

# ***Controlling Your Olympic Moment!***

***A Gift from the Experiences of the 2012 USA Track & Field  
Olympic Medal Winners***

***In Preparation for the 2016 Olympic Games  
Rio de Janeiro, Brazil***

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# ***Controlling Your Olympic Moment!***

## ***A Gift from the Experiences of the 2012 USA Track & Field***

### ***Olympic Medal Winners***

#### **The Proposal**

In the Fall of 2012, Dr. Rick McGuire, long time Head Track and Field Coach and Director of Sport Psychology at the University of Missouri and the Chair of Sport Psychology for USATF for 27 years, and Dr. Anne Shadle, former 2X NCAA Champion and All American miler for the University of Nebraska, proposed to the leaders of USA Track and Field their desire to conduct a formal research study, specifically focused on the athletes who won individual Olympic medals at the recently concluded London Olympic Games.

The researchers proposed to study the actual lived experiences of these Olympic medal-winning athletes. Many athletes dreamed and prepared to make the Olympic Team and to win an Olympic Medal. Only a very few succeeded in standing on the Olympic Games Medal Awards Podium. For these athletes, their process of preparation and performance delivery worked. The researchers were interested in determining what were the key factors - beyond talent, and beyond physical/technical training - that impacted these athletes achieving success and winning their medal(s) at the Olympic Games.

Specifically the three major factors to be explored included:

- Did the athletes undertake deliberate preparations, beyond physical/technical training, that impacted the athletes' ability to meet the challenges of the Olympic Games experience, having a successful performance, and winning an Olympic medal? What were the defining challenges and what were the specific deliberate preparations that

supported their success?

- Did the athletes have a strong identification with personal values, beliefs, and a strong sense of self-determination? Did this impact the necessary motivation, willpower, persistence, and perseverance necessary to achieve success?
- Did the athletes have a strong sense of autonomy, supporting and allowing them to make right choices in response to critical challenges? Did this lead to and define outstanding performance, culminating in success and winning an Olympic medal?

In addition to Dr. McGuire and Dr. Shadle, the research team included their Sport Psychology colleagues at the University of Missouri, Dr. Brian Zuleger, Dr. Robert Low and Derek Marr, each with many years of significant experiences with high level competitive Track and Field.

## **The Study**

In September of 2008, following the 29<sup>th</sup> Olympic Games in Beijing, there were literally thousands of American track and field athletes who entered the four-year quadrennial leading to the 2012 Olympic Games, dreaming and working towards qualifying for the United States Olympic Track and Field Team Trials. By June of 2012, less than ***1,500 of these athletes had qualified for, and participated in the U.S. Olympic Trials.*** From these, only ***126 qualified to become members of the 2012 United States Olympic Track and Field Team.***

At the ***2012 London Olympic Games***, there were ***2,231 Track and Field athletes entered, with 143 Olympic Medals*** awarded in the sport of Track and Field. From the ***126*** members of the United States Olympic Track and Field Team, only ***23 athletes*** were successful in winning ***25 of the 143 coveted individual Olympic medals (Gold -7, Silver -11, Bronze -7).***

From ***thousands who dreamed, only 23 individuals won***

*individual Olympic medals.* All that we know for certain is that whatever each of these 23 athletes did in *their process of preparation and performance delivery, it worked.* It was the intent of this research project to study the actual lived experiences of these athletes.

From this extraordinarily elite and limited pool of qualified participants for the study, 14 of these athletes responded to the invitation and agreed to participate, along with 6 of their coaches. Individual open-ended interviews were conducted, allowing for each to “tell their story”, leading to and through their standing on the Olympic medal podium. These interviews ranged from 1-7 hours in length, and produced more than 4000 pages of transcribed text. The study used an array of qualitative research approaches, including narrative and multiple case study designs. Cross case analyses were employed to illuminate the findings.

## **This Report**

The purpose of this report is to provide each of you with insight into the lived experiences of these *Olympic medal-winning Track & Field athletes*, and specifically the *critical moments, and the intentional responses* that influenced each *Olympic medal winning performance.*

When each of these athletes walked out of the tunnel, onto the Olympic stage, we learned how, in that moment, they took control of their Olympic moment. *This is the challenge for every Olympic athlete.* There is evidence from the narratives of these athletes that suggest, “*Controlling the Olympic Moment*” was the ultimate critical moment! This process did not begin when they entered the Olympic stadium.

*Either the athlete controls the environment or the environment controls the athlete!*

The athletes shared intimate understandings found within the crevices of their lived experiences leading to and through the Olympic Games. These athletes were prepared. They were

experienced in making *autonomous* decisions. They were *intrinsically motivated* and determined. They recognized the *critical challenge in the moment, and they took control*.

In the Olympic Games the intensity of competition is extraordinarily high. This intensity is driven by the worldwide public interest in the Olympics; the perceived importance and value placed on being the Olympic Champion and winning Olympic medals; the actual and potential monetary reward that can be derived from Olympic success; by the fact that all of the very best athletes in the world are competing for the same prize; and, that there will not be another chance for four more years. In this setting, only an athlete's very best performances will give them even the chance for winning an Olympic medal.

In any high level sporting competition, and especially in the Olympic Games, there are critical moments, critical incidents or critical events that strongly influence, or even directly determine the success or failure of the athlete's performance. These events, incidents or moments can occur during the competition, in the environment prior to the competition, or even during the months, weeks and days leading to the competition.

These critical moments can be sport related or non-sport specific, such as stress related, romantic relationships or friends. How *the athlete responds* when experiencing and facing these *critical moments* can have everything to do with the *competitive outcome* that will follow.

In the words of USOC veteran sport psychologists Dr. Sean McCann and Dr. Peter Haberl, the challenge for every Olympic athlete is ... *“can the athlete put their mind where it needs to be to perform at the Olympic Games?”* (Haberl), while being comfortable with the reality that, *“at the Olympic Games, everything is a performance issue”* (McCann).

## **The Big “SO WHAT?”**

This is the question that confronts all researchers. “So what?” What has really been found, and what difference will it make in our world?

This research suggests that **“Controlling the Olympic Moment”** uncovers something new. It provides a shift in the paradigm, with an entirely different configuration and context for examining Olympic athletes’ experiences. And, these athletes were not just Olympians. They were all Olympic Medal Winners! Several of them were Olympic Champions! They won the Gold Medal!

Again, when each of these athletes walked out of the tunnel, onto the Olympic stage, they **took control of that Olympic moment**. They silenced the stadium, controlled the chaos by *focusing on what they could control - their own minds and their own performance*. This is the challenge for every Olympic athlete. There is evidence from the narratives that suggest, **“Controlling the Olympic Moment” was the ultimate critical moment, and it did not start when they entered the Olympic stadium.**

**Your challenge – Controlling YOUR Olympic Moment!**

## **Personal Thoughts From The Olympic Medal Winners**

*“I remember getting off the shuttle and walking into the stadium and I thought, ‘THIS IS THE DAY!’”*

*“I get out to the track. Nervous. I stepped on the track and I looked around. The stadium was cool, people were screaming. It was LOUD, and then I thought, ‘Okay, they’re*

*all cheering for you, they all want to you win.’ I thought, ‘Those are YOUR fans.’ Got quiet and I just relaxed. I wasn’t nervous anymore. I was chillin getting into the blocks.”*

*“If you stay in your lane, you will win. If you don’t worry about what they’re doing, then you’re going to win this race.”*

*“I just remember before the competition, reflecting on the past two Olympics and just feeling really grateful to have that opportunity.”*

*“I just have a super competitive nature. I thrive off that. I want to compete with whoever.”*

*“At the Olympics it was the perfect set up. After every round, we had our routine. The chiropractor and doctor were there. My mom would drop off my dinner. She would go to the store there and they had a full kitchen, so she would cook during the day and then go to the track and drop it off that night. That was our little routine. That was our whole system. We went through the whole games like that.”*

*“Every race I get nervous. It’s just when I step on the track I feel like I’m in my element. I focus on what I need to do at that time.”*

*“My support system has been constant.”*

*“I love the big moments. I really try to enjoy the big moments because sometimes you can stress yourself out so much and then it’s over. I really don’t want do that because I remember being on my knees, crying, praying to run fast. So I tell myself, ‘How dare you?!’ Take away that moment from yourself or make yourself so nervous that you don’t perform. I always say, if I don’t run well it WON’T be because of me.”*

*“The Olympic moment is not necessarily about what you do then, but about what you do leading up ‘til then. “You’re*

*both there (athlete and coach), you've done all the work, all the preparation technically, thought process, everything."*

Each of the athletes had different challenges, for which they responded with a specific and definite plan of action.

**"Taking Control of the Olympic Moment"** means that they had skills and preparations built in. The narratives of these athletes showed us clearly that *the Olympians were tested, not only in the discipline of their event, but in handling the entire experience* of first preparing for and qualifying at the U.S. Olympic Trials, then leading from the trials to the games, and then in handling the entire Olympic environment and all that is presented there. Having an awareness of their own personal needs added to their readiness to respond and to take control, allowing for success in winning the gold, silver or bronze medals.

## **Suggestions**

### **Control Your Olympic Moment!**

- Every Olympic athlete and Olympic hopeful should begin intentionally building their personal "Controlling My Olympic Moment" Plan well in advance of the Olympic Trials and Olympic Games. Now would be best!
- Plan and build the athlete's "Protective Bubble", to shield the athlete from the threat from the onslaught of incessant challenges. (Including those from intended supporters – i.e. USOC officials/plans, USATF officials/plans, sponsors, agents, coaches, family, friends, the Olympic Village, et al)
- Every Olympic athlete and Olympic hopeful should become masters of the SKILLS of FOCUS. FOCUS is a skill! (see Focus outline below)

- Every Olympic athlete and Olympic hopeful should engage in the early preparation and development of the psychosocial understandings, skills, perspectives, characteristics and approaches that are necessary for supporting successful performance at the Olympic Games.
- Critical Moments – These may and will be experienced in many different forms – injury/health challenges, coach-athlete and other key relationships, weather conditions, training disruptions, climate, time zone changes, financial, nutritional, environmental, cultural, protecting and coordinating pre-Olympic training, and practice track facility schedules and limitations, ... etc.
- Critical Moments – Olympic athletes and Olympic hopefuls must be prepared to anticipate and recognize these as “critical moments” as they are encountered, to make the decision to respond decisively, and to protect and control their Olympic Moment.
- Control Your Olympic Trials Moment - If it does not happen here, athletes do not make the Olympic Team, and then there are no Olympic moments to be controlled. (Note: the United States Olympic Track and Field Team is coined as "The Hardest Team in the World to Make")
- The Olympic Moment - Every Olympian, and without a doubt every Olympic Champion, is necessarily confronted with this challenge - Control Your Olympic Moment!

### **Well-Being – The Flourish: PERMA Model**

(Seligman)

- The PERMA model provides five experiential elements that describe a person’s well-being. They are: **P**ositive Emotions, **E**ngagement, **P**ositive **R**elationships, **M**eaning, and **A**chievement.

- Well-being is experiencing a balance between the challenges faced and resources accessible in a person's life.
- When a person experiences one or more of the PERMA elements they begin to flourish, thus experiencing a balance in their well-being.
- Any sources of the imbalance can be interfering factors to performance. Coaches and athletes should be knowledgeable, aware, planning and monitoring the athlete's personal well-being, just as they are attentive to the physiological training and technical development. All are necessary to become fully prepared to successfully achieve at the Olympic Games.
- To win or medal at the Olympic Games, athletes have to perform at their best. Any slight interference can be the difference between winning a medal and not winning a medal.
- Housed within the engagement element of PERMA is the skill of FOCUS. It is critical to learn this skill to enhance the engagement element of PERMA. (See FOCUS is a Skill outline, which is included at the end of this document.)
- It is critical to understand what the elements of well-being are and how they are experienced by each individual athlete.
- It is critical to enhance those elements of well-being, thus promoting a flourishing life and reducing potential interfering factors.
- Being able to manage and enhance your own individual well-being and to flourish is a big part of "Controlling Your Olympic Moment."
- You do want to flourish at the Olympic Games!

## **Self Determination Theory (SDT)**

(Deci & Ryan)

- **Intrinsic Motivation** is the strongest, most powerful, most impacting, enduring and lasting of any of our motivational experiences.
- Coaches and athletes should intentionally do anything possible to build and support the athlete's intrinsic motivation. Conversely, coaches and athletes should avoid any strategies or experiences that would diminish the athlete's intrinsic motivation.
- Autonomy is the key to developing an athlete's intrinsic motivation. Autonomy is experiencing the opportunity to make key important decisions for oneself, about oneself and by oneself!
- Coaches should allow, instruct and support athletes to actively participate in making key decisions regarding their preparations and competitive experiences.
- Autonomy and intrinsic motivation promote competence and engagement.
- What was it about these athletes that allowed them to take control of their Olympic moment? They responded with autonomy. These athletes, and no one else, had to make the decision on how to handle each situation.

## **Coach-Athlete Relationship**

- There was considerable reported evidence, both unique yet consistent, of the importance of the impact of the role of the coach-athlete relationship in both the preparation for and delivery of the intentional control processes leading to successful Olympic medal winning performance.

- All of these coaches placed a priority emphasis on the importance of developing an independent athlete, by providing an autonomy supportive environment, where the athletes were intentionally taught and allowed to make choices, for themselves, about themselves and by themselves.
- The coaches and athletes suggested that the coach should act as a positive model for the athlete by having and displaying a positive attitude, evidenced by their reaction and response in times of distress.
- The most important factor that athletes and coaches identified was the need to build a coaching relationship that centered on trust and mutual respect. These coaches and athletes had caring relationships, where both the coach and athlete reciprocated care and gratitude for each other.
- It is important to have a plan for how to stay positive and effectively handle distractions, so as to remain focused and composed, while conserving energy, and remaining optimistic,
- Athletes cited focusing on the process, focusing on what one can control and focusing on one's self, as methods for helping improve their performance
- These athletes had specific plans for the time between the trials and the Games that involved minimal competition and emphasized rest, regeneration, and quality practice.

## **Summation**

The research has shown the intimate understandings found within the depth of the lived experiences of these great Olympians. *Either the athlete controls the environment or the environment controls the athlete.* These athletes were

prepared, they were experienced in making autonomous decisions, they were intrinsically motivated and determined, they recognized the critical challenge in the moment, and they took control.

Just as the athlete has a race plan, this research suggests a mental plan and strategy for the Olympic year, to and through the Olympic Trials, and then to and through the Olympic Games. The current research would support that the athletes were prepared from having prior experiences with autonomy; they were fueled with intrinsic motivation; and, they were wrapped with PERMA experiences. They were able to maintain and sustain their focus! **They Controlled Their Olympic Moment, and They Won Their Olympic Medals.**

This research suggests that these Olympic medal-winning athletes should make great models for future Olympic hopefuls, medalists and Champions.

This research and report is their gift to you!

It's now all about YOU **"Controlling Your 'Olympic' Moment!"**

**The “Big So What?” – “Controlling Your Olympic Moment!”**

If you would like a digital copy of the 100 page Executive Summary Report of the “Controlling Your Olympic Moment” Research Project, please email your request to:

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## **The SKILLS of FOCUS**

Sport Psychology is all about “Thinking Right in Sport”!

Wrong Thoughts Hurt Performance!  
Right Thoughts Help Performance!  
Learn to Recognize the Difference!  
**CHOOSE to THINK RIGHT!**

**FOCUS - The Ultimate Sport Skill!**  
Distraction - Thinking Wrong!  
**FOCUS - Thinking Right!**

### **The Five Skills of FOCUS**

1. Time Orientation- In the present! Right Here! Right Now!
2. Positive Self Talk - Develop the Habit of Strong  
Positive Affirmations!
3. Composure – Not too High; Not Too Low; Just Right!
4. Concentration - Find What Matters! Pay attention to that!
5. Confidence - Confidence is just a CHOICE! Your Choice!!

**Focus is a skill! It is not an attitude!**

### **The “C’s” of SuCCCCCess**

Confidence: Total trust that you are about to deliver your best!  
Concentration: Find the key information; stay focused on that!  
Composure: Not too high! Not too low! Just Right!  
Courage: Recognize the presence of fear, and go anyway!  
Commitment: Final decision is made before meeting the  
challenge!

**Control: You take it!**  
**Choice: You make it!**

This is autonomy! Focus is autonomy! Nobody can focus for you!

