Importance of Fan Conduct to an Athlete and impact on Team Success

Name

Instructor

Course

Date

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Fan conduct affects the performance of athletes. A study conducted by Wann (2012) has determined that athletes perceive the support of fans as being important to their success. The study involved 325 participants from 13 countries that had taken part in 34 Olympics sports. The athletics viewed fans as an important element of their support network. They indicated that fans influence their confidence and performance. Fans influence athletes’ performance by providing them with support when they are playing a match. The theory explains why teams are more likely to win when playing “home matches” compared to “away matches.” Fan support increases the athletes’ confidence, resulting in better sports performance. While fan conduct boosts the team performance, it may also have a negative impact on the success of a team. When fans engage in disruptive or unruly behavior, it may demoralize the players, resulting in poor performance.

Athletes and sports teams are held liable for the conduct of their fans. When fans exhibit unruly or disruptive behavior, the teams are held liable for any losses or damages occurring as a result of their fans’ activities. For this reasons, teams have taken steps to manage their fans’ behavior. For instance, NFL has urged sports teams to urge sports fans to take anger management classes when they display unruly behavior. The classes talk about anger management and how to deal with fans from rival teams. However, the classes may guarantee that the fans will demonstrate good behavior as fans may still act unruly despite knowing their behaviors are wrong (Novick, 2012). Therefore, while fans may take the anger management classes, the classes may not modify their behavior. Athletes need to implement structures to monitor and control their fans’ behavior, such as boosting security to detect unruly fans and remove them from matches to prevent them from influencing other fans to copy their negative behavior.

References

Novick. A. (2012). NFL fan conduct class. *YouTube*. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fsdh9XUfRmQ

The link contains information about the NFL’s recommendation for sports teams to provide their fans with anger management classes when they become unruly.

Wann, D. L. (2012). The Head and Shoulders Psychology of Success Project: An Examination of Perceptions of Olympic Athletes. *North American Journal of Psychology*, *14*(1).

The article describes the impact of fan support on a team’s performance.

**The Head and Shoulders Psychology of Success Project: An Examination of Perceptions of Olympic Athletes**

Link/Page Citation

Over the past several decades, research in sport psychology has greatly enhanced our understanding of the affective, behavioral, and cognitive reactions of sport participants. This research has examined participants from many levels of competition including youth sport (Brustad, 1993; Roberts, 1993), recreational participants (Wesch, Law, & Hall, 2007), and elite performers (Vanden Auweele, De Cuyper, Van Mele, & Rzewnicki, 1993). The purpose of the current project was to investigate the psychology of success among Olympians, thus expanding our understanding of these elite athletes. There were four themes targeted in this research: the impact of fan support, perceptions of the home field advantage, the importance of pre-event rituals, and perceptions of attributes that lead to athletic success.

With respect to fan support, one of the earliest studies in sport and social psychology found that audiences play a key role in motor and athletic performance (Davis, Huss, & Becker, 1995; Triplett, 1898). Indeed, a large body of literature now exists detailing the impact of fan and spectator support (Bray & Widmeyer, 2000; Wann, 1997) and it is clear that fans can strongly and with great devotion support their favorite athletes and teams (Wann, Melnick, Russell, & Pease, 2001). For instance, audiences can lead to a social facilitation effect, in which the audience leads to arousal and increases the performer's dominant response (Zajonc, 1965). Consequently, successful athletes tend to perform better in front of an audience while unsuccessful athletes will exhibit a decline in performance. This pattern of effects has been substantiated in sport environments (Davis & Harvey, 1992; Singer, 1965). To extend past work, this research examined athletes' perceptions of three specific aspects of fan support. Specifically, they indicated the extent to which they viewed fans as a source of support, the degree to which they believed fan support had an impact on their performance, and the extent to which they felt that fan support affected their confidence.

The second theme examined athletes' beliefs in the home field advantage. Because spectator support is viewed as a major cause of the home field advantage (Courneya & Carron, 1992), this theme was related to the previous theme examining perceptions of fan support. The home field advantage is one of the most well-documented findings in sport psychology (Carron & Hausenblas, 1998). This phenomenon has been noted in numerous sports and at many levels of competition (Jamieson, 2010), including the Olympic Games (Balmer, Nevill, & Williams, 2001, 2003; Leonard, 1989). However, few studies have investigated athletes' perceptions of the home field advantage. One study that did focus on athlete perceptions of the home advantage was conducted by Bray and Widmeyer (2000). These authors examined the perceptions of female intercollegiate basketball players. The respondents were asked to indicate their beliefs in the influence of several game location factors. The results indicated that home court familiarity, fan support, and travel were all believed to be influential in leading to a home field advantage. While this study was quite informative, the respondents were collegiate players and researchers had yet to investigate the home field advantage perceptions of Olympic athletes. Furthermore, sport scientists had yet to fully investigate strategies athletes use to cope with an opponent's home advantage. The current investigation was designed to fill these research voids.

The third topic involved participants' pre-event rituals. Pre-event rituals can have a beneficial impact on athletic performance and may take many forms, including psychological, behavioral, or even luck-related (Bull, Albinson, & Shambrook, 1996; Murphy & Jowdy, 1992; Wann, 1997). Indeed, many athletes report superstitious pre-event rituals (Neil, 1982), including participants in basketball (Gregory & Petrie, 1975), hockey (Zimmer, 1984), and baseball (Wann, 1997). In general, superstitious actions by athletes are used in an attempt to provide them with an increased sense of control (Keinan, 2002; Langer, 1975; Schippers & Van Lange, 2006). The current work extended previous efforts by investigating the pre-event routines of Olympic athletes. First, the percentage of athletes with pre-event rituals was assessed. Next, those athletes with pre-event rituals provided details about the rituals and these descriptions were classified into pre-event ritual categories. Finally, athletes with pre-event rituals were asked to describe the consequences of being unable to perform their pre-event routines.

The final theme reviewed Olympians' perceptions of attributes associated with success. Researchers have identified a large array of factors with the potential to impact athletic performance, including natural ability (Thomas, Thomas, & Gallagher, 1993), socialization (Wann, 1997), quality instruction and coaching (Smoll & Smith, 1993), team cohesion (Carron, Colman, Wheeler, & Stevens, 2002), and community support (Warner & Dixon, 2011). In the current study, Olympic participants were asked to indicate those attributes they felt were most closely related to athletic success. Furthermore, researchers had yet to investigate athletes' perceptions of the relationship between their physical appearance and their level of success. Consequently, this previously unexamined area was investigated here.

Thus, the current investigation was designed to further our understanding of four themes: the impact of fan support, perceptions of the home field advantage, the importance of pre-event rituals, and perceptions of attributes leading to athletic success. In particular, the current investigation focused on the Olympians' perceptions as they related to the four themes (e.g., did they believe fan support impacted their performance, did they perceive a home field advantage?).

As noted above, each of the four themes targeted in this project had been examined empirically; however, an assessment of Olympians' perceptions of the themes was generally lacking. An understanding of athletes' perceptions is important for two reasons. First, their perceptions may or may not match empirical data. For instance, data collected by Brewer, Jeffers, Petipas, and Van Raalte (1994) indicate that athletes believe that goal setting is the most effective interventional strategy for aiding in the psychological recovery from a sport injury. However, given that there are several other successful intervention options (see Wann, 1997) and research indicates that goal setting is often less effective in sport settings relative to other environments (Burton, 1993; Weinberg, 1992) the athletes' perceptions about the value of goal setting may not be accurate. Second, researchers and practitioners can learn much about the experiences of athletes by assessing their perceptions, in addition to observing their behavior. Certainly, a great deal of information within sport psychology has involved assessments of athletes' perceptions (Duda, 1998; Ostrow, 1996). This includes work on perceptions of coaching behaviors (Chelladurai & Saleh, 1980; Riemer & Chelladurai, 1995), horizontal and vertical power (Wann, 2009; Wann, Metcalf, Brewer, & Whiteside, 2000), the home field advantage (Bray & Widmeyer, 2000), and causal attributions for performance (De Michele, Gansneder, & Solomon, 1998). For instance, assessments of Olympians has led to a better understanding of successful and less successful strategies the athletes employ in an attempt to cope with anxiety (Gould, Eklund, & Jackson, 1993).

Because the themes examined in this research had not been directly assessed among Olympic athletes, the target areas were examined within the framework of a research question asking "What are Olympic athletes' perceptions of the influence of fan support, the home field advantage, pre-event rituals, and attributes that lead to success?"

METHOD

Participants/Sample

Participants were current or former Olympic athletes from both the summer and winter games. Initially, slightly over 400 athletes were contacted. Approximately 25% declined participation, resulting in a final sample of 325 individuals. The gender breakdown was 60% male and 40% female. Participants were from 13 different countries (Australia, Brazil, Canada, France, Germany, Japan, Mexico, New Zealand, Poland, Russia, Spain, United Kingdom, and United States; n = 25 per country). The vast majority (97%) were between the ages of 20 and 59. The participants had competed in one of 34 different Summer (e.g., diving, basketball) and Winter Olympic sports (e.g., luge, ice hockey) [the most common sports were track and field (20%), swimming (13%), equestrian (7%), and canoeing, cycling, skiing, and volleyball (5% each)].

Materials and Procedure (1)

Athlete contact information was obtained through several sources (Olympic organizing bodies within each country, coaches, athletes' agents, athletes' personal websites, athletes' business websites, and referrals from other Olympians). Athletes were contacted and asked if they would be interested in participating in an interview/survey examining the psychology of success. Interviews (conducted either by phone or via an online questionnaire) were completed between July 11th and July 20th, 2011. Participants completed an interview/survey containing 19 items. The items were both open-ended and Likert-scale in format. Eleven items (all Likert-scale) targeted the impact of fan support, two items examined the athletes' perceptions of the home field advantage (one in Likert-scale format, one in list format), four items focused on pre-event rituals (three in Likert-scale format, one open-ended), and two items (one in list format with an "other" option, one Likert-scale) examined perceptions of attributes that lead to athletic success (the protocol is available from the author upon request).

RESULTS

The Impact of Fan Support

The initial theme examined the impact of fan support. Three specific issues were investigated: athletes' perceptions of fans as a source of support, the impact of fan support on performance, and the impact of fan support on confidence.

Fans as a source of support. To investigate the impact of fans as a source of support, the Olympians were asked to rate the importance of fan support in their overall support network and when it is most important to receive fan support. As for importance, 70% indicated that fan support was an important part of their support network (either somewhat or very). (2, 3) Only 12% felt that fan support was not an important component (either somewhat or not at all). The remaining 18% indicated that fan support was neither important nor unimportant. A majority of athletes from each country reported that fans were an important part of their overall support network. French (88%) and Russian (84%) participants most frequently indicated that fans were important while athletes from Germany (56%), the United States (56%), and New Zealand (52%) reported the lowest frequencies. (4) Test of proportions revealed that the French and Russian percentages were significantly greater than those of Germany, the United States, and New Zealand (all zs > 2.16; all ps < .05). In terms of the timing of support, most indicated that they needed to feel support from fans on the day of their competition (35%) or moments before they competed (20%). Less frequently selected times were a month before (13%), a week before (8%), and a day before the competition (4%).

The next item examined athletes' impressions of the importance of several persons/groups in their support network. Those targeted were: coaches, parents, significant others, training partner/teammates, medic/physiotherapists, wider family members, fans, psychologists, nutritionists, religious figures, and pets. Response options to this Likert-scale item ranged from 1 (not important) to 10 (very important). Several persons/groups received ratings above the mid-point on the scale (5.5), including coaches (8.7), parents (8.4), significant others (8.0), training partner/teammates (7.6), medic/physiotherapists (6.8), wider family members (6.6), and fans (6.3). Ratings for psychologists (5.0) were slightly below the midpoint. The patterns across countries were consistent, with a few notable exceptions. First, among participants from the United States, although ratings for the importance of coaches was high (7.7), it was relatively low when compared to respondents from other nations. Second, athletes from Brazil rated the importance of fans especially high (8.3) relative to the others. And third, participants from Brazil, Canada, and the United Kingdom reported higher ratings for the importance of a psychologist in their support network.

The impact of fan support on performance. Three items examined the Olympians' perceptions of the impact of fan support on their athletic success. The first item asked participants to indicate how important supportive fans were/are to their performance. Fully 81% of the sample reported that fan support was important (either somewhat or very). Conversely, only 6% felt that fans were unimportant (either somewhat or not at all). The remaining 13% indicated that fan support was neither important nor unimportant with respect to the outcome of performance. With respect to comparisons between countries, the highest percentages of Olympians reporting that fan support was/is important were Brazilian (100%) and French participants (96%), while the lowest percent was reported by the Australians (60%). Test of proportions revealed that the Brazilian and French percentages were significantly greater than that for the Australians (all zs > 3.06; all ps < .01).

Next, the Olympians were asked whether or not they believed that supportive fans increased their chances of winning. A clear majority (71%) indicated a belief that, yes, fans do increase their chances of success. There was a difference of opinion across country. Although at least four out of five athletes from several countries reported a belief that fan support increased their chances of victory (Australia, Brazil, and the United Kingdom = 84%; France = 80%), only about half of the athletes from the United States (52%) agreed with the statement. Test of proportions revealed that the Australian, Brazilian, French, and United Kingdom percentages were each significantly greater than those of the United States (all zs > 2.09; all ps < .05).

Finally, participants were asked the extent to which they agreed that "Support equals Success." A strong majority (83%) of athletes agreed with this statement. Only 7% disagreed. With respect to comparisons across country, a majority of respondents from all countries agreed that "Support equals Success," with percentages ranging from a high of 92% (Australian, Brazil, Canada, Germany, and Russia) to a low of 60% (France) (these percentages were significantly different, z = 2.65; p < .01).

The impact of fan support on confidence. The first two items examining the impact of fan support on confidence asked the Olympians how fan support affects their confidence prior to and during an event. With respect to pre-event support and confidence, most (86%) indicated that fan support had a positive influence on their pre-event confidence levels. An extremely small percentage of Olympians (3%) indicated a belief that fan support had a negative effect. A majority of participants from each country indicated that fan support had a positive influence on their pre-event confidence. In fact, all of the Olympians from two countries, Brazil and Canada, reported that pre-event fan support had a positive effect. The lowest percentage, 68%, was reported by Japanese athletes (the percentages were significantly different, z = 3.08; p < .01).

As for support during an event, the findings mirrored those for pre-event confidence. Specifically, 85% of the athletes indicated that fan support had a positive influence on their confidence during an event while only 1% felt that it had a negative effect. Athletes from Australia, Brazil, and Mexico reported a particularly high belief (96%) in the positive influence of fan support on confidence during an event while Olympians from New Zealand and Spain had the lowest levels (72%) (the percentages were significantly different, z = 2.31; p < .02).

The next item asked participants to indicate which specific persons/groups provided them with confidence prior to a big competition. The persons/groups examined were: coaches, parents, significant others, training partner/teammates, medic/physiotherapists, wider family members, fans, psychologists, nutritionists, religious figures, and pets. The Olympians were asked to select all that applied. Several targets were frequently selected as providing confidence, with coaches (78%), parents (69%), and training partners/teammates (63%) receiving the greatest number of votes. Also selected by a large percentage of the respondents were wider family members (48%), significant others (47%), fans (39%), and medic/physiotherapists (39%). Religious figures (18%), psychologists (18%), nutritionists (13%), and pets (4%) were chosen less frequently. Coaches were listed as the most frequent response option by persons from all countries except Mexico and New Zealand. For these two countries parents were most frequently chosen (coaches were second). There was a rather wide range of disparity between the countries. A majority of athletes from three countries (Germany, 72%; United Kingdom, 68%; France, 52%) indicated that fans were a source of confidence. Conversely, less than a quarter of the respondents from Mexico (24%), Japan (24%) and Australia (16%) selected fans as a source of pre-event confidence. Test of proportions revealed that percentages reported by the German, U.K., and French Olympians were significantly greater than those reported by athletes from Mexico, Japan, and Australia (all zs > 2.04; all ps < .05).

The next two items examined messages of support from fans. The athletes indicated how often they used social media (e.g., Facebook fan page, website, blog) to read messages from fans and whether these messages improved their confidence. In terms of examining social media for fan support, 26% of the sample reported doing so at least once a week (9% indicated they did so every day). Only 18% of athletes with a social media page never checked it/them for messages of fan support. There was an interesting relationship between age and use of social media to read messages of fan support, as younger athletes were more likely to engage in this activity. Specifically, 66% of respondents aged 20-29 reported checking social media for fan messages at least once a week (30% did so every day). This activity was also somewhat common among athletes in the 30-39 age range (37% at least once per week; 16% each day). Older athletes were far less likely to engage in this behavior (40-49 = 14% at least once a week and 1% daily; 50-59 = 7% at least once a week and 1% daily; 60 and older = 0% at least once a week).

As for beliefs that such messages provide a source of confidence, 69% of the sample reported that the messages do give a boost to their confidence. Although the percentages were generally consistent across country, one discrepancy was that only 4% of athletes from Australia reported that fan messages provide them with confidence. All other countries had a minimum of 64% reporting an affirmative response. Similar to the previous analyses, there was an interesting relationship involving age. Fully 91% of participants aged 20-29 reported that messages gave a boost to their confidence. Percentages for the older age groups ranged from 64% to 73%.

Perceptions of the Home Field Advantage

Another major theme in this research involved the home field advantage. The two items in this section assessed Olympians' beliefs in the home field advantage and (for persons with such a belief) strategies employed to overcome an opponent's home advantage. With respect to beliefs in the home field advantage, respondents indicated their level of agreement with the statement, "An athlete has more chance of winning when competing on home ground." The majority of participants (60%) agreed with the target statement while only 17% disagreed. There was a wide range of responses across the 13 countries. Athletes from Australia (88%) and Japan (76%) were most likely to believe in the home field advantage while less than half of the athletes from France (44%), Germany (40%), and Poland (36%) expressed such a belief. Test of proportions revealed that the Australian and Japanese percentages were significantly greater than those of France, Germany, and Poland (all zs > 2.31; all ps < .05).

Next, persons reporting a belief in the home field advantage were asked which strategies (if any) they employed to overcome an opponent's home field advantage. They were provided with a list of strategies and instructed to select all that apply. The participants were far more likely to select "focus more intensely" (61%) than any other strategy. Other coping methods included a desire to practice on the pitch/track/field prior to the event (22%) and meditation (11%). Interestingly, 10% of the athletes stated that they would ask their own fans to make more noise and to increase their cheering, thereby trying to establish a home advantage of their own (at least in terms of fan support).

The Importance of Pre-event Rituals

The third theme examined Olympians' pre-event rituals. Initially, participants were asked if they had engaged in any pre-event rituals. The data revealed that 48% reported a pre-event ritual. Athletes from Mexico, the United Kingdom, and the United States (64% each) were most likely to report having a pre-event ritual while persons from Australia, France, and Russia were least likely (32% each; the 64% and 32% proportions were significantly different, z = 7.16, p < .01).

Next, the athletes provided details about the specifics of their rituals (only athletes indicating they had a ritual responded to this item). Some of the descriptions contained more than one ritual, resulting in a total of 211 rituals. The descriptions were grouped into meaningful categories and thirteen categories were listed by at least 4% of the sample. The most common ritual category involved athletes' pre-event warm-up routines, as 13% of the respondents mentioned this in their description. An example of this category was "Always pursued the same warm-up techniques." The next most frequently mentioned ritual concerned athletes' clothes and jewelry (11%; e.g., "Always wear lucky T-shirt"). A third common ritual was visualization (10%). One person wrote that she would "Visual a perfect race." The next two most commonly cited rituals involved concentration/focus and food/drink (6% each). Examples of these rituals included "Focusing on performance" and "have a breakfast." Three rituals were listed by 5% of the Olympians. These rituals focused on equipment ("Tighten my helmet"), relaxation/rest ("Have some quiet space to relax"), and religion ("Making the sign of cross" and "Pray for protection"). Finally, five categories of rituals were mentioned in the descriptions of 4% of the sample. These rituals concerned general mental processes ("Assessing frame of mind"), engaging in activities in a specified order ("Dressing in same order"), watching television or listening to music ("Watch a DVD of the TV series '24'" and "Listened to music"), specific body movements ("stretch"), and making certain to do something on the left or right side first ("Always put the left foot into the boot first" and "Jumping into the canoe from the right side").

Two additional items investigated the consequences of being unable to perform a pre-event ritual. First, respondents were asked "If you aren't/weren't able to complete your rituals before a competition, how do/did you feel?" Many participants (41%) reported feeling unprepared and 14% indicated that they felt less lucky. Approximately one-third of the sample (32%) reported that the inability to complete a pre-event ritual had no effect on their sense of preparation. Second, the athletes were asked if they believed they had "underperformed in a big competition" due to the fact that they had not completed their pre-event ritual. Just under half of the participants (43%) reported a belief that they had underperformed in such circumstances.

Perceptions of Attributes that Lead to Athletic Success

The final theme examined Olympians' perceptions of attributes associated with successful performance. This section contained two items: one examined which attributes were believed to be associated with success and one specifically investigated the relationship between physical appearance and athletic success. The first item asked participants to indicate which attributes (from a list) were the most important in making "someone a winner" (participants could also write-in their own responses). The most frequently chosen attribute was "drive or ambition" (29%). The next most frequently chosen response was "determination" (20%), followed by "confidence" (15%). "Focus" (11%), "natural talent" (8%), and the "ability to relax" (4%) rounded out the other response options.

The second item specifically examined Olympians' beliefs in the relationship between physical appearance and athletic success. Participants indicated their agreement with the statement "If I feel like I look good, I play good." Participants were four times more likely to agree (completely or somewhat) with this statement (64%) than to indicate disagreement (completely or somewhat; 16%). Athletes from Australia and Brazil reported particularly high levels of agreement with the statement (76%) while participants from the United States reported a particularly low level of agreement (24%) (the percentages were significantly different, z = 3.68, p < .01).

DISCUSSION

The current research examined several components of the psychology of success among current and former Olympic athletes. It is important to note that because of the large sample (over 300 Olympians), the large number of countries represented (13 countries from five continents), and the large number of sports played (34 sports from both the summer and winter games), the data reported above are likely quite robust and generalizable.

The data described above indicated that fan support was extremely important. A large majority of participants indicated that fans were an important component of their support group, particularly in the hours and moments right before a competition. Further, a majority of persons believed that fan support played an important role in their performance and confidence. Most athletes believed that fan support increased their chances of winning, that "Support equals Success," that fan support positively impacted their confidence both prior to and during an event, and many athletes actively sought out fan support via social media outlets. Younger athletes were particularly likely to report checking social media for messages of fan support and to gain confidence from them.

The interrelation between confidence and performance warrants additional discussion. As noted, a large majority of respondents viewed fan support as having a positive impact on their performance and confidence. Research in sport psychology has found a bi-directional relationship between these variables (Wann, 1997; Weinberg & Gould, 1995). That is, as athletes build confidence, their performance improves. And as their performance improves, they gain additional confidence (i.e., the relationship is reciprocal). Thus, if an athlete gains confidence through his or her fan support, that confidence will likely translate into better performance which, in turn, can lead to even greater levels of confidence. Thus, it appears evident that fans are a vital and valued component of an athlete's support network.

The data detailed above indicate that the Olympic athletes surveyed were, generally, believers in the home field advantage. Given the strong empirical support for this phenomenon, (Carron & Hausenblas, 1998; Courneya & Carron, 1992), this finding likely reflects the fact that most athletes have experienced a home field advantage (or an away field disadvantage). Most athletes attempted to cope with an opponent's advantage by increasing the intensity of their focus. Because fan support is an important cause of the home field advantage (Bray & Widmeyer, 2000; Courneya & Carron, 1992), it is likely that the athletes were increasing their focus in an attempt to block out the distractions caused by the rival fans. The ability to block out distractions is a powerful predictor of athletic success, and thus, athletes are wise to employ such an approach (Bull et al., 1996).

With respect to pre-event rituals, approximately half of this sample reported engaging in such behaviors. Many of the rituals indicated a sport psychology focus (i.e., mental skills). That is, consistency in pre-event warm-up routines, visualization, concentration/focus, and relaxation are all standard psychological skills utilized by athletes (Bull et al., 1996; Wann, 1997). Other rituals were superstitious in nature, such as wearing a lucky item of clothing or entering a canoe on one particular side. As noted earlier, superstitious behaviors are quite common in sport (Brevers, Dan, Noel, & Nils, 2011; Wright & Erdal, 2008). While such actions may seem frivolous and without merit, research indicates that superstitious behaviors may have advantages (Damisch, Stoberock, & Mussweiler, 2010). To the extent that engaging in a superstitious action increases confidence (e.g., "Because I'm wearing my lucky shirt, I know I will play better"), the enhanced confidence can potentially lead to performance improvement (similar to the manner described above).

When asked to select from a list of attributes that lead to success, the current sample of Olympic athletes viewed psychological attributes as more important than natural talent. In fact, drive or ambition, determination, confidence, and focus all received more votes than natural ability. Although no one can dispute that natural ability plays a role in athletic competence (Thomas et al., 1993), the athletes' responses reflect the reality that there is more to athletic success than mere physical skill. It should be noted that this finding may be partially a function of the elite athletic status of Olympic athletes. Certainly, a great deal of natural talent is likely needed to achieve this level of athletic prowess. At this level, where most (if not all) athletes have truly elite physical skill sets, very small differences in other skills, such as those as the psychological level, can play a major role in determining a winner and a loser. Thus, psychological skills may stand out for such elite performances.

Many of the athletes believed that one additional attribute linked to athletic success was physical appearance. Indeed, well over half of the sample believed that if they looked good, they would play well. Given the previous discussions of confidence, this finding should not be taken lightly. That is, if an athlete believes that physical appearance is related to performance and he or she is pleased with his/her appearance, this will likely result in higher levels of confidence. As noted multiple times above, this increased self-confidence can then result in improved athletic performance.

Conclusions

Although a number of interesting findings are presented above, taken as a whole the data reveal three patterns that warrant further discussion. First, it is clear that the Olympians viewed fans as an important component on their support network. This was reflected in the participants' perceptions of the impact of fan support on both their performance and confidence. Second, it is highly evident that confidence is extremely important to the athletes. This is revealed in many of the findings, including the confidence athletes gain from fan support, pre-event rituals, performing at home (i.e., the home field advantage), the attributes of athletic success, and the importance of physical appearance. In fact, one could argue that the importance of confidence was the single greatest unifying theme running throughout the Olympians' responses. And finally, there were many differences between countries. Sport scientists from a variety of disciplines (e.g., sport psychology, sport sociology, sport marketing and management) have come to recognize the value of cross cultural research (e.g., Cox, Qui, Liu, 1993; Theodorakis & Wann, 2008). This research indicates that many athletic behaviors are culturally specific and one cannot fully understand athletic performance without incorporating culture (e.g., country, global region) into the analysis. The data presented above are consistent with this reasoning. Numerous factors may be at work in facilitating the differences among countries noted above, including different sport socialization processes, differential media coverage, and inconsistencies in athletic training.