

## Trying to Answer a Very Good Question

A colleague of mine posed a question today in response to some thoughts I had written on social media about how Olympic athletes need to be very close to their personal best to make it through the rounds. My initial comments had been about Track & Field athletes but I am sure that the concept applies to just about everyone. My colleague asked, *"What number of team members need to set a personal best at the Olympics (or any other 'tournament' competition) for the team to be seen as being well prepared in terms of preparation and peaking?"*

My reply - What a great question. It deserves a sensible answer so I hope you don't mind if I add some scattered thoughts as opposed to simply plucking a figure out of the air. Don't worry – there is a figure in here somewhere.

It is a question worthy of much discussion as the answer implicates more than the coach into the debate. Once high performance is truly understood, then a strategy can be created that allows for each coach/athlete unit to thrive within whatever national strategy is put in place. I would suggest that measuring a team's performance based on medals or top 8 finishes is one for the bureaucrats and not a true 'performance' assessment. I feel that the sporting bureaucracy might do a lot better if they concentrated on performance and not on the vanity-soothing medal count. If you get the 'performance' strategy right the other shallow assessments might just get satisfied. Without athletes moving their personal best performance along the continuum there is little chance of a medal or top-eight finish. Controlling the controllables might be an effective change of direction at the Federation level.

Maybe I should start with a generalisation by setting the foundation of this firmly at the centre of the discussion. There are no accidents in performance production. The production of a personal best is based on preparation and choices in exercise progression. This preparation model is unique to the individual so whatever principles are set out as guidelines must be interpreted accurately by the coach relative to the unique characteristics of their athlete. Each athlete will adapt to the training rhythm and prescription in a different way to someone else. While the underlying principle of 'fitness v freshness' might be true to all athletes the reaction of each athlete will be different, just as the exercise prescription and progression will be different.

What about those selected to give them experience? What about those who suffer illness and injury in their preparation but are still healthy enough to compete? I accept that there are some who have suffered setbacks in their preparation (illness and injury) and may still deserve to be in the team but are vulnerable. Happy to see their performances put into perspective when trying to come up with the number of PB's that would be acceptable.

There may be other athletes who arrive with a set of circumstances that may fall outside the normal and may want to be viewed differently but I doubt it. Excuses are easy, performance strategies are difficult. I coached an athlete who had only done their event 7 times before reaching the Olympic selection standard in the Olympic Trials just 16 weeks from the Games. Not a lot of time to get her adjusted to a 'tournament' contest let alone overcome the disgusting treatment that Athletics Australia subjected her to. By the time she knew she was competing in her individual event, there were only 20 days to go to the Olympics. This is the reason why your question is so important. Not only does the coach/athlete unit have to be encouraged and supported to their best decision-making but the selection and 'progression' strategy created by the bureaucracy must also be one that is optimal for performance. This was clearly not the case in 1992 but, regardless of the strategic failure of the NGB, our decisions still led to a personal best in the last race she competed in at the Games (semi-final). I have another example of how and why the national performance strategy must be performance-based and not just a bureaucratic puzzle created by career administrators. After Atlanta in 1996 another of my athletes started the journey to the 2000 Games. It was decided that 1997 would be a year of consolidation and building and that the World Championships of that year (Athens) did not feature in our plans. The Federation again stepped in with their own plans and she was forced to attend the World Championships. While this was unsatisfactory to our journey it had to be dealt with from a planning point of view. We re-vamped the program so that the contest could be accommodated and at the same time protect the longer-term plans. She still set a new PB and got the Silver medal. This, I hope, is an illustration of the adaptability and flexibility that is required when putting together the program. The knowledge of what this 'adaptability and flexibility' is and how it needs to be created and managed should be part of the National Coach Development strategy for all sports. I was lucky in my career that there were several experienced coaches who mentored me informally in these elements of performance. It is time to move ahead and create a true Coach Development journey that encompasses these elements.

In recent years some sports have changed the way they conduct the Trials and pre-Games journey in the hope that they can control the controllables a little better. The key will always be to create a journey where the euphoria of making the team at the Trials is not the end of the journey. There is also the problem of how to advance from the required 'peak' at the Trials onward to an even higher performance weeks or months later. Some Federations have allowed selection based on performance too far in the past (even though the Olympic selection timeline allows it) which adds to the problem. Performance specialists put forward these changes to the Federation and they were adapted for the Tokyo Games journey. Here is an example of performance engineers (coaches, athletes, sports science, sports medicine) getting the bureaucracy to listen.

It will always be a matter of how you manipulate the physical, technical, tactical and mental elements of the journey. As each cycle, phase and year unfolds the coach should observe the results of certain decisions and add them to the 'toolbox' of decision-making. In detail, these planning decisions allow the coach and athlete to know - what is too much and what is too little; what elements need what amount of exposure to gain an adaptation; what session intensity requires what recovery to get a training effect; what rate of load progression works, over what period of time; what happened when you 'tweaked' the volume or intensity or complexity; what number of competitions or 'test' training exposure is required; how is the multi-peak process (qualifying rounds, semi-final, final, etc) of the tournament being catered for? All these are elements that are controllable and are vital to arriving on the known date at the known time in the known environment, ready to do a personal best.

We can already commence the journey to Paris in 2024. We know the date, Fri, 26 July 2024 – Sun, 11 Aug 2024. We know the climate. We know the travel time. We know the culture. If you are a Track & Field athlete you can prepare for an August 2nd start; if a swimmer a July 26 start. Federations can commence their plans for Trials. There are 3 annual cycles to prepare for so the 'toolbox' can start or continue to be filled with information on the best ways to progress.

So, what is an appropriate percentage of the team who should set a PB in the right place at the right time? I have not done any statistical research or come across any examples as a guide but having been on that journey with my own athletes at over 25 'tournament' contests I would offer a recommendation of 75% as a starting point for discussion. Expect far less if there is no appropriate national strategy and coach development strategy in place.

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