Literature Review: The Path to Excellence – A comprehensive view of development of U.S. Olympians who competed from 1984 to 1998

Today’s Expert Advantage blog post is a guest post written by Young-Bin Cho. Young-Bin is a 3rd year student at the University of Guelph-Humber, Ontario, Canada, working towards a Bachelor of Applied Science in Kinesiology. Young-Bin is currently completing a fieldwork placement as a research assistant with the Pathways to the Podium Research Project, and has been contributing to a wide range of tasks. In this post, Young-Bin reviews some of the literature that inspired the Pathways to the Podium Research Project.

The Path to Excellence was a study undertaken by the United States Olympic Committee (USOC) in an attempt to describe and understand the factors that contributed to the development of U.S. Olympians (1). This study presents a number of practical findings relevant to athlete development and talent identification that are along similar lines to those being investigated in the Pathways to the Podium Research Project.

816 male and female Olympians were recruited to participate in this study; all of whom competed in either the Summer or Winter Olympic Games between the years 1984 to 1998. All athletes completed a detailed questionnaire regarding the history of their involvement in sport, and their experiences throughout their journey to the Olympics. Some of the main findings that I found particularly interesting and applicable to coaching and athlete development are outlined below.

The Important Qualities of a Coach

What do athletes look for in a coach? The Olympians were asked to identify and rank the characteristics they value most in a coach. Here are the results:

1. Teaching ability
2. Ability to motivate or encourage
3. Training knowledge
4. Strategic knowledge of the sport
5. Skill competence
6. Personality
Important qualities of a coach for male and female Olympians (Source: Gibbons et al. 2002)

Olympians rated the ability to teach and the ability to motivate or encourage as the most important qualities of a coach. It’s interesting that skill competence and strategic knowledge of sport were ranked secondary to the above-mentioned qualities. It seems as though athletes were less concerned with technical knowledge of a coach and more with their ability to communicate and teach effectively, along with the ability to motivate and encourage.

Factors that contributed to long-term improvement

Another section of the study focused on what Olympians thought contributed to their long-term success. Essentially, what factors helped propel them to an elite level?

The top 6 factors identified by the athletes were:

1. Dedication/commitment
2. Mental focus
3. Competitive success
4. Family
5. Coaching
6. Training environment

Figure 2 - Factors for long term performance progression in male and female Olympians (Source: Gibbons et al. 2002)

Olympians ranked dedication/commitment first, followed by mental focus and competitive success. These results suggest that it takes a conscious effort from the athlete to make sacrifices and devote oneself to constant self-improvement in order to become an expert in their sport.

It’s no secret that the path to becoming an elite-level athlete is long and arduous; it is a journey that is often travelled at a tortoise-like pace. So it perhaps comes as no surprise that dedication/commitment was ranked as the most important factor.

However, it is noteworthy that the first three factors were all related to *intrinsic* factors – characteristics that came from the individual athlete. These three intrinsic factors were then followed by three *external* factors. Family, coaching, and training environment all pertained to the environment in which an athlete grows and is cultivated.
These data indicate that a complex set of factors contribute to the success of an Olympic-level athlete. The character of the athlete appears to play a primary role; however, it is not the sole contributor to an athlete’s success. The athlete’s environment and social support structures play a vital (albeit secondary) role as well.

Interestingly, financial incentive and reward was ranked last among all of the factors suggesting that Olympic athletes were not driven by monetary or material awards.

**Factors that contributed to the dropout of peers of Olympians**

The researchers were also interested in knowing why the peers of Olympians were not able to achieve the same degree of success. People are always curious to know why some athletes succeed while others do not. The top 6 reasons were ranked by Olympians as follows:

1. Conflict with other life pursuits
2. Financial pressures
3. Failure to improve
4. Conflict with work
5. Time pressure
6. Injury
Conflict with other life pursuits was ranked as the number one reason peers of the Olympians discontinued their sport. In fact, three of the top six factors were related to conflict issues (conflict with other life pursuits, conflict with work, time pressure). It seems as though conflict with demands outside of sport is a major and fundamental reason why competitive athletes discontinue with their sport.

Moreover, although financial incentive and reward were not ranked as motivating factors for the elite-level athletes, financial pressures were ranked as a main reason why peers of Olympians discontinued their sport. Although this may seem contradictory, it suggests that while athletes are not motivated by money, they do require some sense of financial security in order to pursue excellence in their sport.

**Yearly training hours for Olympians**

The athletes were asked to report their yearly training hours as they progressed through their athletic careers. Results are presented in Figure 4 below:

![Figure 4 - Yearly training hours for male and female Olympians (Source: Gibbons et al. 2002)](image)
study progressed from 200-300 training hours per year in the developmental stages to more than 1100 training hours per year at the Olympic level.

Factors motivating athletes to participate in their sport

The Olympians were asked to rank the motives as to why they originally decided to participate in their sport. Here is what they said:

1. Challenge/love of competition
2. Fun
3. Desire to be successful
4. Competitive outlet
5. Intrinsic value of sport
6. Acquisition of skill

![Bar chart showing factors motivating athletes]

Figure 5 - Factors that motivated male and female Olympians to participate in their sport (Source: Gibbons et al. 2002)

Competitive factors played a large part in motivating athletes to participate in their sport. In addition, fun and a desire to be successful played a role as well. These results suggest that youth sport programs should emphasize fun, enjoyment and a
healthy level of competition in order to develop a solid foundation from which athletes can build upon and grow.

**Conclusion**

There are many practical applications from these results that can be put to use by both athletes and coaches.

Since athletes ranked the ability to teach, motivate and encourage as the most desirable qualities of a coach, program coordinators should hire coaches with these attributes. In addition, current coaches should look to augment these qualities in order to improve both their own, and their athletes’ performance.

Olympians felt that dedication/commitment was the most important factor contributing to their long term development and success. Along with other intrinsic factors, they also felt that environmental factors played a key role. Peers of Olympians who were not able to achieve the same degree of success seemed to be held back by a conflict with other life pursuits. Interestingly, monetary factors did not play a role in motivating Olympians; however, a lack of financial support blunted the development of peers of Olympians.

This study also highlighted that in order to achieve Olympic success, a gradual increase in training load should be applied over a long period of time. In other words, the athlete should not be overwhelmed with their sport at an early age. In fact, results suggest that youth sport programs should emphasize fun and enjoyment (along with a healthy level of competition) in order to best develop young athletes.

In terms of the process and factors that precede the development of an Olympic-level athlete, perhaps researcher Benjamin Bloom summed it up best in his book Developing Talent in Young People (2): “...no matter what the initial characteristics of the individuals, unless there is a long and intensive process of encouragement, nurturance, education, training, the individuals will not attain extreme levels of capability in the particular fields.” This seems to suggest that in order to become an expert in a particular sport, a long, intensive, industrious journey is required that depends not only on the athlete, but also on a nurturing environment and support group.
What do you believe are the most important qualities of a coach and the most important contributing factors to long term development? We’d love to hear your thoughts so add your comments below or contact us on Twitter (@pathways2podium) or Facebook (http://www.facebook.com/pathways2podium).

References


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The Pathways to the Podium Research Team consists of: Ms. Melissa Hopwood, PhD Candidate, Victoria University, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia; Dr. Joe Baker, School of Kinesiology and Health Science, York University, Toronto, Ontario, Canada; Dr. Clare MacMahon, School of Sport and Exercise Science, Victoria University, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia; Dr. Damian Farrow, Victoria University, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, and the Australian Institute of Sport, Canberra, Australian Capital Territory, Australia.