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What Olympians Can Teach Us About Disappointment
By Gloria Liu
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Every Winter Olympics, Lindsey Jacobellis was forced to relive her most public failure. At the 2006 Games in Torino, Italy, the snowboard cross star was only 20 years old when she attempted a stylish grab in the final stretch of a race and crashed, losing her significant lead — and the gold medal.

At the next three Olympics, Ms. Jacobellis couldn't forget her devastating blunder — and others wouldn't let her either. Reporters asked about it in press conferences. Strangers, not knowing who she was, brought up the woman who "totally blew it" in snowboard cross. In 2010 and 2014, she didn't even make the finals.

Today, Ms. Jacobellis still has a hard time watching any sports competition, even the Super Bowl. When the camera pans over the ecstatic winner, she said, "I immediately feel for that other individual."

For every victory at the Games, there are many more heartbreaks. A majority of athletes don't earn a medal, and even those who do, but fail to win gold, can experience profound disappointment.

"They have a dream that many of them have had since childhood, and in some cases it dies right in front of the world," said Michael Gervais, a psychologist who coaches Olympians and other elite athletes. But "the best have a framework to move through it," he added.

Learning resilience

For top athletes, grappling with failure is a job requirement, said David Fletcher, a professor of human performance and health at Loughborough University in Britain. A key difference between the best athletes and the rest of us is that they see challenges as opportunities for growth rather than threats, he said.

While being naturally optimistic or conscientious helps, researchers say that to some extent, resilience can be learned. What we might perceive as mental Teflon in top athletes is also the result of a lifetime of practice.

Today, sports psychology and mental skills training are increasingly common in elite competition, and much of the work to bolster an athlete's psychological hardiness happens long before the Games.

Just as psychologists have athletes visualize their wins, they also ask them to imagine all the things that could go wrong, and how they'll respond, said Jessica Bartley, senior director of psychological services for the U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Committee.

Athletes also use self-talk to overcome disappointment and regain composure, especially during competition. Dr. Gervais has his athletes prepare ahead of time by writing down their self-talk — "I'm a tough competitor," for example — as well as three experiences that have proved that self-talk. "It needs to be believable," he said.

The power of purpose

Research suggests that people who have a sense of purpose in life deal with stress more effectively. Dr. Gervais has athletes identify their goals beyond winning, such as achieving personal growth or representing a marginalized group. When an athlete's motivations feel anchored to something bigger than medals, he said, "disappointment is painful, but it's not terminal."

Having multiple bars to measure success can help athletes to hedge against disappointment, Dr. Fletcher said, adding that the best athletes set what are known as process-oriented goals, meaning those within their control, as opposed to just performance-oriented goals, which are based on results. If they lose a race, they can still say they achieved other goals, like improving their technique, pacing or fueling strategy.

As part of identifying purpose, psychologists like Dr. Gervais also have athletes make plans for their life after competition.

The two-time gold-medalist skier Ted Ligety said that his work managing an eyewear and helmet company during his racing career, and his plan to do so full-time after retirement, gave him something else to focus on beyond his sport.

"It showed me there were other cool things out there," he said. He said his plans helped him eventually transition into what he called "the civilian world" after a disappointing 15th-place result at the 2018 Olympics.

Grit as a team effort

A person's environment and support system are important elements of grit, said Michael Ungar, a professor of social work and director of the Resilience Research Center at Dalhousie University in Canada.

An athlete overcoming an injury, for example, might have a support system of physical therapists, family and friends who drive them to appointments and sponsors who continue to pay them.

Dr. Fletcher emphasized that an athlete's perceived social support, rather than actual, is most important. He asks athletes to list the people or support systems they have in their lives, along with how often they've relied on them recently. This not only boosts their perception of the help they have available but illuminates where they could ask for more.

It's also critical to have supporters who care about the athlete as an individual, not just a performer, said Lauren Loberg, a mental performance coach who works with Olympians.

In 2002, the speedskater Shani Davis qualified for his first Olympics, then immediately endured months of scrutiny and unwanted media attention when another skater accused him of colluding with teammates to fix the race. At the 2006 Games, he was disparaged for skipping the team skating event to focus on his individual races. (Some suggested the criticism was racially fueled.) Controversy continued to follow Mr. Davis through his Olympic career, though he went on to win four medals. Support from childhood friends helped him handle these challenges, he said.

"My identity wasn't just tied to being a speedskater, but having real-life friends I grew up with who really know who I am as a person."

Acceptance is the goal

For all of these athletes, their Olympic disappointment still hurts. One said her experience remains a "sorrow-inducing memory." Another described his feeling as akin to losing a loved one.

Disappointment can activate the same parts of the brain that "light up" during grief, Dr. Gervais said. And like grief, Dr. Loberg said, an Olympic disappointment can take years to process.

Today, these athletes appear to have arrived at some semblance of acceptance. If coming in ninth or fifteenth in the Olympics is "a low, you've got to put things in perspective," Mr. Ligety said.

But Dr. Loberg pointed out that these athletes all had generally luminous careers, which may have made it easier for them to reframe and process their experiences enough to share their stories at all. Some Olympians, she said, end up suffering from depression or substance abuse. "Unfortunately, the ones who go into that dark space, who can't say 'that's life,' we don't know about them, right?"

Psychologists fall on a spectrum of how much they believe resilience is rooted in personality, as opposed to learned skills. But for most of us, almost any deliberate practice — using techniques like meditation, visualization or self-talk — could make a real difference, Dr. Gervais said.

After Ms. Jacobellis's disappointing results in 2010 and 2014, she and her coach determined that they had exhausted every avenue of physical conditioning. In 2016, she began mental skills training. In the 2018 Games, she reached the finals for the first time since 2006. Four years later, at 36, she won not one gold medal but two.

After every Olympics, she considered retiring. But knowing the season immediately after the Games was always fun and relaxed, she'd resolve to compete for one more year; if she stopped enjoying herself, she'd quit.

"And by the end of that season," she said, "I'd be like, 'I still have the fire.'" So she just kept going.