

International Association of High Performance Sports Training Centres
By
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Thanks, Liz, for that introduction!

And thanks to Beijing Sport University and the International Association for having me here.

I've learned a lot from the seminars over the last few days!

Two weeks ago, we had the Pre-Olympic test events in my sport, flatwater and whitewater kayaking, so it's been a real thrill to see that and then come here.

Tonight I want to talk about what training centers do now, and what I think they could do better in the future.

But before we get to that, let me ask you all a few questions:

* How many of you are from training centers that are basically research centers, where very few or none of your country's top Olympic athletes train?

[Show of hands]

* OK, now how many of you are from centers where your country's Olympic athletes train, but in just one sport, not all sports?

[Show of hands]

* OK, and finally, how many of you are from centers where most of your country's top Olympic athletes train?

[Show of hands]

All right. Very interesting, very helpful!

Now let me tell you a little bit about me, about my perspective on training centers.

When I was the Olympic coach in whitewater canoeing and kayaking, I ran a training center for that sport.

It started out as a club training center, but after a while when most of the US Team came from that club, it became the national training center as well.

And we had athletes who won 57 medals in World Cup, World Championship and Olympic competition, 27 of them gold, so we were pretty successful.

On top of that, I was for many years a "consumer" of training center "products," largely from the US Olympic Committee.

But I also observed training centers in the Soviet Union, France, Britain, Germany, and several other countries.

And right now, I am a consultant to the Chinese Canoeing Association, so I've observed training centers here in China, too.

By the way, from now on, I'm going to refer to the US Olympic Committee as "U-S-O- C." or "USOC." It's just easier to say that way!.

In general I would say how successful a training center is depends a lot on the culture of the country it's in.

And what works in one country may not work in another country. So, we have to be careful about that.

In the United States, for example, there is no government money spent on Olympic sports.

And that brings me to another question for you:

How many of you come from programs like that? How many of you come from training centers that are funded entirely by government money?

[Show of hands]

OK. In the US, the fact that Olympic sports are funded by corporate sponsors means that athletes -- and even sometimes coaches -- often have to pay much of the costs of their training themselves.

Especially when they are younger, not yet champions.

And since they have to pay for it themselves, they have much more say in how they train and where they train than athletes in other countries where someone else is paying the bills.

It's just a lot more individualistic in the US.

So, this means that in the US, it's very hard to get all athletes from just one sport to train together in a training center.

And it's next to impossible to get all Olympic athletes in all sports to train in one place.

The result is that, yes, USOC has several training centers -- the biggest one being in Colorado Springs.

But they see only limited use by the best athletes.

And most sports tend to have their own training centers somewhere else, in clubs, schools, and colleges.

So, in the US, there has historically been a big question of whether these USOC training centers are really worth the expense of running them.

Now, in one sense, the US performance in the Olympics probably suffers from not having all the top athletes train in one place.

But on the other hand, there is one really good thing that comes out of this system, and we'll talk about it a bit later on.

Essentially, it's individual initiative, entrepreneurship, and athletes taking complete responsibility for their own success.

We'll come back to this later because I think it's really important.

MAIN USES OF TRAINING CENTERS

But first, I want to talk about the main uses of a training center.

As I see it, there are two of them -- and a third potential one.

The first one is delivery of athlete services.

As I see it, in a sports program where the government is paying all the bills, it's possible to require all the athletes and coaches to train in one place.

But what would it take to make all the athletes want to train in that place?

And to me, the answer is: delivery of outstanding athlete services.

And I can think of 6 of these services:

1. The first one is an excellent venue for your sport.

In our case, whitewater kayaking, this is especially difficult because it really means a world-class artificial slalom course, like the one you have here in Beijing.

And we don't have one like this associated with any of the USOC training centers. So, that's the main reason we don't spend much time at those centers.

2. Secondly, an "excellent venue" means not only the world class course.

It also means a course that's set up to facilitate coaches and training center staff to do certain studies of athletes in training.

This means video analysis, blood testing, biomechanical analysis, sports psychology, nutritional analysis, injury prevention and rehabilitation, and so on.

Since none of the USOC training centers have the venue that we need in whitewater kayaking, all we can do is sometimes get USOC staff to come to one of our venues somewhere else for a few days for a special study.

But this, of course, is not as good as being able to do it all year round whenever you want and comparing notes with other sports.

3. The third service is free housing and food, all within walking distance of the the venue.

It also means access to some amusements, such as TV and internet.

4. The fourth thing is excellent supplementary training facilities -- weight rooms, for example, with staff to help you use them properly.

5. The fifth thing is a training center staff that is very knowledgeable about your sport generally.

There's not much sense in making a long trip to see people who can't teach you very much.

For example, about 30 years ago, I had training center doctors tell me that the best way to measure the maximum oxygen consumption of my kayakers was to have them run on a treadmill.

Well, we did this and our scores were pretty low.

But then I thought to myself, "Gee, this running doesn't feel very much like kayaking."

So I asked the doctors if they could take the pedals off a bicycle ergometer and test our athletes cranking on that.

And guess what: their scores were very high!

So, ever since then, I've been very careful to make sure the so-called "experts" really know what they're talking about!

By the way, I've been part of something here in China that I think could be a model for training centers in the rest of the world.

And that is linking universities and Olympic sports.

Right now, the Chinese Olympic Committee is giving grants to several Chinese Universities to have them do work on Olympic sports.

One of these universities is Beijing Sport University, where we are right now.

And while I've been here in China, I've done quite a lot of work with professors and students from 3 of these universities -- Beijing University, Beijing Sports University and Shanghai Sport University.

The professors and students are very smart and have suggested to me many methods for analyzing my sport that I never thought of before.

On top of that, they have provided support for things I always wanted to do in the past, but never had the people or resources to be able to do!

Well, to me, the potential advantages of this are huge.

And we just don't have this kind of link between Olympic sports and our top universities in the United States at the present time.

6. The sixth thing that you have to provide if you want most American athletes and coaches to move permanently to a training center is schools and jobs.

In the US, most athletes --and even coaches -- are very concerned about what they're going to do after the Olympics.

Because even if they win the Olympics, they're probably not going to earn very much money from it.

So, preparing for a career after the Olympics is a key factor in deciding where to live and train.

So, those are your 6 key athlete services that the ideal training center should deliver --

basically a great venue, great supplemental facilities, great staff, some amusements, and educational or job opportunities.

INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGES

The second main use of training centers, for me, at least, is promoting international exchanges.

This is typically done by housing foreign teams at the training centers.

First, the foreign team pays its way to get to your country, but once there, the host country pays all the expenses for the foreign team.

And then your team pays to go to their country and they pay all the expenses while you're there.

As long as it's basic services, it's non-controversial, and everything's fine.

So housing and food and venue access are offered.

That, and being able to train with the foreign athletes.

But there's no taking the foreign athletes or coaches into the special lab doing research on sports medicine or nutrition, say, because that could give away a competitive advantage.

In determining whether a foreign team should be invited, the first consideration is whether it will benefit your team.

Whether by training with the foreign team your athletes will improve faster than they would otherwise.

If not, then as Mike English, the head of all US training centers and who's with us today, puts it, "You need to at least get some international goodwill out of it."

And for me personally, international goodwill is very important.

First of all, it helps promote your sport around the world, thus creating more fun opportunities for everyone in the sport.

Also, creating good will with a foreign country means that your athletes are going to be treated better when they go to that country!

It also means you have more friends who can tell you things that are happening in your sport.

Mike tells me that today more and more people from both the US and foreign countries are interested in visiting the USOC training center in Colorado Springs.

And he says it's because the Center is really concentrating on delivering great athlete services now.

I had the same experience when I was running our training center in whitewater kayaking.

We had a lot of foreign athletes come train with us.

I like to think it was because we were delivering great athlete services!

So, those are the two main things that a good training center should emphasize -- great delivery of athlete services and promoting foreign exchanges.

GIVING BACK TO SOCIETY

Now let me talk about a third area in which not much is being done right now, but could be: giving back to the wider society.

For me, this is justified first, because it's the right thing to do, what with the lack of physical fitness in the world and the increasing world obesity problem today.

But secondly it's justified because it will generate more support from the public for the training center -- and thus more money from the government or corporate sponsors!

Mike English tells me the Colorado Springs training center has recently started to work on this concept.

For me, the idea is to use training centers to give the public physical fitness tips.

The training centers could use websites to get the information out.

There could also be public television programs showing what happens at training centers and how it can benefit average people.

Just think what good visuals you could have with Olympic athletes speaking on camera to the public about this!

Here are just a few examples of things that could be discussed:

- * Basic exercise ideas. How much exercise do you need" And what kind?
- * Stretching. Boy, I sure need this the older I get!
- * Proper nutrition and weight control. Everybody needs this!
- * Treatment of everyday ailments like tendinitis. You know, sometimes I think all the problems of the world could be solved if we could stop people suffering from tendinitis! And what athletes know about treating it is really useful for everybody!
- * Relaxation drills, goal setting, mental rehearsal. These can all be very valuable in everyday life, not just sports.

So those are a few examples.

And that concludes my comments on the roles of training centers.

Now, I want to say something about the philosophy of training centers.

And I want go back to a theme I mentioned at the outset of this talk.

Something that I think the US system is pretty good at, really.

Something that I think all training centers should bear in mind.

And that is: don't let bureaucracy overwhelm the individual initiative and entrepreneurship of your athletes!

In order to discuss this, I have to tell you a little about my own philosophy of coaching.

And that is, simply: teach the athlete to someday be his own best coach.

Teach him -- or her -- everything he needs to know to be able to operate on his own someday.

In other words, teach the athlete to take ultimate responsibility for his own development, for his own success.

Oh, sure, he should use other resources wherever he can.

Other people, like coaches and experts, and special equipment and so on.

But he should never give to those people the ultimate responsibility as to whether he wins or not.

That's his responsibility.

I've found that when someone takes ultimate responsibility like this, he goes that extra mile to win.

So, that's what I tried to do as a coach -- work my way out of a job.

Prepare my athletes so well that they didn't need me any more.

Now, for me, the first step in this process is to teach what I call "fascination for the process."

As you heard, besides having a career in the Olympics, I also had one in US politics, working as an aide in our US Congress and then for President Clinton in the White House.

And besides that, my son is a rock star -- seriously!

He's the singer/songwriter for a band called "The Bravery," which tours all over the world.

So, it so happens that I've been exposed to top performers in a number of fields.

And sometimes people ask me what they all have in common.

And I'd say this: "fascination for the process."

They are so fascinated by all the little details of what they're doing that they inevitably do them more than anybody else.

And in so doing, they becomes masters of it.

They reach a level of understanding most people don't even know exists.

All my World and Olympic champions were like that.

They wanted to know everything they could about their sport.

No detail was too small for them.

My son was like that with rock music.

He not only studied singing, he studied all the instruments, and the whole music industry, and all the steps it takes to make it big.

Bill Clinton was like that about politics. He not only loved policy, he loved politics.

I remember one time in the White House.

We started at 10:30 at night. We didn't end at 10:30, we started at 10:30.

And Clinton came in to tape some radio messages we'd written for him.

These were pretty small things -- hardly history-making decisions!

And as he came into the room, you could see he felt sick.

He was holding a cold can of Coca Cola up against his head because he had a headache.

I thought he was going to cancel the session and we'd have to do it another time.

But when Clinton saw what we wanted him to do, he actually got excited about it!

He put the Coke can down, and he was really interested to read the scripts we'd written for him.

Then, after he'd taped a few, he put them down and he said: "Now, this all reminds me of a race for parliament in France a few years ago."

And he started to tell us all these war stories about French politics.

Not US politics, but French politics. Things we'd never heard of before.

This guy was the ultimate "political junkie!"

He was completely fascinated by the process of politics -- and that's why he was so good at it.

OK. So, my point is this:

Any organization interested in athletic success -- like a training center -- needs to encourage its athletes and coaches to think like this.

To teach them to be fascinated by the process.

To become experts in teaching themselves what they need to do to win.

To come up with new ideas and inventions all the time.

And to take ultimate responsibility for their own success.

But a big organization often does just the opposite! It actually discourages this.

Unfortunately, the more money an organization gets, the more bureaucracy it can create.

And often for these bureaucrats it becomes more a matter of "who's right," when it should be a matter of "what's right."

They don't want to work themselves out of job.

They want the athletes and coaches and everyone else to depend on them forever.

The result is things like USOC a few years ago refusing the application of my top athletes for money to help design new boats.

Now, these were athletes who had already won many World and Olympic medals who wanted to use their own experience in designing new boats.

But USOC wanted to use scientifically proven methods to design them, not subjective opinion.

They basically thought their theory was better than our practical experience.

Now, USOC was not trying to hurt our athletes, quite the opposite.

And most of the time the USOC was very helpful to our athletes.

But in this particular instance, a pretty important one, I might add, USOC missed a big opportunity to help.

So, hopefully you in this audience will figure out how to get the best of both worlds in your training centers.

To combine the benefits of having many sports train together in one place, along with fostering the entrepreneurial spirit of your athletes and coaches.

So, those are my thoughts about training centers, what they do now and what they could do in the future.

I hope I've given you some things to think about.

I think you and I are probably pretty much the same.

I'm "fascinated" by excellence and the process of becoming excellent at sport.

And I bet you are, too, or you wouldn't be here!

Sure, we want our countries win.

But we can still have great respect for the winners -- and for the people who try to win -- whatever country they come from.

So, it's been a real honor to share this evening with you, with people who have the same sense of internationalism about sports that I do.

Because when any one of us succeeds, we can all smile!

One last word:

Because of sports, I've experienced the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat!

Because of sports, I've gone all over the world.

I've been to some of the world's most beautiful places.

And I've met some of the world's most beautiful people.

So, for me, sports has been the ride of a lifetime.

And I hope it will be for you, too!

Thank you very much!