

The Olympic Games: The Experience of a Lifetime or Simply the Most Important Competition of an Athletic Career?

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Rune Dall Jensen^{1 B-D}, Ask Vest Christiansen^{1 C,D},
Kristoffer Henriksen^{2 A, C, D}

¹Aarhus University, Denmark

²University of Southern Denmark, Denmark

ABSTRACT

As a multi-sport event that only takes place every four years and is accompanied by intense media coverage, the Olympic Games are often described by athletes as a defining moment in their careers. The objectives of the present study were: 1) to describe differences in expectations of Olympic debutants towards the Olympics and their actual experiences while they were at the Games; and 2) to describe how the athletes negotiate the balance between performing at and enjoying the experience of the Olympic Games. Further, we will discuss the athletes' stories in light of the differences between the goals and expectations of the elite sport system and those of the individual athletes. Data was collected through a qualitative interview study with a pre- and post-Olympic competition design.

Using a semi-structured interview guide, we interviewed 14 Danish Olympic debutants about their Olympic goals and expectations within a month preceding their departure for the Olympic Games and about their actual experiences within a month following their return.

Condensed narratives from two Olympic debutants represent the spectrum of the athletes' expectations and experiences: one failed in his performance but had a great experience; the other was successful and won a silver medal but was truly unhappy with her experience. The debutants emphasize balancing their desire to perform with a desire for social experiences. They also discussed the challenges posed during preparation and goal setting.

Olympic debutants are caught in a very real dilemma between the Olympics as the "most important competition of their athletic careers" and "the Olympics as the experience of a lifetime." This dilemma is linked to a wide rift between the perspectives and goals of the sport organization and those of the athletes.

Olympic Games, debutants, performance stress, competition preparation

KEYWORDS

Introduction

The Olympic Games are special. Many elite athletes dream of success at the Olympics; the most ambitious go beyond dreaming to make Olympic success the goal and focal point of their athletic career. What makes the Olympics unique is the fact that they only take place every four years and they have the

status of a multi-sport event. Other unique factors include the intense media coverage and public attention as well as the accommodation of athletes from all over the world in a common Olympic Village (Birrer, Wetzel, Schmid, & Morgan, 2012; Blumenstein & Lidor, 2008; Gould & Maynard, 2009). The most important factor that differentiates them from other sporting events, however, is found in the meaning attached to the Games as a defining moment with the potential to change an athlete's life (McCann, 2008).

In the sport psychology literature, the Olympic Games have often been emphasized as a very stressful event. Increased media attention, restricted freedom to move, boredom in the Village, stressed coaches and managers, being members of multi-sport national teams, selections, etc., all adds to the pressure (Birrer et al., 2012; Greenleaf, Gould, & Dieffenbach, 2001; Gould & Maynard, 2009; Pensgaard, 1998). The athletes live in the Olympic Village, where only athletes, coaches, and officials with credentials are allowed to access. In many ways, life inside the Village is very different from life outside, including an overwhelming selection of free food and drinks; the fact that all services (e.g., physiotherapy, training, dentists, etc.) are free; an impressive service level provided by a large number of voluntary workers; and last but not least the fact that the athletes constantly bump into international superstar athletes (Blumenstein & Lidor, 2008). Furthermore, the athletes experience an unmatched number of potential distractions, such as family and friends who request help in obtaining tickets, increased attention from media and sponsors, and invitations to a range of social and sponsored events (Gould & Maynard, 2009). All of these challenges are likely to have a significant impact on the Olympic debutant, since no other sporting event matches the Olympic Games in size, scope or significance. As Kristiansen argued regarding the media challenge: "Media contact is considered to be part of the job of being an elite athlete, and the inexperienced younger athletes struggled more and got affected easier" (2011, pp. 43–44).

The special atmosphere surrounding the Olympic Games has prompted applied sport psychology practitioners to recommend that preparation for the Olympics be fine-tuned for the specific event and for the special challenges the athletes are likely to meet, and that mental routines be customized for the specific setting (Birrer et al., 2012; Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012; Samulski & Lopes, 2008; Vernacchia & Henschen, 2008). However, it is also emphasized that no matter what the level of preparation is, unpredicted events and incidents must be expected, and that athletes are likely to respond to situations and challenges in ways they had not foreseen. As such, the applied sport psychology consultant should be an integrated part of the Olympic support team (Arnold & Sarkar, 2014; McCann, 2008; Pensgaard, 2008; Salmela, 1989).

Denmark at the Olympics

Denmark is a small country (population 5.5 million), albeit with significant ambitions in international sport. In the last four Summer Olympics, Denmark has won between six and nine medals. All 2012 medals (nine in total) were won in sports where athletes are less accustomed to intense media interest (badminton, rowing, sailing, track cycling, and shooting), with four medals won by Olympic debutants. This only underscores the importance of these athletes' abilities to perform in a uniquely stressful setting.

As it is the case in most countries, considerable financial and time resources were invested in preparing the Danish athletes for the 2012 Olympics. Most of these resources focused on the sport-specific training. However, the athletes were also prepared for the Olympics as a unique event that transcends sport-specific competitions. This part of the preparation comprised several initiatives. First, the National Olympic Committee (NOC) arranged seminars that focused on rules, practical considerations, and daily life in the Olympic Village. Secondly, the NOC arranged media training courses. Third, Team Denmark, the government-sponsored elite sport organization, employed a team of applied sport psychology practitioners, who held seminars, team workshops, and individual consultations in the lead-up to the Games. These seminars focused on developing specific routines, handling stress, enhancing the quality of recovery, and making arrangements with friends and family before the Games. Finally, the sports federations held a number of seminars in which former Olympic participants shared their knowledge on how to succeed at the Games. On top of these more organized preparations, the athletes were constantly exposed to various media's

“Olympic stories,” including reminders of memorable moments from previous Games, which were often communicated with a dash of national(istic) pride.

Team Denmark thus takes a significant interest in the athletes’ chances of success in the Games. That is their *raison d’être*. The organization came into being in the early 1980s as a result of the increasing international competition. To gain an edge, Team Denmark will – like other national elite sport organizations – seek to optimize all matters that may potentially influence the athletes’ performance. Thus, the “spiral of competition”, as Finnish sport sociologist Kalevi Heinilä named this phenomenon of increasing international competition, influences not only individual athletes in individual sports but also nation states (Heinilä, 1982). From an organizational perspective, this consequently shifts the interest from the individual athlete’s performance to the system’s performance. Yet this may also lead to conflicts of interests between the athletes and the system that supports them. Such conflicts also surfaced in our material.

For the present study, we interviewed 14 Danish Olympic debutants about their Olympic goals and expectations prior to the Olympic Games and about their experiences after the Games. Applying this background, the aims of the study were:

1. To describe and understand differences in the debutants’ expectations towards the Olympics and their actual experiences while they were at the Games;
2. To describe how the athletes negotiate the balance between performing at and enjoying the experience of the Olympic Games. Further, we will discuss the athletes’ stories in light of the difference between the goals and expectations of the elite sport system and those of the individual athletes.

Method

The present study is a semi-structured qualitative interview study with a pre- and post-design. The empirical basis of the study consists of 28 interviews. First, we interviewed 14 Danish Olympic debutants about their Olympic goals and expectations within the space of a month before they left for the Olympic Games. We subsequently interviewed the same athletes within a month of their return about how they actually experienced the Games.

Participants

In total, 112 Danish athletes participated at the 2012 London Olympic Games, 70 of whom were debutants. For the study, we selected 9 female and 5 male Olympic debutants who were between 21 and 31 years old (mean age = 27.1 years). The participants represented 10 different individual sports and 2 team-based sports, including sports in which Denmark has traditionally succeeded at the Olympics and sports with less successful Olympic track records.

Gaining access to interview Olympic participants in close temporal proximity of the Games was difficult, since coaches and performance directors make an effort to protect their athletes from all potential distractions. We, therefore, chose a pragmatic inclusion criterion, namely the athlete’s willingness to participate and the national sport federation’s acceptance of the athlete’s participation.

Research instruments

The study relied on two distinct semi-structured interview guides that both progressed from open-ended questions to more specific ones (Silverman, 2001). The guide for the pre-Olympic interview was constructed on the basis of a literature review regarding psychological aspects of performing at the Olympic Games, and targeted aspects such as distractions from the media and family, life in the Olympic Village, and personal goals. It included questions such as:

- “What do you expect of the Olympics?”;

- “What are your goals for the competition and who influenced these goals?”;
- “What do you think will be the biggest challenges and the biggest experiences during the Games?”;
- “How do you expect the Olympics to differ from other big competitions in your sport?”.

The guide for the post-Olympic interviews was constructed as a natural continuation of the first guide, and thus dealt with many similar topics, albeit in retrospect. It included questions such as:

- “How would you describe your personal experience of the Olympics?”;
- “How did the Olympics differ from other competitions in your sport?”;
- “What did you experience to be the biggest challenges and the biggest experience during the Olympics?”.

The second guide was modified for each specific interview based on the answers provided by the athletes in the first interview.

Procedure

The study was conducted with assistance from Team Denmark, who would first contact the coaches and performance directors of the national governing body (NGO) of a specific sport in order to explain the nature and purpose of the study. In many cases, the NGO would express interest in the study but then decline the offer on behalf of the athletes. When the NGO indicated approval, the performance director of the NGO would then contact the athlete and ask if the athlete would be willing to participate. All contacted athletes agreed to participate. As a next step, the first author would contact the athlete, inform them about the project and that their identity would be kept confidential, and arrange a time for the interview. At the end of the pre-Olympic interviews, a date and time was set for the post-Olympic interview.

The pre-Olympic interviews were conducted by telephone, since many of the informants were abroad at training camps for their final preparations. The pre-Olympic interviews ranged in length from 20 to 45 minutes ($M = 28$ min). Some of the post-Olympic interviews were conducted face-to-face (five interviews), but some athletes were already away for new training camps; in these cases telephone interviews were conducted (nine interviews). The post-Olympic interviews lasted between 25 and 65 minutes ($M = 40$ min). Both sets of interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

To reduce researcher bias, all interviews were conducted by the first author, who had received extensive training in the qualitative interview method.

Data treatment and analysis

In order to enhance validity (Bryman, 2012), the transcripts were read by another member of the research team while listening to the interview to detect any misunderstandings.

The study employed two different types of analysis. First, we performed a thematic content analysis in order to establish an overview of the themes in the interviews. For this purpose, the transcripts were coded using a deductive-inductive approach. The deductive and high-level codes were derived from the literature, and included “media,” “goals,” and “dealing with family and friends.” The inductive codes were derived from the interviews and expanded the three nodes with subthemes. We proceeded to write a summary of each main theme and subtheme. To enhance inter-reader reliability, two members of the research team coded all interviews independently, whereupon any differences in coding were discussed until agreement was reached.

Secondly, in order to capture each individual athlete’s unique story, we constructed narratives. With this in mind, we condensed the (pre- and post-Olympic) interviews for each athlete into a narrative that captured the individual athlete’s overall Olympic journey – from his or her initial expectations to the actual experience. We constructed the narratives to reflect the overall themes in the interview material. We realize

that specific cases may be recognizable to a reader with knowledge of Danish elite sport. For this reason, we asked the athletes to read their own narrative. All athletes gave us permission to present their story. Having the athletes approve their stories further minimizes the risk of presenting a distorted picture.

Findings

In the following, we present the condensed narratives of two of the Olympic debutants. The overall analysis was informed by all 14 interviewees, and results from the remaining 12 are presented below. However, with their expectations towards and their experiences of the Olympic Games, these two athletes represent the spectrum of athletes, while at the same time they may be considered extreme cases: one failed in his performance but had a great experience; the other was successful and won a silver medal but was truly unhappy with her experience. In that sense, these two athletes embody the range of experiences of the total pool of interviewees.

Ben: The happy athlete who did not reach his goal

Ben is a track and field athlete. He did not qualify for the Games during the formal Danish qualifying period, but at a Diamond League in Paris a few weeks before the Games began, he shot putt 20.02 meters, which convinced the Danish Olympic Committee to send him to the Olympics at the very last moment.

When we interviewed him a few days before the opening ceremony in London, Ben had vast expectations:

"I expect it to be huge and exciting. It will be good fun; I'll meet many other athletes and hope to make a lot of new friends".

Ben describes himself as a social person and he also looks forward to meeting Danish athletes from other sports. He is hoping for a couple of intensive days in London as an Olympic tourist too. Although his preparation time has been limited, Ben feels ready. However, in his own relaxed manner he is aware of the non-sporting challenges at the Olympics, for which he cannot fully prepare:

"I'll just take things as they come. It's impossible to prepare for everything, so I've decided to stop worrying and just deal with things as they come".

Physically, he is at his peak, but if he wants to perform his very best, he also needs to be mentally focused. He recognizes that he has a challenge in finding the right level of arousal for competition. Ben's goal for the competition is to finish among the 12 best and thereby enter the finals. However, Ben finished 28th out of the 40 competitors with a shot put of 19.13 meters. The result was disappointing but did nothing to ruin his overall positive experience:

"The result wasn't great. It should have been better. But apart from that, it was a great experience. It was very exciting and I got to meet a lot of new people. It was really cool. I really liked it. It's huge. A lot of people have told you how massive it would be, and I must say it really is something special!"

Despite his poor results, Ben is far from disappointed. He is very positive about the Olympics per se, and says he learned a lot from participating. In terms of his performance, he finds comfort in the fact that few athletes perform their best at their first Olympics. Ben emphasizes again and again that it is impossible to prepare completely for the Olympics. In a sense, he expresses that his poor performance is somehow excused. At the same time, he admits that the whole atmosphere and the sheer scale of the event distracted his focus from his own competition. His attention was shifting and flickering. One moment he saw himself from a bird's-eye view and could not believe he was really there. The next moment he would try to remind himself of the importance of the situation and of the need to focus on the task:

"The whole setting influenced me to a point where I totally forgot to shot the put. It was so immense and I wasn't really prepared for it. You know, it's the simple fact that you are there."

I've been watching the Olympics on the telly ever since I was a boy, and I've always said: Damn! I want to be part of that someday. And then, suddenly, I am here! I guess that feeling somehow diverted my focus. It ruined my competition. I totally forgot to focus”.

However, Ben explains how he is now determined to use his experience in a positive way. Now he says he knows exactly what he needs to work on in order to be successful in 2016 in Rio de Janeiro.

Prior to the Olympics, Ben talks about how much he is looking forward to meeting other athletes, to the social life and to being a part of the Danish team. Although the sheer scale and all the hype surrounding the event caused Ben to underperform, after the event he still talks about how awesome he thinks it all was. He is very enthusiastic about the Olympic Village, the social life with the other athletes, about being a spectator at other competitions and ceremonies.

In order to minimize the risk of disrupting the focus of the athletes who were still in competition, the Danish NOC decided to limit the time an athlete could stay inside the Olympic Village as a “tourist” after finishing his or her own competition. More specifically, they enforced a “two-day rule,” which stated that the athletes had to leave the Village two days after the final competition in their sport. Since track and field competed during the entire period of the Games, Ben could stay in the Olympic Village from the opening to the closing ceremony, and he cheerfully talks about how life in the Village and being close with other athletes enhanced the team spirit:

“We all lived in the same building, so you could just go upstairs and knock on a door if you wanted to socialize. During the evenings we sat and chatted in the apartments. It was really cozy. I liked it a lot. I am a social person, so it was really cool”.

Ben was, however, critical about the two-day rule, which in his view created a ghost town towards the end of the Games, when most Danish athletes had left:

“If I was to decide, everyone could stay in the Village all through the Olympics”.

With his open and social mentality, Ben becomes a darling among the many Danish journalists and he enjoys the attention. For instance, he thinks it is witty that the media nicknamed him “Big Ben”:

“I think it is cool and quite sweet. It's funny that they can come up with that. I think they treated me very well”.

Big Ben is ready to work towards the Olympics in 2016 in Rio de Janeiro. He thinks that one should be proud of representing Denmark and that one should prepare mentally. But he holds that preparing completely for the Olympics is impossible. Although Ben's athletic performance was a disappointment, he is happy and remains adamant that his overall experience of the Olympic Games is one of personal satisfaction.

Susie: The disappointed medalist

Susie is a 28-year-old rower. She competes in the women's single sculls. She was inspired to start rowing by the Danish gold medal win in the men's lightweight fours at the 1996 Atlanta Olympics. Susie had previously won a bronze medal at the European Championships in 2011, and placed fourth at the World Championships in 2008. Before the Games, her focus was solely on her performance and she expected a top result:

“Of course, I expect a great result. I am looking forward to competing at a sold-out venue, with support from a great crowd. I definitely hope to be competing in the finals, and hopefully earn a spot on the podium. That would be the greatest experience: the ultimate goal. There aren't many who know about my chances of winning. I like it this way, because it takes away some of the pressure. My friends know that I'm competing, but I'm not sure they know how close to a medal I may actually be. Beyond this, I hope to see some of the other events”.

Susie and her support crew meticulously planned every detail concerning her competition. This brought her confidence and comfort. She was more concerned with factors outside her own competitions.

She was particularly concerned that she would not be able to take part in the Olympic “event” as much as she wanted:

“I want to get involved in the whole experience as much as possible. But I have been told they send us home or at least make us leave the Village two days after our competition ends. So I don't know how much I'll be able to involve myself in the whole event of the Olympics, which I expect would be a great experience. That's probably my biggest concern right now. I really hope I will get that Olympic experience. I would like to be able to say that these things are planned and under control, like my training and competition, but that isn't the case. I don't have any tickets. I don't have anything. All I can do is to cross my fingers and hope that things will be solved and that I'll have a great time”.

Before the Olympics, Susie officially states that finishing in the top eight is her aim, but she and her coaches have higher ambitions. She ends up winning a silver medal, which is perhaps the most unexpected Danish medal at the 2012 Games. When asked about the greatest experience at the Olympics in the post-Olympic interview, she has no doubt: *“That is self-evident [laughs]. It was crossing the line. Knowing that I did it.”* However, what reads like a success story turns out to be less simple. Susie reaches her aim; she exceeds all expectations, wins a medal and contributes to the proud Olympic tradition in Danish rowing. During their competition period, the rowers are accommodated in a small Olympic Village at Eton Dorney, outside London. Here Susie manages to keep her focus, and everything goes smoothly and as expected. After their races, Susie and the other rowers move to the larger Olympic Village in London in the hope to catch some of the “real” Olympic atmosphere. From here, the positive experience begins to fade, which end up coloring her overall experience:

“It was all positive until I finished my competition. Afterwards it was ridiculous. It was a terrible experience to be honest. Dreadful, really. We moved into the Olympic Village, received our keys and checked in, but there were no Danish athletes! They had all left. It wasn't at all the social experience I had hoped for. Not even close”.

Susie had looked forward to being a part of a big Danish Olympic team, but as a result of the “two-day rule,” several athletes had left the Olympic Village to allow the remaining athletes to keep focus. The Danish staff had a number of tickets per day for different Olympic competitions to give to Danish athletes and staff. However, although she asked for tickets several times, Susie never got any, and so did not get a chance to see any Olympic events.

“I feel the people in charge walked all over me. There was no one to help us. They absolutely didn't care about me and I'm damned disappointed about that. They are in London because we perform. If I was able to sack them I would. It pisses me off! I feel I've been to the Games, but I don't feel that I've experienced the Olympics”.

In the post-Olympic interview, Susie reflects on her potential participation in the 2016 Games in Rio de Janeiro. If she only consults her sporting ambitions she wants to go and win a gold medal, but she also wants to experience the true Olympic atmosphere, which she feels she did not do in London:

“Maybe in Rio I will compete as a part of a team boat. I know that that probably won't win me a gold medal, but instead I believe it will give me the chance to experience the atmosphere and have a more casual approach, where the Olympics are just a game. Of course, this would be a bit of an act of defiance should I choose to do so”.

Susie's Olympic experience did not match her expectations. She was told it would be the experience of a lifetime. It was not. Just like everybody expected of her, she focused on her sport, gave it her all, and won a medal. Still, after the Games, her dominant feeling is not one of pride and exhilaration:

“I guess I am a bit disappointed. Well, in fact I am pretty frustrated”.

On the face of it, Susie's 2012 Olympics was a great success, but at the same time it was a personal disappointment.

Key challenges for Olympic debutants

The thematic content analysis of the two rounds of 14 interviews revealed a number of key challenges for Olympic debutants, as well as some interesting dilemmas. In the present paper, we have chosen to present the results mainly in the form of two narratives that embody these challenges. In light of what has been emphasized in these two cases, we will briefly outline below some of the main themes from the overall interview material.

The first and dominant theme from the debutants' reflections regards their difficulties in terms of balancing their wish for an Olympic experience of a lifetime on the one hand, and their ambitions to succeed in their sport competition on the other. For Ben, this balance tipped in favor of the social experience. Going into the Games, Ben mentioned that he aimed to experience excitement and fun, to socialize and meet friends for life, as well as reach the final in his sport. Going into the Games, these goals were compatible in Ben's mind, whereas after the Games, Ben reflected that the "Olympics as a social event" somehow got in the way of the "Olympics as an important competition." Susie, on the other hand, kept a strong focus on her performance and on achieving a good result. However, already before the Games she was concerned this strong focus would lower her chances of experiencing the Olympics as a social event, and after the Games she was sure this was the case. She even reflects that for the next Olympic Games she may focus more on the experience, even if this means compromising her chances of sporting success. The difficulties in balancing the Olympics as "the most important competition in my life" and "the greatest experience of my life" were evident in most of the interviews. When asked what they expected to be the highlight of the Olympics, several athletes did not mention their own competitions, but rather being a part of the overall Danish team; several athletes also pointed to the opening ceremony as something they looked forward to. This was confirmed when asked what turned out to be the highlight after the Games.

A second and related theme concerned life in the Olympic Village. The debutants spoke of difficulties in keeping focus on their performance while in the midst of a real turmoil. For example, the debutants in many cases told of family members and friends who requested assistance in obtaining tickets, media who requested interviews at inconvenient times and the surreal experience of dining with the world's top athletes. Ben felt that life in the Village enhanced the team spirit, but in hindsight he admitted it had had a negative impact on his performance. Susie lived in a much smaller Village in Eton Dorney during the competition, so was less disrupted.

A third theme in the interviews was athletic preparation. Huge effort had been put into preparing the athletes for the Games. As described earlier, the NOC, Team Denmark and the sport-specific NGOs had set up a number of initiatives to prepare the athletes. These initiatives included media training, seeing pictures of the venues and the Village, sessions with former Olympians who passed on their experiences and more specific sport psychology interventions. In general, the athletes consider this to have been a fruitful effort and a worthwhile investment. Most of the study's participants felt well prepared and they felt that even the intense media interest did not come as a surprise. At the same time, the athletes' stories in most cases also contained elements of being caught off guard and feeling unprepared for the sheer magnitude of the event. In the post-Olympic interviews, most of the athletes highlighted difficulties outside their specific performance as the most important challenges they met. These included balancing their own preparation and recovery with being a spectator; handling requests from family and friends; not getting carried away by the wide selection of food in the dining hall and the opportunities in the Village; and sticking with their routines in disruptive surroundings. The final overall theme in the thematic content analysis related to goal setting. While the athletes all had official goals for the end result of the competition, most of the debutants had given these goals less emphasis. Rather, the athletes had made a conscious effort to keep a task focus during preparation and competition. This does not mean that official goals are unimportant to the athletes. Rather, the focus on the task is a result of knowing that optimum performances (and thus the best results) come from focusing on the task rather than the end result. However, once at the Games, they experienced a huge focus on results from media, other athletes, family and friends, and in some cases even from the coaches. While some athletes managed to stay committed to their process goals and keep a task focus, other athletes

described how they ended up adopting this result focus from their surroundings, which was not beneficial for their performance.

Discussion

In the present study, we interviewed 14 Olympic debutants within a month before they left for the most important competition of their athletic careers, and once again within a month of their return. Overall, through the interviews, we are presented with the stories of 14 very reflective athletes, who engage in many reflections about their participation in the Games. To these debutants, the Olympics are certainly not just another competition.

On the face of it, the present study supports much of the previous research on the Olympic Games. First, we found that the Olympics are indeed a very special event to the participants: it is regarded as a defining moment in an athlete's careers and carries the potential to change their life (McCann, 2008). Second, the athletes consider the event to be unique and incompatible with any competition in which they had previously participated. This uniqueness comes from the fact that the event only takes place every four years, is a multi-sport event with intense media coverage and public attention, as well as from the fact that the athletes are accommodated in an Olympic Village (Birrer et al., 2012; Blumenstein & Lidor, 2008; Gould & Maynard, 2009). Onsite stressors makes it difficult to undertake a complete mental preparation for the Olympic Games; hence, the sport psychology practitioner must prepare for unplanned tasks during the games. (Henriksen, 2014).

The present study also supports the notion that the Olympics are a much more stressful event than other competitions. The increased media attention, being part of a multi-sport team, the interest from family and friends, and the multitude of opportunities for taking part in sporting, social and sponsor events are all potential distractions which may add to the pressure (Birrer et al., 2012; Gould & Maynard, 2009; Greenleaf et al., 2001; Jowett & Spray, 2013). At the same time, an impressive service level by numerous volunteers, and a ready selection of free food and drinks intended to make life easier, in some cases only adds to the experience of pressure (Blumenstein & Lidor, 2008)

These special circumstances have prompted applied sport psychology practitioners to recommend that preparation for the Olympics be fine-tuned for the specific event and special challenges (Birrer et al., 2012; Samulski & Lopes, 2008; Vernacchia & Henschen, 2008). Through several initiatives on the part of the NOC and NGOs, the participants of the present study had indeed been well prepared for the special event. However, while feeling prepared for the Games, the debutants all experienced episodes of complete surprise and overwhelming magnitude. Like Ben, we ask ourselves if it is even possible to prepare debutants fully for the Olympics. Firstly, all of the athletes spoke of unpredicted events and unforeseen challenges, which have also been emphasized by McCann (2008), Pensgaard (2008) and (Wylleman & Johnson (2012). However, and perhaps even more importantly, the athletes were unprepared for how the event affected them. Examples included athletes who were surprised by their own reactions to the ceremonies and other athletes' good or bad performances, to seeing superstars in the dining hall, and to the requests of tickets from friends and family. Such reactions are perhaps more difficult to prepare for.

A finding of the present study, which has received less attention in previous research, is the athletes' experience of being caught in a dilemma. The athletes are told many and divergent stories about the Olympics throughout their career; stories that in the present study seem to revolve around two central and opposing ideas about the spirit of the Olympics. On the one hand, "the Olympics as the most important competition of my athletic career" demands that the athlete is fully focused on his or her own performance, and therefore must maintain adequate performance routines. On the other hand, "the Olympics as the experience of a lifetime" stimulates the athletes to engage in social and sponsor events, to cheer for other athletes, to try a variety of food from different corners of the world, and to regard the opening and closing ceremonies as important events.

On a deeper level, this is related to what is perhaps a fundamental and wide rift between the aims of the individual Olympic athlete and his or her national elite sport organization. The Finnish sport sociologist Kalevi Heinilä has thus argued that although many regard the system of competition to have largely positive benefits, these may be accompanied by negative side effects. In his theory of the totalization process of sport, Heinilä explains this by pointing to how the level of demands in international elite sport results in a “spiral of competition,” leading to what he coined the “Iron Law of Totalization” (Heinilä, 1982). As a result of ever-increasing performance demands, international sport transforms (or totalizes) into a competition between “systems” rather than individual athletes. Since the aim of the system is to cover all matters that are of importance for the overall production capacity of the system, it has to make sure that all resources are utilized in the best way possible, hence increasing the chances of international success. Consequently, Heinilä argues, the totalization of the system increases the individual athlete’s dependency on the system, its conditions and its control. This in turn may lead to conflicts of interests, where both sides – the athletes and the system – seek to protect their interests to the best of their abilities. The internal logic of the system also means that authoritarian tendencies are reinforced in the system’s decision-making and yielding of power (Heinilä, 1982). Even though Heinilä’s theory has been around for more than 30 years, the last 40 years of Olympic history and a significant body of empirical evidence from the last decade has backed up his theory by demonstrating that it is the systems with the most integrated elite sports policies that have the best medal-winning capabilities (De Bosscher, Bingham, Shibli, Van Bottenburg, & De Knop, 2008; Houlihan & Green, 2008). Although it appears that athletes just compete against each other as individuals or teams, success in top-level sport is fundamentally dependent on the optimization of all background conditions. The system of which the athlete or team is a representative must therefore – if it responds rationally and logically to the increasing international competition – optimize its performance capacity by adjusting all relevant parameters. This condition is now a matter of course in all nations with Olympic ambitions (even in the United States, although the state plays a very limited role here). Consequently, it is the overall performance of the elite sport system, rather than that of the individual athlete (or team), that is of primary importance for the national elite sport organisations – as is also apparent by the notorious medal count statistics. However, this emphasis on the system may collide with the understanding of the individual athlete, who has to regard his or her performance and perspective as of utmost importance, otherwise the immense amount of training and the privations on their social and family life cannot be justified. However, given that the system is optimized for performance and not for the experience of the individual athlete, conflicts may arise. The lived experience of this is what is played out in Susie’s story. After winning a silver medal in her event, she looked forward to having the almost mythic Olympic experience about which she had heard so much. But reality did not live up to her expectations, and she subsequently blamed the officials on the Danish team for completely neglecting her. In her reasoning, she got them the desired medal, but she did not get the Olympic experience she was offered in prospect in return. From a systemic point of view, the Danish two-day rule made perfect sense, since it assured tranquility in the Village for athletes preparing for competitions; at the same time, however, it was one of the roots of Susie’s frustration. She clearly did not accept the premise that the system’s performance was more relevant than her experience.

Although specific elements can be adjusted according to the context, the overall potential for conflict between the individual athlete(s) and a nation state’s elite sport organisations is built into the system because of their divergent aims and perspectives, i.e., the first-person perspective of the athlete versus the overall capability of the nation or system. In addition, the potential for athlete-system conflicts is likely to be higher for athletes in individual sports rather than team sports, since they have no athlete colleagues with whom they can share their potential problems and frustrations. Although quite a few found them annoying, most athletes in our research demonstrated an understanding of the decisions made by the administrators of the Danish Olympic team, including an acceptance of the so-called two-day rule. Susie’s story nevertheless illustrates that if the respective expectations of the athletes and the systems or organisations behind them are not calibrated in a satisfactory manner, it may lead to conflict and frustration that have the potential to be counterproductive for the overall performance.

Methodological considerations

A unique feature of the present study was the fact that the interviews were carried out in close temporal proximity to the Games. Often a sports federation will be keen to protect their athletes from all irrelevant tasks, which are often seen as mere distractions. Yet this also meant that we only had access to a relatively small sample (14 of the 70 Danish debutants), which involves a potential bias. Although we present our results in the form of narratives, we do not claim to have taken a narrative approach in the full sense (Smith, 2009). In narrative research, the interviewer will most often conduct longer and less structured interviews, in which the interviewee is allowed to unfold his or her story in depth. In the present study, however, as a result of the close proximity to the Games, athletes and coaches were very careful to point out that the interviews could not take too long. This forced the researcher to be more structured and time-efficient than otherwise preferred. We still believe, however, that presenting the results in the form of stories is illustrative of the study's findings.

Applied perspectives

Although the present study is not an evaluation of the setup of athletic preparation and does not measure effect, the athletes do mention that they felt well prepared for a number of the challenges they encountered at the Olympics. They particularly mention as helpful media training, listening to advice from former Olympians and the more specific sport psychology interventions. For these reasons, we feel confident in recommending that any NOC engage in such activities. At a practical level we recommend that the NOC arrange the aforementioned activities in seminars at a larger scale, since the interviewees in our study mentioned as important the opportunity to meet other debutants before the Olympics. This especially concerned athletes competing in individual sports with a low number of participants. They stated that knowing other debutants before entering the Olympics made them less anxious regarding the unknown elements of the Olympics; hence, they knew they were not alone at the event. Some of the interviewees who did not have the opportunity to meet other debutants or athletes before the Olympics mentioned that they wished they had participated in events that could have provided them with the opportunity. At the same time, it seems that such preparations do not cover the whole range of potential disrupters. Some of these – for instance, the potential athlete-system conflicts – are issues that both athletes and sport psychologists must be prepared to address. The latter conflict is furthermore an area where future research is needed. Despite serious preparatory efforts, the athletes are still surprised by the sheer scale of the event, as well as by the whole uncustomary setup surrounding the event. For these reasons, we recommend that the onsite support system includes sport psychology support that can help athletes deal with unexpected challenges, emotions, thoughts and dilemmas as they arise, all while knowing that an onsite support system requires resources, preparation and time. (Pensgaard & Abrahamsen, 2012; Williams & Andersen, 2012).

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AUTHOR'S ADDRESS:

Rune Dall Jensen
 Centre of Medical Education
 Faculty of Health
 Aarhus University
 Brendstrupgårdsvej 102
 Bygn A. 8200
 Aarhus N, Denmark
 Email: Rdje@medu.au.dk