**How Olympians Stay Motivated**

Mindfulness, self-talk, and an obscure chunk of the brain help elite athletes get through the training grind.

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Until the 1990s, Olympic figure skating included a segment called “compulsory figures,” in which athletes would slowly trace precise, intricate shapes into the ice, and judges would inspect the resulting swirls and loops to determine much of the skater’s overall score. These “figures” gave the sport its name, but they were gradually phased out because not even the most ardent skating fans would watch the tedious process on TV. Today’s competitive figure skaters only do what their predecessors called the “free skating” portion—fast-paced programs set to music, packed with jumps and dance moves.

When American figure skater Dorothy Hamill won gold in the ladies’ single competition in 1976, compulsory figures were the first event. They played a decisive role in whether the skater would medal. Hamill adored skating, but training to execute the figures perfectly at the Olympiahalle in Innsbruck that year was, frankly, kind of miserable.

“I would spend four hours a day going in circles and trying to perfect the compulsory figures, and no one ever saw those but the judges,” Hamill told me. “They were so complicated and so hard to perfect. I changed coaches just to get someone to help me with my compulsory figures.”

At the time, Hamill was 19 years old and living in Colorado with her mother, who had moved with her daughter from their family’s home in Connecticut so that Hamill could focus on training to the exclusion of almost everything else. Each day, she awoke early and skated in the morning, then went to school, then skated after school, then had dinner (steak was big for athletes back then, when they could afford it), and then skated for another two hours.

Full days of training consisted of four hours of practicing compulsory figures, then two hours of free skating, then running through the short program and the long program, and then ... repeat.

“The same thing, day in and day out,” she said.

Many Olympic winter sports involve feats of incredible dynamism and gravity-defying stunts, making it seem as though the life of an elite winter athlete would be a nonstop adventure full of half-pipes and triple Axels. And to some extent, it is. But what audiences don’t see are the grueling practice sessions that involve hours of repetitive, muscle-straining movements.

A 2009 *Boston Globe* article about a school for Olympic snowboarders described a typical day as, "up at dawn, stretch, watch video of the previous day, hit the slopes till lunch, go to class, do more conditioning, eat dinner, and then go to study hall for an hour and a half. At most, they get about an hour of “free time” a day, but it’s usually used for homework."

With schedules like that, some of the most successful athletes aren’t necessarily the strongest or fastest, but simply the ones who are best at staying motivated.

“A lot of times before you physically give out, you give out mentally,” said Thomas Hong, a high-school student and speed skater who placed 11th at the Olympic trials this year. “You know you’re going to be sore for a while, you know how bad it’s going to hurt you.”

Hamill said part of what spurred her on were the sacrifices that her parents and coaches had made. She wasn’t very interested in school, and most of the family’s money went to her training. It was skating or bust.
“I had a commitment to myself and all the people who were helping me skate,” she said. “It’s like a marriage, you don’t walk away from it. It was a huge investment in everyone’s life—my mom and my brothers and sisters and coaches.”

And most of the time, she said, the training was enjoyable. But some of the time, “it really wasn’t.”

We can’t all be Olympic athletes. (In fact some of us, including your humble narrator, should not be allowed anywhere near ice or blades.) But we all face times when we really don’t want to do something that we, nonetheless, really have to do. Drawing from interviews with top athletes and their coaches, along with psychological studies of athletes, here are seven ways Olympians stay motivated through the training slog.

1. Talk yourself through the stress

In 1993, researchers interviewed 17 national champion figure skaters and identified 158 unique coping strategies they used. The most common, used by 76 percent of the skaters, was “rational thinking and self-talk,” which the study authors describe as logically examining all of the potential stressors, determining what could be controlled, and talking oneself through the problem rationally. The skaters would say that they tried to “gather all the valid points, sort through everything … take what you think is a good comment, disregard what you think is not a good comment.” One tried to displace the weight of the competition by convincing herself it was just for fun. “Listen, if I want to skate, I have to skate, I have to do it for myself,” she told the researchers. “I’m not out here for anyone else or the USA. I’m out here to do it for myself.”

2. Love—or at least accept—the grind

Studies of college-age swimmers and professional rugby players have shown that, more so than physical exhaustion or even defeat, the biggest factor in predicting burnout was the athlete’s own devaluation of the sport—caring about it less or attributing negative qualities to it.

Successful athletes were repeatedly described as being intrinsically motivated and “loving” their practice, not just their competitions.

“The women that I’ve worked with that medal are the ones that really enjoy the process,” said Teri McKeever, the head swimming coach at UC Berkeley who has also trained Olympic swimmers. “They enjoy the working out as much as they enjoy the competition. They love that idea of pushing the limits and learning and being challenged emotionally and physically.”

3. Be optimistic

Yes, it’s a cliche. But in a 2002 study for which researchers interviewed 10 Olympic medalists and their coaches, all of the athletes and eight of the coaches described the athlete in question as “optimistic/positive.” By comparison, only two of the athletes described themselves as “intelligent” and only seven called themselves “focused.” Zero athletes called themselves nice.

You don’t have to be an especially pleasant, smart, or even driven person, it seems, as long as you’re irrepesibly Pollyannaish about your own abilities. Other studies have shown that a sunny outlook also helps Olympic athletes bounce back from defeat. Meanwhile, negative moods tend to hurt performance.

In another study of 10 participants in either the Olympics or the Commonwealth games, “having an unshakable belief in your ability to achieve competition goals,” was found to be the most common definition of “mental toughness” among the athletes. The participants also believed they possessed “unique qualities and abilities” that made them better than their rivals.
“Everyone’s gonna fail or get beat or get injured or whatever, but [successful athletes] figure out how to reframe it so that it can be a positive thing instead of a negative thing,” McKeever said. “Failure and setbacks and struggles are where all the good stuff happens, if you can take that approach.”

4. Anticipate things before they occur

Becoming a Navy SEAL requires swimming for 50 meters without taking a breath. One trainer realized that the SEAL-aspirants who are most likely to have trouble with this task are the ones who get intimidated by it before they even try. So, he began telling them to focus on executing each stroke individually instead of the entire, 50-meter stretch.

"That recalibrates the brain to pay attention to the body's moment-by-moment change," said Martin Paulus, a psychiatry professor at the University of California, San Diego, who studies both military members and elite athletes as part of the university's OptiBrain Center. "He was then able to have some of these guys do much better than if they were beforehand saying 'Oh my God, I have to dive 50 meters.'"

If a particularly arduous training session were to seem overwhelming to an athlete, the brain’s motivation centers might falter and the person would feel like they just couldn't go on.

But new research from the OptiBrain Center suggests that a grape-sized section of the brain called the insular cortex is especially fine-tuned in top athletes, helping them anticipate upcoming pressures and adapt to them quickly.

The insula “can generate strikingly accurate predictions of how the body will feel in the next moment. That model of the body's future condition instructs other brain areas to initiate actions that are more tailored to coming demands than those of also-rans and couch potatoes,” Sandra Upson wrote in an article about the structure in Scientific American.

In clinical studies, people with greater insular activity were also able to guess their heart rates more accurately and had faster reaction times. Paulus doesn't know whether people are gold medalists because they have stronger insular cortices, or vice-versa—but he did say the insula, like the athlete, gets better with practice.

5. Stick with a coach who’s more like South, not North, Korea

Unsurprisingly, the coach (or boss, or spouse, or parents, in real life) matters almost as much as the athlete. In a 2000 study, Division I athletes were shown to be more motivated when the coaches were neither too easygoing nor hard-charging—they reinforced consistently, but with a democratic style of instruction. (“Autocratic” coaches, meanwhile, are the ones who shout orders with no explanation.)

"When I tell them something, they ask, ‘How is it going to help me?’"

It also helps if the coach provides rationale for each point of feedback. It’s been suggested that parents who explain their disciplinary choices are more likely to gain compliance from their children because they seem more rational. Similarly, a process called “internalization” helps athletes follow the well-reasoned guidelines.

David Park, a trainer for Hong, the speed skater, and for other athletes, said Hong differentiates himself by internalizing each of Park’s instructions.

“When I work with Thomas and other elite athletes, when I tell them something, they ask why. ‘How is it going to help me?’” he said. “It enables them to connect it to themselves.”
6. Try mindfulness

Mindfulness is loosely defined as the nonjudgmental focus of attention on an experience as it occurs. Some researchers think being mindful helps athletes achieve a state of flow, or feeling fully immersed in an activity.

Athletes who experienced flow said they felt time going by more quickly or a sense of effortless control. In a 2009 paper in the Journal of Clinical Sports Psychology, French swimmers at the national level told researchers that while competing, “I had the sensation of being in control of what I did, so everything seemed easier” or “I wasn’t aware of time anymore. Everything went very slowly at the beginning . . . and everything went so fast after.”

Elite golfers who had been trained in mindfulness techniques, such as greater awareness of breathing or accepting emotions without judgment, all increased their national rankings, compared with only two golfers in the control group.

Another study published in 2011 found that high-performing university athletes who took a mindfulness class were able to increase their levels of flow, though to a more limited degree.

7. Think about your next big event

Psychologist Steven Reiss believes that all behavior is guided by 16 basic desires, which are as wide-ranging as the need for power, independence, curiosity, or acceptance. He has also argued against seeing “intrinsic motivation” as being somehow superior to other motivators, like money or power. After all, who can know when or how an athlete’s internal drive morphs into a vision of themselves atop the Olympic podium, their national anthem blaring in the background.

"Individuals differ enormously in what makes them happy—for some, competition, winning and wealth are the greatest sources of happiness, but for others, feeling competent or socializing may be more satisfying,” Reiss once said. “The point is that you can’t say some motivations, like money, are inherently inferior."

Even some renowned athletes don’t intrinsically enjoy practice—they just see it as a means to win the next competition. Often, when artists or athletes give up on their craft, they tend to stop practicing it entirely. They don’t train just for the fun unless there’s a competition worth training for.

“Competitions and public performances provide short-term goals for specific improvements. At this point the motivation to practice becomes so closely connected to the goal of becoming an expert performer and so integrated with the individual’s daily life that motivation to practice, per se, cannot be easily assessed,” one 1993 study of top performers in the Psychological Review said.

Hamill loved to perform, and she said she always kept her sights on her next opportunity to be in front of an audience.

“The few times that I was so sick and tired of it and I really considered not wanting to keep up with it, I’d go in the rink and put in my hours, but my brain wasn't there,” she said. “Ultimately, I'd think ahead. I'd think, ‘Oh, what about that the competition in a few months.’ Okay, there's a light at the end of the tunnel, and then things start to get better.”

“Skating is cyclical. I'd skate really well and then I’d have a series of lousy performances. Then all of a sudden you're skating and everything feels great. It's being able to get through those tough times. It's looking ahead and thinking —what the end result is supposed to be. That's where I think our minds can be pretty powerful.”