

Podcast Recording Transcription

Chloe: Hey everyone, I'm Chloe. I'm a first-year doctoral student in the Laboratory for Sport Psychology and Performance Excellence, and I'm here today with Dr. Barbara Meyer. She's my advisor, and she is a professor at the University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee and she is also the director of our lab.

Besides her many duties here at UWM, she is also the lead sport and performance psychology consultant for the Olympic Winter Institute of Australia. The most recent Winter Olympic Games in Beijing marked the sixth Olympic Games that she has attended in her role as sport and performance psychology consultant for competing athletes. Today, we're going to learn more about her experience in this first lab podcast. So thank you so much for being here today.

Dr. Meyer: Hi, Chloe. It's so awesome to be able to talk to you about this. Thanks for inviting me on the pod.

Chloe: Yes, you're welcome. Given your background, you're from the Midwest. How did you end up working for the Australian Olympic Committee, and with aerial skiing specifically?

Dr. Meyer: Yeah, great question. As you know, Chloe, from being here in the Midwest for a while, we have huge mountain ranges. Oh, wait, no we don't. That's right.

So you're exactly right. I really got into my work with aerial skiing through a few referrals and was connected with members of the US Ski Team. It was through my work with the US Ski Team that I received some referrals to the Australian Olympic Winter Institute. That was many, many, many years ago. I worked with that athlete and a coach and she ended up winning a gold medal in women's freestyle aerial skiing in 2002. Her name is Alisa Camplin. Alisa has been very public with our work, so I'm not speaking out of turn or violating any confidentiality. And so it was that first foray into working with Australia and Australian athletes, and then the rest is history. I've been working with them generally and with their aerial ski team for just about 20 years now.

Chloe: That first experience must have been pretty high pressure to be thrown into.

Dr. Meyer: Yeah. It's interesting, because I look back on it now after serving in this capacity for six Winter Olympics, and I didn't really have any expectations. I'd never worked with aerial skiing and I'd never worked with Australian athletes, and I'd never worked at an Olympic Games. So I was a rookie in every single sense of the word. I just had very few expectations, was really just trying to help an athlete and a coach to achieve their potential. And it just so happened that everything clicked on the day and she won a gold medal. It is a really nice way to start because then you think, wow, this is just going to happen every four years, which it did for quite a while. So yeah, a good way to dip your toe into the Olympic water for sure.

Chloe: Yes, definitely. As a consultant, you're also a performer. What are some challenges that you face performing your role at an event like the Winter Olympics?

Dr. Meyer: The Winter Olympics, any outdoor sport, I think, provides some challenges for CMPCs as performers. Certainly we have weather, so maybe you work with a golfer and you're dealing with wind and rain and you as a consultant are outside in those conditions. And when we're talking about winter sport, certainly it's cold. Or sometimes it's not and it's supposed to be cold, so maybe it's too warm and it's supposed to be cold. Typically, it's really cold, it can be quite snowy.

Certainly, the wind is a challenge in outdoor sport generally, but in winter outdoor sport because you're training and competing outside there are oftentimes schedule changes. Schedule format changes. There are cancellations. This year in Beijing for the women's aerials competition, it was a very rare blizzard in China. And so qualifications got pushed back a day, which meant that qualifications and finals were on the same day, which was not what had been on the schedule. So certainly those provide challenges.

I think, as a performer, also having to manage your own health. So any illness or injury that you may incur as a consultant, you want to be really mindful about that and take care of yourself. Challenges also include performance expectations. Sport is a big business, and so certainly there are consequences of winning and losing. And so not performing, when it's expected, can have financial as well as job consequences for a CMPC. So those are challenges, not performing up to standard performance expectations.

Certainly, the media and social media can be a challenge as well. At the Olympic Games, there's what we like to call five ring fever, which is, you know, the Olympics have the five rings. Oftentimes, the media doesn't come out until the Olympics or an athlete's friends and family don't come to watch until it's the Olympics. And so oftentimes, there is a different external vibe around that, quote, unquote, big or milestone event. And so not only do we see as CMPCs have to help athletes, staff, coaches, manage those external differences from a daily training environment or any other competition, but we also have to make sure that we manage those for ourselves so that we are performing up to standard, so that we're preparing and anticipating and so forth.

Chloe: What are some strategies or techniques that you use to coach yourself through those challenges?

Dr. Meyer: Yeah, that's a great question. And it makes me think of, as your question indicated, consultant as performer because we really are. We need to be on our game, as well, in order to be the best for the individuals who we are working with. Certainly, I really try to control what I can control, as cliché as that sounds. And that is making sure that I'm able to self-regulate as much as possible. I try to manage my sleep, my fuel, I use a support network who is not with me in that environment to just debrief and talk.

I use breathing and positive self-talk myself, and I try to rely on the rest of the staff team that's in place, we typically work together for a while. And so if I'm having a moment, someone else can step in, and vice versa. So we really try to support each other and cover for each other.

And then just try to anticipate and prepare as much as possible. I do a lot of scenario planning. If this happens, I'll do that. If this happens, I'll think this. So again, very much the sorts of strategies and techniques that we would give athletes or coaches. I really try to utilize those myself so that I can be my best in the environment for the client.

Chloe: So really practicing what you preach, it sounds like.

Dr. Meyer: Yeah, definitely, really have to walk the talk. Because the last thing we want is for a coach or a performance director to have to manage our nerves, our stress, the fact that we aren't doing our job.

Chloe: What are some common challenges that you saw athletes face at this past Olympics?

Dr. Meyer: Yeah, that's it. This past Olympics, I think, is a key phrase there. I think, oftentimes, athletes and staff and coaches are creatures of habit. So if you've been to an Olympic games before, you try to

rely on what worked for you at that previous event, or that previous competition. Well, that was a challenge because everything in Beijing was different than at a previous Olympic Games, because of COVID and the restrictions.

We didn't necessarily get the training that we would have. We didn't get the time on the Olympic sites where we would be competing in previous years like we might, because we couldn't travel to China. And so, we realized in early 2020, that this Olympic quad was going to be different for us. And we really tried to learn from what the summer athletes had gone through in Tokyo. Thankfully, we didn't have our games postponed, yet we could see how their lead-up to Tokyo was different. We really tried to learn from that.

I think one of the things that was really important in my position was to help athletes and staff and coaches to do a perspective shift regarding what you had done before. So in most Olympic Games, you'd have at least one or two test events on the Olympic site. We didn't get to do that, because we couldn't get to China, prior to the Olympics. Oftentimes, we would live in a sub site. We would not live in the Olympic Village, because there's so much commotion and so many distractions, we would live in a house or a sub site, near the Village. And we couldn't do that this time, so we just needed to do a perspective shift, and we just needed to own right away that things were going to be different. But different didn't necessarily mean worse. And really just help people to understand that we have performed well before when we haven't been on a site, when it's been our first time there, when we haven't had our own accommodation.

So that was a challenge that we needed to meet. We also met some of the challenges, I think, by adding COVID into our daily training and our competition routines. So as performers, we like to have routines, it gives us confidence and helps us to regulate our intensity. And so again, we had 18 plus months to know that after you finish competing and before you talk to the media, you just put on your mask, and you stay at a social distance from the interviewer. And in addition to having maybe hand warmers in your backpack, you also have hand sanitizer in your backpack. So again, we just added COVID policies and COVID practices into our daily training and our competition routines.

Another challenge, and I know that athletes from multiple countries, or different countries, have different challenges, but when we're talking about athletes from Australia, Australia had some of the most restrictive travel requirements around COVID. So athletes and staff from Australia weren't often let back into the country. So when they left the country to train, they were doing so with the knowledge that they may be gone for 9 plus months, and not able to go home for birthdays, for a graduation, if a friend or family member was ill or had passed away. They weren't going to be able to get back into the country. So we just had to plan for that, and find ways to meet those challenges.

Chloe: Definitely a lot of COVID related challenges, obviously.

Dr. Meyer: Yeah, there were, but they were challenges, but they weren't obstacles. We were really careful from the start to say we were trying to find a way to say yes to things. Instead of no, you can't do this. It was well how can we get to this place? How can we travel here? How can we make sure athletes are able to be in this competition? So we really tried to find green lights instead of red lights as it related to preparing for an Olympics during a pandemic.

Chloe: We're going to shift gears a little bit. I'm wondering, how do you use your experiences working with Olympic athletes in teaching your courses?

Dr. Meyer: Yeah, so that's a great question. Cases. And I'll call it cases, the cases of maybe there's an athlete who is injured and is rehabbing and returning to sport and then returning to performance. We often use those real-life examples in our undergraduate or graduate courses on psychology of injury.

When we're talking about, you know, what kind of approach that we're going to use with an athlete or a team. We may use the specific case of a coach, an athlete, a strength and conditioning specialist, a nutritionist, and a sport psychology specialist as part of a transdisciplinary team. And when things work well, and when things don't work well, as we're managing leadership, communication, group cohesion, group function. So when providing examples in class, or if we're doing our CMPC work and we're analyzing case studies, rather than making them up or having to go to a book, we are able to pull from real world examples that that I've been through or that I've experienced.

Similarly, any number of students, whether they're undergrads or grads, may have access to athletes, teams, coaches, for their independent research projects for their thesis and dissertation research. And so we have numerous situations of students coming out of our lab who have published work, that have involved qualitative studies with Olympic athletes, or Olympic teams. So students really do get to have access, either through case studies or through actual data collection, to athletes, staff, coaches at the highest end. And I think that's something that really helps them to hone their skills and to get a sense of what that kind of work is like.

Chloe: Could you say a little bit more about how you use these experiences specifically with students in the lab?

Dr. Meyer: Yeah. Students in the lab will have to maybe do a capstone project, they may need to do a poster presentation, what have you. And so based on their interest, we may give them access with informed consent documents approved, we may give them access to some of the training or competition data of the athletes and teams that we work with. So one of our former graduate students, for her master's thesis, did a case study of an Olympic slopestyle athlete through two consecutive ACL tears. And that's what she based her thesis research on, and got two publications out of it.

We had an athlete recently who wanted to delve more into self-regulation, particularly breathing. And so in collaboration with our sport and performance physiology lab, that athlete monitored her heart rate during training and she completed multiple, subjective measures. We used those data to help determine whether she needed to change some of the strategies that she was using around self-regulation and breathing. So we really try to solve real world concerns or problems, answer real questions that athletes and performers have, through the projects that students are doing in the lab.

Students also sometimes may be tapped to provide support. On projects, maybe there are executive summaries that we need to produce, and so they may analyze some of the data for that. And, again, get their hands dirty with some of those data and then help to shape what an executive summary might look like, which they may need in the work that they do as well.

Chloe: Definitely a great experience for them. My last question is, what advice would you give to novice practitioners who are interested in applied sport psychology?

Dr. Meyer: Wow. I think my overall advice is to play the long game, and delay your own gratification. And what I mean by that is, I oftentimes get phone calls from individuals who are interested in, and to quote them, I want to do what you do. I want to be you when I grow up. And I want to tell them, and I sometimes do tell them, well, it's been a really long journey, to be able to do what I'm doing to work with, you know, elite level athletes and teams, and be able to combine that effectively with the work, the teaching and the research work that I do at the university. And, just like you know, your top notch football coach or basketball coach doesn't start out coaching in the NBA or the NFL or Major League Soccer, they start out and coach a lot of sport along the way. Similar with strength and conditioning coaches or nutritionists. It goes for us as CMPCs as well. So you have to start and get experience. And that's usually at the lower level. So that's where I say, play the long game and delay gratification.

It starts for me with getting a good quality education that fits with your career goals, and also getting in the CMPC space. Really good quality supervision. There are different, there are different ways to get that education and different ways to get that supervision. So just to make sure that you complete your due diligence early on in your education to make sure that you've got a graduate program that fits for you and matches what you want to do.

I think also, as I alluded to, slow, steady progress. You can't rush, you can't rush a good thing. And so just as I said is the case with other performance-related professions, really just be patient and take each experience for what it is. And as you gain your experience, you will be gaining your confidence which will eventually get you that career goal.

I also would say stay curious, be a student of the performance game, and really try to enter the profession for the right reasons with the right people. Again, I get a lot of phone calls from people who will tell me I want to work at the most elite level, I'm really into this sport. I want to travel in the corporate jet. And I want to get all the goodies associated with elite sport. And I have a hard time continuing conversations for those reasons.

Because, as you know, Chloe, being in the lab for just one year, there are some perks that come along with doing this work at a high level. But there are a lot of hard hours. You know, athletes don't take holidays, the NBA plays on Christmas. There are time zone challenges and changes and so forth. And so it's really, it's a lot more challenging, I think, than oftentimes people think it is. So again, to play that long game and delay gratification and really know what you're in for.

I think if you can do that, and we have experience of graduates, from the students in our lab, that you can do really good high-quality work at a high level. At this Olympic Games in Beijing, one of our lab alumni and former PhD students, Dr. Stacy Gnacinski, who has a university position at Drake University, was also a CMPC sports psychology consultant in Beijing, so it was really cool to see her there and to share that experience with her a little bit. She did play the long game and delay gratification, has stayed curious and done the hard work to get there.

And one of our other PhD students, his work hasn't been public, but one of our other PhD students did some work with the Olympians in the lead up to China. And so again, examples of, if you do the work the right way, it certainly can pay off for you.

Chloe: Thank you so much for your insight, Dr. Meyer. I know it will be really valuable for our listeners and for me as well.

Dr. Meyer: Thanks Chloe. I really enjoyed talking to you and encourage anybody to be in touch if they have further questions or would like to discuss anything more.