

Young Norwegian Olympians' experiences from the 2012 youth Olympic Games

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Elite youth sport is a rather unexplored research field, and the young Olympians' experiences are hardly documented. The vision of the Youth Olympic Games (YOG) is to inspire young people around the world to participate in sport and adopt and live by the Olympic values. Moreover, this new International Olympic Committee (IOC) innovation is supposed to be much more than just another competition where the aim is to win; equally important is the YOG as a learning arena for education on the Olympic values, sharing and celebrating the cultures, and learning to become role models for the future (IOC, 2011). The introduction to the Olympic values is done in part through the athlete-focused mandatory Cultural Education Program (CEP) which includes activities like an arts project, competence projects, meet the role models panel sessions, and sustainability projects. As a result of the IOC's approach to the Games, no records are to be kept, and the young athletes are all seen as winners if they behave like Olympians. But what do these young elite athletes think of the Games; what are their experiences, thoughts on the YOGs?

The purpose of this investigation was to examine how the Norwegian Youth Olympic Team experienced the combination of Olympic competition and the CEP of the first winter Youth Olympic Games in Innsbruck, January 2012.

Theoretical framework

In a competitive event, an athlete may face both competitive and organizational stressors that they have to cope with using a variety of coping strategies (Nicholls & Polman, 2007). Organizational stressors (e.g., sport organization politics, selection of coaches, selection criteria for participation, housing, busses and planning) can disrupt athletic performance (Gould et al., 1999). Therefore, the YOG as a new competition, with the CEP as an important aspect, is an interesting arena to gain more knowledge about how adolescents perceive major competitions using the transactional model framework of Lazarus and Folkman (1984).

Methods

Participants were the Norwegian national team that consisted of 28 athletes (14 men and 14 women aged 15-18) who qualified for competition in luge, alpine skiing, cross-country skiing, biathlon, curling, ski jumping, freestyle skiing, Nordic combined and speed skating. Altogether this team won 2 gold, 6 silver and 2 bronze medals. Qualitative methodologies were used such as semi-structured

phone interviews (n=9) and observations (several competitions sites, Congress centre, Opening ceremony etc.) The interviews started with: (a) General questions about their own previous experiences with major competition (b) expectations and experiences with the combination of competition and CEP, (c) whether they experienced stress of any kind; and (d) if so, how they coped with the different stressors. Data from the observations and interviews were compared through content analysis, specifically pattern matching (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Results and discussion

The young Norwegian Olympians came to the YOG in order to do their best: "we are elite athletes; of course we take the competition seriously" (Man, age 17). They perceived the competition as bigger due to the size, and there were many new issues to adapt to like security, the Olympic Village and travel distance to venues and food. In order to cope with the new situation (perceived as additional stressors), the athletes used social support from team officials, each other and their parents (95% of the athletes had their parents present at YOG – and some also had grandparents, siblings, aunts and uncles).

The official CEP was optimal for the athletes who only had one or two days of competitions, as they had to stay for the entire period the Games lasted. As a result, the Norwegian athletes enjoyed the CEP after, in between, or if they had some extra time to spend at the Congress Centre in Innsbruck (where the CEP was located), a 10-minute bus ride away from the Olympic Village. To be enrolled in the Olympic atmosphere was harder for the athletes whose sports had several competitions and organized practices every day. Instead, recovery was prioritized when facing a tough competitive schedule.

In conclusion, it seems that the young Olympians are curious, enjoy the learning element of the competition, but for many, the unstructured and spontaneous meetings made a greater impression than the organized cultural program. The CEP may easily be perceived as an extra organizational stressor for the athletes that already had several new issues or stressors to cope with. If the YOG are to be a development-based event, organizers will need to consider the young athletes' perceptions of stressors and adapt the program accordingly.

References

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