas on coaching and leadership, I recently read an article by Nilsen and Hernez-Broome, titled “Integrity in Leadership.”¹ It was a valuable reminder of the importance of credibility and integrity for any leader or coach.

Based on research by David Campbell of the Center of Creative Leadership, the article reported that the primary quality separating the most effective and least effective leaders was credibility — defined as “being believable and worthy of trust.” Examples of credible leadership included being consistent in making decisions (even when this resulted in a short-term problem) and “walking the talk.” The results of this study of business leaders were so dramatic that the authors concluded that once a leader’s behavior caused the loss of credibility, “it is probably gone for good.”

This article reminded me of the times I have seen elite coaches lose credibility with their athletes. Talented coaches, who lose credibility with their athletes and NGBs, can never retrieve this key ingredient of coaching leadership success. The two most common examples I have seen in elite coaching are: 1) giving up on athletes, and 2) disappearing in bad times, re-appearing in good times (fair-weather coaching).

GIVING UP ON ATHLETES

Coaching at the elite level requires tremendous energy and sacrifices, often without significant rewards. When a coach’s team or individual athletes perform poorly, it is easy for a coach to question whether the sacrifices and energy required to coach are worth the commitment. This is especially true when family or other non-coaching responsibilities also are important to the coach.

Poor performance on the field can be so discouraging that a coach’s outlook can change for the worse; thinking, language and behavior can change dramatically. These changes are usually visible to other people in the coach’s environment and can become poisonous.

One Olympic coach told me that her athletes would never be internationally competitive due to disadvantages the sport faces in the U.S. Months later at the Olympic Games, an athlete in the sport said, “It’s amazing, but it is so hard to ‘get up’ for the Games, because nobody on the team thinks we can do anything here. Even our coach gave up on us after our last trip. She doesn’t even try to motivate us anymore. Why should I care? Half of my teammates are here just to go to the parties.”

When a coach gives up on athletes, they know it, and credibility and the chance to lead towards success is gone.

FAIR-WEATHER COACHING

Fair weather coaching is the act of disappearing when results are bad and paying attention to athletes when things are going well. Like giving up on the athletes, coaches under tremendous pressure and stress may find it difficult not to fall into the behavior pattern. Because of time pressures, coaches often must focus their energies on the athletes with the best chances to succeed. This is simply the nature of high pressure sport. Athletes don’t always like this aspect of elite sport, but they usually understand it. On the other hand, coaches who carry this behavior to extremes may lose credibility and the ability to lead athletes.

For example, one athlete described her feelings towards her coach after winning an international competition,

“It is pathetic. When I was performing horribly, he told me I was lazy and didn’t even know what I was working on. Now that I win, he is jumping in front of reporters to tell them that it was his program that ‘turned things around.’ It was really his assistant who worked with me when I was struggling, and we both know it. He is the same way with injured athletes, never calling them and ignoring them unless they are ready to compete. It makes you feel like a piece of meat, and it makes you want to think only about yourself.”

Giving up on athletes and extreme fair-weather coaching are coaching behaviors in and of themselves - athletes learn that “coach doesn’t care about me.” Conversely, coaches who lose credibility become quite lonely when things are going poorly. The two-way street of good will and patience that can benefit a coach with struggling performers is absent when a coach loses credibility with athletes, other coaches and administrators. A coach who loses credibility loses the chance to lead, which may lead to a loss of his/her job.

BUILDING AND MAINTAINING COACHING CREDIBILITY

Losing credibility is devastating. What can coaches do to build and maintain it? The opening quote by Coach Wooden suggests a good starting point, character; but reputation is also important. As research has indicated when it comes to leadership roles, perception (and reputation) can become reality. Many coaches in danger of losing credibility are unaware of it, because they don’t realize how they are perceived by others.

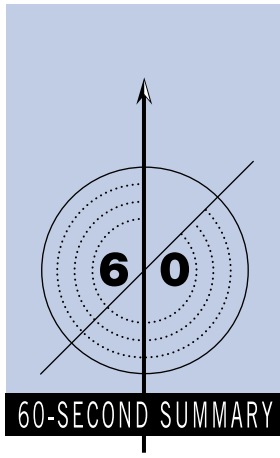
TIPS FOR COACHES WHO WANT TO MAINTAIN CREDIBILITY

- Get feedback. Do you have a feedback mechanism to get an accurate reading of how others perceive you? If not, this should be a starting point. Coaches who get over the initial fear and discomfort of soliciting feedback from coaching peers and athletes find it to be extremely useful. If you are lucky, your sport organization has a system in place, but if it doesn’t, you should start one.
- Increase consistency. “Walking the talk” is easy to say but often difficult to accomplish. One common mistake is to make a rule that is applied strictly for some athletes and less so for a star athlete. This is a classic example of the kind of inconsistency that leads to a loss of credibility. Taking an occasional short-term loss of long-term credibility is rarely a mistake. On the other hand, I have frequently advised coaches not to establish rules or expectations that they are unable to enforce. If you know that you can’t be consistent in your behavior, don’t pretend of your will lose credibility with your athletes.
- Know your strengths and weaknesses. Loss of credibility may be related to a blind spot within yourself. Coaches who understand their own motivation, personality and preferences can build an environment that helps maintain credibility. For example, a coach who thrives on constant change and new challenges might not want to preach the gospel of consistency, unless they have other people in the environment (such as a strong assistant coach) who will maintain a consistent approach.

Credibility is the key to strong leadership, and the loss of credibility is a major factor when coaches lose the ability to lead. If leading others is one of your goals as a coach, consider your credibility and determine what you need to do to build and maintain it.

1 Nilsen, D. and Hernez Broome, G. (1998), Leadership in action, 18, 2, pp13-14.





Developing Perceptual Expertise

by Catherine Sellers, USOC Coaching

WOULDNT IT BE NICE IF YOUR ATHLETES COULD CORRECTLY ANTICIPATE THE DIRECTION OF MOVEMENT FOR A BALL OR A PLAYER? WOULDNT IT BE BETTER IF YOU COULD TEACH YOUR ATHLETES HOW TO ANTICIPATE THOSE ACTIONS?

Researchers are looking for the answers to those two questions. In a past Olympic Coach issue (Spring 2005), we looked at vision training or what some researchers call the “visual hardware”. We know that our expert athletes do not have better vision than the novice athletes, but they do have more knowledge about their sport and the sport movements or “perceptual software”, that enable them to encode, retrieve, and process task-specific information in a more effective and efficient manner.” (Starkes & Deakin, 1984)

“Skilled performers employ more efficient visual search behaviors, demonstrate an enhanced ability to recognize patterns of play, make greater

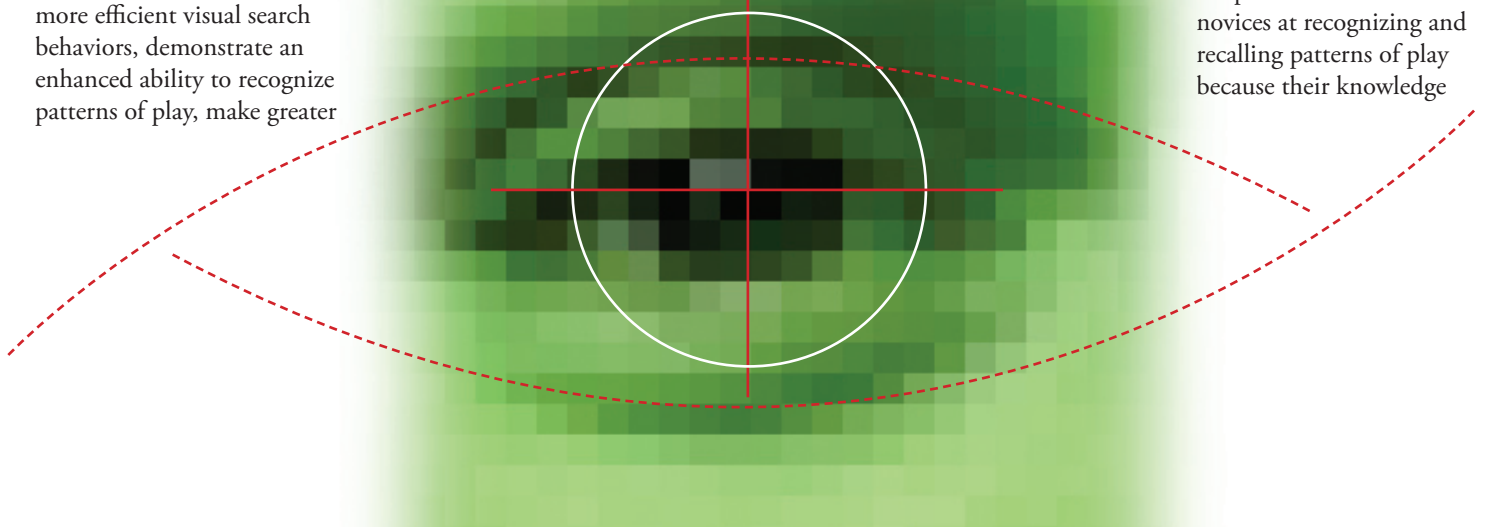
use of advance visual cues, and possess a more elaborate knowledge of situational probabilities. (Williams, et al.,1999)

There is a body of knowledge in regards to eye movements, with sports typically having three types: saccades, fixations, pursuit tracking and vestibular-ocular reflex. Saccades are involved in searching the whole environment for clues and are used for high speed tracking, fixations allow the athlete to focus on a particular area, opponent or the ball, pursuit tracking narrows the focus even more when the speed is slow enough and the vestibular-ocular reflex is used to “stabilize gaze and ensure clear vision during head movements.” (Williams, et al., 1993) “It is possible to stare at an object without visual information processing occurring. This is commonly referred to as the difference between ‘looking’ and ‘seeing’.” (Williams, et al., 1993) Typically, this is an issue with the fixation cueing.

It appears that “experts are able to use their superior knowledge to control the eye movement patterns necessary for seeking and picking up important sources of information.” (Williams, 2001) The question for the coach becomes one of what visual cues do you teach your athletes to respond to? In soccer, it appears that the position of the hips prior to ball contact is very important, as the hips determine the direction of the pass or shot, but for the expert athlete this is only one segment of information that is processed. The run, the arc of the leg as it approaches the ball and the foot and hip angles will be taken into account.

Developing pattern recognition skills seems to be a key factor. Some patterns are very similar in field sports and can be transferred. “There is evidence to suggest that having the opportunity to participate in a wide variety of related sports at an early age may be beneficial in the development of perceptual skills.” (Abernathy, Cote & Baker, 2000) For the athlete to see a particular pattern (i.e. the beginning of a drive to the basket), and to react by moving in position to defend is a crucial skill.

“Experts are better than novices at recognizing and recalling patterns of play because their knowledge



and domain-specific memory skills allow them to ‘chunk’ or group perceptual information into larger and more meaningful units.” (Williams, 2001) The testing was done using video clips and the experts correctly identified significantly higher than novices when it was a structured play. The use of video simulation, practice and feedback has been used in most of the studies and whereas the researchers saw improvement in the laboratory, many of the studies did not follow up with a field-based test.

One study with field hockey did show an improvement in anticipating a “flick” shot, but the training group still did not match up to the experts level, “which highlights the important role that continued, long-term practice plays in the acquisition of expertise” (Ericsson, 1996) However, improvement with a novice athlete is still a worthy pursuit.

Once a basic skill is acquired, there may be a use for mental imagery. “Recent work on the use of motor imagery as a training aid suggests that when a high degree of functional equivalence exists between motor execution and the imaged action, an improvement in motor performance is likely to occur.” (Decety & Ingvar, 1990) It appears that mental imagery may “prime the appropriate neural mechanisms in the visual system.” (Finke, 1986)

The combination of video simulation with mental imagery and feedback from the coach may provide an optimum method of improving perceptual reaction, although more research is needed.

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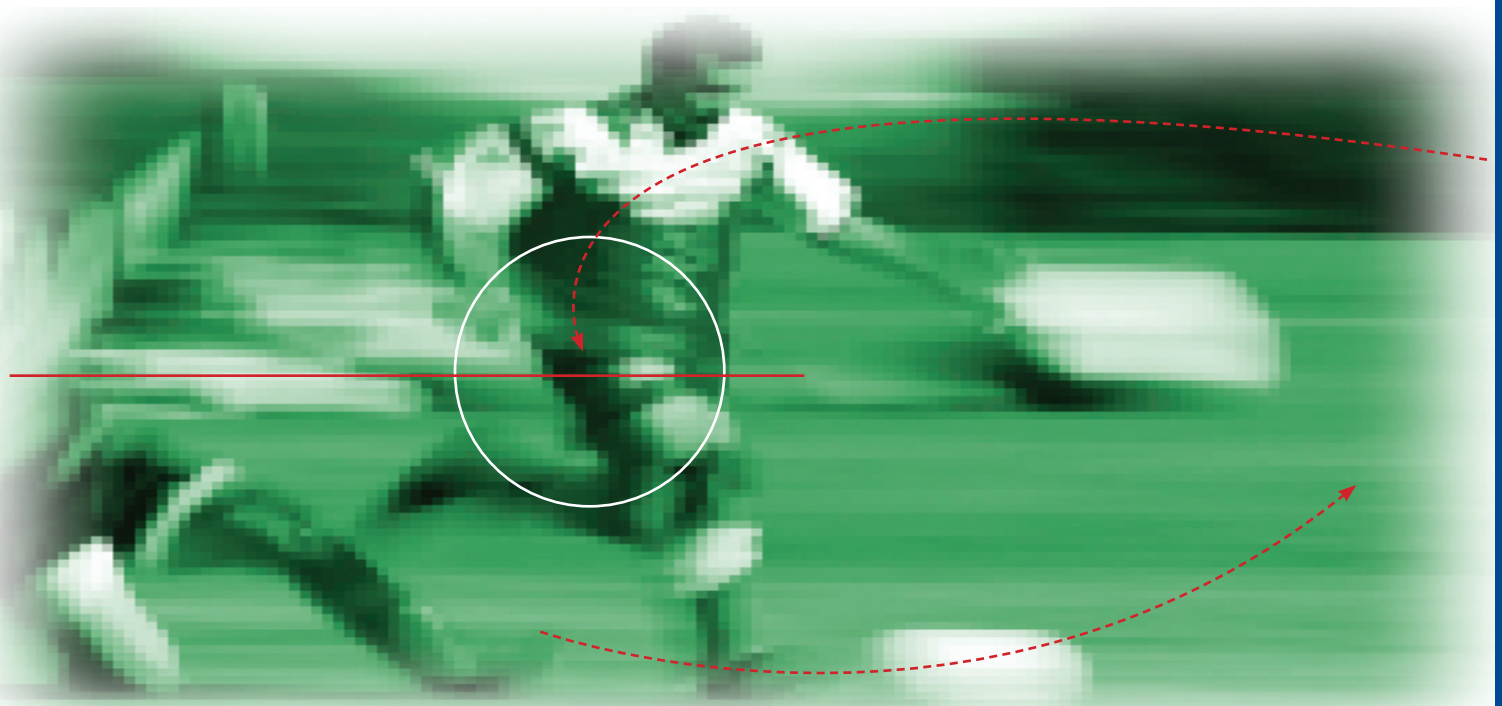
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HOT OFF THE PRESS

WEBSITES:

<http://usoc.org/paralympics/>

Site for the United States Paralympics- information about the different sports that are offered along with a calendar of events and how to get involved.

<http://www.paralympics.org>

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Official site for the 2008 Olympic Games

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