

Laser Focused: Insight into the Mental Preparation of an Olympic Gold Medalist Rower

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Abstract

In the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the United States female rowing team brought home the gold medal. There is no question as to whether or not these champions were prepared – physically and mentally – for competition. However, there is still much to learn about the specific mental preparation strategies and mental techniques used by Olympic champions. While several researchers have identified the mental characteristics of successful athletes (Gould, Eklund, & Jackson, 1992a, 1992b; Orlick & Partington, 1988), much of this research has focused on athletes' use of psychological skills, including imagery, attentional control, controlling anxiety, positive self-talk and goal setting (Bertollo, Saltarelli, & Robazza, 2008). Despite these studies, there is a dearth of research focusing on the mental preparation strategies of Olympic champions. This interview provides an in-depth look at the thoughts and mental preparation strategies of one female Olympic Gold Medalist rower. Throughout this semi-structured interview, she offers valuable information regarding her mental preparation strategies, building confidence and trust in her teammates, and her degree of focus.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to provide insight into the mental preparation strategies and pre-race and in-race thoughts of Caryn Davies, a 2008 Olympic Gold Medalist. This manuscript includes the transcript from the interview that was conducted by one of the authors regarding Caryn's experience before and during the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, China.

Caryn Davies is a 26 year old professional rower. She began rowing at the age of 14, when she began training to be a member of the national team. Caryn has competed in the 4, the 8, the quad, and the pair in different professional competitions. Her Olympic debut was in 2004 but she did not earn a spot on the podium. Recently, her team won the Gold Medal at the 2008 Olympics while she rowed the strong seat.

Interview

Emanuel: Can you tell me about the grand finals of the 2008 Olympics?

Caryn: Well, going into it, going down into the boat house to start our warm up, we were all pretty confident that we could win if we kind of stuck to our plan and trusted in each other. So, it was a very happy kind of atmosphere. We were nervous of course but it wasn't a bad kind of nervousness and so that kind of carried through. One of the stories that I could tell is about our coach. When he gave us our pre-race speech, he said basically, "Just do what you always do. You've done this so many times before, come out on top. You know how to race. [It's] just another race- just treat it like that". So we were pretty relaxed, got to the line, knew that we could get control of the race early, which we did, and then just kind of kept pushing away from the rest of the field. There was really never any doubt in any of our minds that we would win, especially once the race started and we were ahead. It definitely made it easier to be confident in yourself when you are ahead. The only time I ever worried was about the last ten strokes of going to catch a crab or something from being tired (authors' note: catch a crab refers to a rower getting her oar stuck in the water which can slow the boat down drastically). So thankfully the line came before any wheels came off or any springs popped out or anything. Then after the race our coach met us on the dock, and he said, "Yeah, you know what I said about it being just another race and all that, that was bull. This is the Olympics and you just won a gold medal!" So, that was one of my favorite memories...post-race.

Emanuel: You said that you were confident going into the race, can you tell me more about that confidence?

Caryn: Well first of all I think you HAVE to believe you can win in order to win. If you don't believe it then you won't do it. So, that was part of it. It was sort of imperative to be confident. We were also the favorites [since] we've won some. We've won the World Championships the two years preceding and we've won some early season races so we really had every reason to expect the best from ourselves. I think also there was the trust in each other that we had developed through racing over the years, racing each other, racing together against other countries things like that. I just think we were really well prepared.

Emanuel: Then you also said going in that you were a little bit nervous. How did you overcome that? Did you do anything in particular to overcome those nerves?

Caryn: Not really. I think you need a certain amount of nervousness. You don't want to be perfectly calm because then you know you're not ready. You might get dropped at the line or something so there's a certain amount of nervousness that I welcome... you know, gets the adrenaline flowing, blood pumping things like that. You just need to make sure you don't let it run away with you so you know, I do what most of them do, listen to music, deep breathing, things like that.

Emanuel: Can you tell me about your preparation leading up to the 2008 Olympics?

Caryn: I mentioned a little bit of how we spent a lot of time racing each other in pairs, spent a lot of work in small boats. We didn't actually row the eight that much that year. I think we were... one of the best prepared teams physiologically. I think [our coach] does a very good job of planning our training so that we're the strongest we can be.

It's one of those things where you're never really sure, whether you're doing the right thing. You just have to kind of trust, and in the end I think it's that trust in your preparation that makes the difference.

Emanuel: Can you tell me about your pre-race preparation, in terms of the hours before the race or even the minutes?

Caryn: Well we raced in the afternoon, so we had pretty much the whole morning to just wait, and that can be some of the worst time because, you have all this adrenaline and excitement and nervousness and there's no outlet for it. The day of the race, we were in the hotel, watching some of the races on T.V., painting our toe nails, things like that; [trying] not to eat too much for lunch so that we wouldn't puke. And it was almost a relief when it was time to actually go down to the boathouse and start getting ready. And then from there it's a routine. [We've] done it so many times before, you just know exactly what to do. We went for a run, did some stretching, did some core exercises, and had a boat meeting, all those kind of things.

Emanuel: Can you tell me about your state of mind JUST before the race?

Caryn: I kept telling myself that it was gonna be fun. Like I said, I knew we were prepared. I knew we were ready and I didn't think of it as like "THIS IS A BATTLE, THIS IS COMPETITION" you know, "I'M GONNA HAVE [FUN]!" I kind of thought of it as a chance to show off how hard I've worked and how much we've learned. I heard the crowd and I was like, "AWESOME! ALL THESE PEOPLE ARE HERE TO WATCH ME! I'm gonna have fun out there". When I look over and the Romanians are right next to me, I'm gonna say, "AWESOME! I'M GLAD THEY'RE

THERE!" because that's just gonna make me go that much faster. So I was really looking forward to it in a way, just having fun.

Emanuel: And can you tell me your state of mind during the race?

Caryn: During the race, it was kind of more just laser focused. We had a plan, we were ready, and then all you had to do was execute the plan. [I] just focused on the stroke and what was going on at that very moment.

Emanuel: You said "laser focused". Can you tell me more about that?

Caryn: [It's] one of the things you have to do in a competition like ours, where you can't have any direct contact with your competitors and you can't affect them. You just have to focus on yourself and what you're doing so, I was just focused on [my teammate] in front of me and on the boat underneath me and on my blade in the water. When I talk about laser focused, it's like the ability to just get rid of all the other distractions around me.

Emanuel: Can you talk about any mental skills you've used leading up to, just before, and during the Olympics?

Caryn: In the training leading up to the Olympics... in the days when things were not going so well, I had to learn how to stay positive. And say to myself in my head "positive" [because] it's easy to have a bad day and kind of let it spiral out of control and think about all the bad days you had and how you sucked as a rower or something. Especially with injuries, you can get frustrated really easily. So that was one thing that I worked on with a sport psychologist at the Olympic training center. He gave me sticker of a honey bee [which] I put on my

foot in front of me and it was to remind me that whatever you say to yourself you can either make honey with it or it can sting you, depending on what you say and whether it's positive or negative.

Just before (the race) I kind of said to myself, this is my time to show off and have fun...and just be confident in each other and our skills. And then during I was just focusing on the moment and don't think about the finish line, don't think about what the other rowers are doing. Just think about strength and kicking now and your own boat.

Emanuel: You said that in leading up time you did specific things to stay positive and you mentioned the honey bee thing. Was there anything else you did to help with that positive mind set?

Caryn: One of those things, specifically rowing in pairs, which we did a lot throughout the year, is you not only have to deal with yourself and your thoughts, you're also dealing with your pair partner and you're very much in tune to what they're doing and how they're feeling. And sometimes if your pair partner gets frustrated, it's easy to get frustrated yourself and vice versa, you know, you can make your pair partner frustrated. So I kind of worked a lot on being able to either let that go or change how your partner is feeling about things. I'm told that I'm very good in that where you're calling the practice and talking about what else you need to do technically. I worked very much on the tone of my voice and keeping it non-judgmental and positive and also providing positive feedback at least or when it's necessary and called for, as well as saying what we can work on it. So [there's an] intimate partnership when you're rowing in a small boat.

Emanuel: In terms of your mental preparation for the Olympics, what stands out to you the most?

Caryn: Well, I can tell you what stood out for me, this year in contrast to four year ago. Four years ago, when I got to the Olympics, it was my first Olympics. I was just overwhelmed and not in a bad way, in a good way but overwhelmed by the excitement, and you know the flags, and the cameras and everything. And I was like "OH, THIS IS AWESOME!" but in a way I think I almost let it affect my focus on the job, the task at hand. You know like, "oh my god we're here..." Whereas this time, I said, "Okay I know there's going to be a lot of flags, a lot of cameras or whatever but I know what I'm here to do and that's to win". So I felt more kind of centered in being able to focus on the task at hand. I hate using the word focused so many times but just be centered and knowing what I was there to do.

Emanuel: You said you have your focus in the boat and you just focus on your job and stuff like that. When you were weren't in the boat and you were dealing with the environment, how did the focus work then?

Caryn: All the times that we're not practicing in the boat, you still had to be thinking about how every choice you make, everything you do affects your performance. You have to rest, you have to eat right, do all those things. And once you've checked all those things off the list, [it's] like, "Yes I'm doing all these things that are appropriate and good for me to do". Once you've done all that, then it's also important to be able to kind of let it go and mentally get away from the pressure at times. I did that by going and hanging out with people from others boats, guys on the men's team. Also one of my ways to escape is by kind of planning my future beyond the Olympics because it re-

minds me that this is not the “be all end all” of life. It’s really awesome that I’m here but I have so much more in my life so I was looking on Craig’s list, looking for an apartment when I got back and I was looking on websites for law schools and figuring out where I want to go to school. Sitting in the hotel room in China doing all this, it helped to get my mind off of it when it was appropriate to do so and to relax.

Emanuel: Looking back on the Olympics, how do you feel about your personal mental preparation?

Caryn: I’m really proud of myself this time around. I feel like I did everything right. Obviously it’s easy to say that when you win, you know, had we not won, I don’t know what I would be telling you right now. You know, I could have done everything the same and had we not won, I’d probably be regretting something somewhere. But that’s one of the things I’ve thought about during the year and talked about with this psychologist I was working with; you just want to have no regrets. Whatever happens, you want to know that you did everything you possibly can to make sure that you perform. And so yeah, I mean the training, that’s up to the coach to figure out. But the mental preparation, that’s up to me. And that’s what I’m most proud of is that I just feel like I went to the psychologist and, kind of checked all the boxes and did everything the way you’re supposed to and the way I knew would work for me.

Emanuel: Looking back on these same Olympics, how did you feel about your mindset?

Caryn: I think my mindset was in the right place and that was...I know what I’m here to do. I’m going to have fun doing it, and you know we’re just going to show every-

one how hard we’ve worked. So it was just, it was like a calm, centered focus.

Emanuel: I’m going to backtrack a little bit because I think that’s important. You said you had trust with the teammates. Can you tell me about that trust?

Caryn: Yeah. I think it’s really important to trust your teammates because what one person does affects what everybody else is doing so much. Even in practice, like if the practice isn’t going well, it’s easy to start blaming people or thinking this person is not doing this right. Or why isn’t this happening? You know, it’s not my fault, it’s the [other] person’s fault. And that’s just not going to get you anywhere. So, we are a team [and] we’re really lucky. We all got along. We all had a lot of respect for each other so it was easy to have that trust. But I think even if you don’t like each other, you have to be able to trust that everybody’s giving 100% because if you think [someone’s not giving] 100%, then that’s just going to eat away at you and start the negative spiral downward. So we got that trust by training together for years and just knowing that having seen each other race, you know everybody is going to give everything they can.

Emanuel: And then lastly, is there anything else that you’d like to share about your rowing experience that you haven’t shared so far?

Caryn: I don’t think so.

Summary

Caryn Davies described several mental preparation strategies that she used throughout her Olympic rowing experience. First, having a high level of trust and confidence in teammates was extremely important to Caryn. This trust came from preparation and

past successes with the same teammates over an extended period of time. For example Caryn said that years of training in the same boat allowed the team to observe their teammates' behaviors in competition as well as to establish expectations for the team. These expectations were heavily influenced by their confidence and trust in each other.

Second, she believed that her personal mental preparation was her biggest accomplishment because she did all she could to mentally prepare. Her mental training routine included her pre-race checklist (e.g., rest, eat the right things, see sport psychology consultant) and relaxation techniques. Specifically, she relaxed by listening to music, performing deep breathing exercises, and planning for her life after the Olympics. Caryn believed it was important to get her mind off of the race at appropriate times.

Third, her positive perception of the entire event kept her going throughout the Olympic experience. She knew her previous trip to the Olympics was an overwhelming and unsuccessful experience. In 2008, she used self-talk to view the Olympics as a positive experience as well as a chance to have fun and show what she and her teammates could

do. She constantly reminded herself to enjoy the experience, and looked forward to exhibiting her abilities against her opponents.

Finally, her degree of focus which she referred to as "laser focused" was a critical factor in her gold medal performance. She described laser focus as the ability to get rid of all other distractions around her (e.g., flags, cameras, opponents, and the finish line) and stay focused in the moment. She maintained a calm centered focus on the task at hand which included her teammate in front of her, the boat underneath her, and the blade in the water.

This case study highlights practical information regarding one female gold medalist's thoughts, focus and mental preparation strategies before and during a successful Olympic competition. This interview can not only benefit future Olympic rowers but also rowers and other performers at all levels of competition. In addition, sport psychology consultants and coaches who are working with rowers or other athletes may gain a better understanding of what is needed to improve their athletes' focus and mental training strategies.

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