2008 Olympic Reflections:
Perspectives and reflections from the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games-
-Trent Stellingwerff-

What was I doing there?
Most of you have probably heard that I had the wonderful opportunity to be apart of the 2008 Olympic Games. But, what really was my role there? Basically, I have had the opportunity to apply some of my background and education in sport science and nutrition in assisting and helping Canadian athletes supported by Athletics Canada- the governing federation for track and field in Canada. In Singapore, where we had our pre-Olympic training camp, and in Beijing for the Olympics, I was the team exercise physiologist/nutritionist as part of their integrated support team (IST). In short, I was available for consulting with athletes prior to the games at our training camp in Singapore and on-site during the Olympics in Beijing on topics such as: recovery nutrition, hydration and electrolyte needs in the heat, planning proper nutrition around a training and competition schedule and longer-term discussions on body composition and periodizing nutrition around training.

A Unique Games – the best ever?
I have been asked several times if I thought this past 2008 Beijing Olympics was the best ever. This is incredibly hard for me to answer, as this was the first Olympic Games I have attended. However, I did ask several games veterans, some who had been to 5+ Olympics, and most agreed that these Games, when considering all aspects, were probably the best. There are so many factors to consider when asked if this was the best games ever. Beyond what is just seen on TV, there are considerations such as travel logistics, food quality, weather conditions and the quality of the Olympic Village.

The quality of an Olympic Village can be anywhere from a glorified prison design, to upscale condominiums, and the Beijing Olympic Village was much closer to the latter. This village was nearly like a ‘zen garden’, with small ponds and streams, glowing lanterns at night, and even soft music emanating from little fake rocks dotted along the walking paths. The village was also very close, about 8min by bus, to the main Olympic Green, featuring all of the main competition sites such as the Bird’s Nest and the Aqua Cube, where swimming was contested.
"Zen" like Olympic Village, Canada as in Sector C1, with the big Canadian flag draped over the entire wall.

Omnipresent super-pleasant volunteers
Another feature that is universal at any major event is the volunteers. I read somewhere that there were nearly 350,000 volunteers for these Olympics—and they were everywhere, wearing the easily identifiable official blue adidas Beijing outfits. As soon as you walked down the runway from the plane in Beijing’s magnificent new terminal 3, they were there to greet you. An aside, the new Beijing Terminal 3 alone is the size of all 5 of London Heathrow terminal’s combined! Walking into this grand single open air terminal for your first arrival into China really sets the stage for the type of colossal structures the Chinese were going to have for these games. During the games, this airport handled 1500 flights per day! So back to the volunteers...

The volunteers were not only present at competition sites, but also all around the city at major landmarks and subway stops. Their ability to communicate English was not always the best, or even possible, but you certainly could not fault them for their gracious efforts. On the morning of the men’s 50km walk I showed up at the required security checks (metal detectors) to get into the Olympic Green area at 5:45AM. And, to my surprise, there were already hundreds of volunteers lined up to pass security at this early hour. With a 5hr break in the afternoon, the track and field events that evening went to 11PM, and again I saw several of the same volunteers—day in and day out. I finally asked one of them what time they show-up each day, and how long they stay. To my amazement some of these volunteers were showing up at 6AM each day and working till midnight, plus they had a 90min commute. All told, they were getting less then 3hrs of
sleep per night for weeks on end just to have the opportunity to volunteer 18hrs per day for free, sometimes stuck in a single hallway in the bowels of the Bird’s Nest, to be part of the Olympic experience. You would think that at the end of 3+ weeks of volunteering you just might come across a volunteer who was worn-out, or slightly punchy. But no, I never met a single volunteer who was not absolutely pleasant and willing to go out of his/her way to help.

Many volunteers in full force...maybe too many?

**Getting out of the Olympic “Bubble”**

Finally, on the last week of the games, I had several experiences to get outside the Olympic “bubble”. When you are staying at/near the Village and near all the Olympic venues, you really are within this bubble, where everywhere you look, you see the soft blue Olympic banners, and hear the Beijing Olympic song softly playing. To be honest, when in the Olympic bubble, you are in such a controlled environment, you really feel like you could be anywhere in the world. During the last week, two Canadian coaches and I hired a taxi to take us to the Great Wall of China. Now, I was initially worried about the cost of this. I mean, we were getting a taxi to drive us ~120km, wait for about 2.5 hrs as we walked around, and then drive us back ~120km. In Switzerland, where taxis are Mercedes Benz’s, this would probably be somewhere in the neighborhood of approaching $1000. But, in China our total bill came to about $150, including a tip which he was very surprised to get. Along the same lines, a beer in the Bird’s Nest was less than a dollar. I have a feeling that beer, and everything else, in 2012 London Olympics, with how strong the British pound is, will be at least 10-times the price.
Great Wall of China—here you can get a sense of the steepness of some sections.

At the end, the complete organization, the unbelievable dedication of volunteers, the open and heart-warming hospitality of the native Chinese made for an unforgettable experience. The professionalism and attention to detail that the Chinese put into this global event really showed that China is poised to become the new world superpower—perhaps they are already? After walking about 3km of the Great Wall of China, one of the Canadian coaches remarked, “When you consider there is about 6,400km of this wall, most of it built hundreds of years ago, building the Olympic venues and organizing the games would have been easy.”

Chinese perspective
However, one needs to be reminded that despite putting on an incredible show, there are still many political issues that face China; media/internet censorship, issues in Tibet, poverty rates and the fact that the vast majority of Chinese, due to communism, will never have the funds or opportunity to leave their country during their lifetime. Perhaps, this is one of the reasons why the Chinese were so open and hospitable to other cultures—it is their own glimpse into another world. But, politics are not part of this reflection.

Wired to Win - What separates the winner’s from the loser’s?
So, when an athlete is racing at the Bird’s Nest in front of 90,000+ people, or knowing that nearly 4 billion viewers are watching the games, how does an athlete actually seize the moment and come through in the clutch? How do they perform under pressure when it really counts? What really separates the winners from the losers? As a practicing scientist in the area of exercise physiology and sports performance nutrition research, I might be tempted to suggest that the only thing that separates the winners from the losers is purely physiological differences.
On the other hand, as a coach and former competitive runner, I know that there is more involved than just physiology, nutrition or genetics—especially as athletes get to the very elite echelon of sport, such as the Olympics.

At this level, where less than 0.5% will separate the winners from someone who is not even top 10, it is an incredibly hard process to try and predict who is going to medal, let alone who is going to win gold. In the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games 10,000m final there was less than a 0.005% difference in performance between Haile Gebressalie of Ethiopia and Paul Tergat. We are talking mere centimeters after more than 27 minutes of racing.

There seemed to be more major upsets at these 2008 Games in athletics than compared to recent world championships—was it the added Olympic pressure that caused people to crumble?
Quite honestly, when I walked away from the Olympic Games and reflected, my major impression was that it really comes down to a myriad of little factors as to who wins and who finishes out of the medals; many, of which, have nothing to do with the current physiology or fitness of the athlete. Fitness is required to be in the hunt for medal initially. But the most important performance dictating factors appear to present themselves in the weeks and days leading into the Olympics, such as mental state, most recent health, ability to stay calm, luck, and tactics. Probably, along with current fitness level, Olympic performance is most strongly related to the current mental state and very recent health of the athlete – indeed hard to predict off these factors.

One of these little factors I am also alluding to is “Killer Instinct” or “Will to Win”. This is something that scientist and coaches cannot really measure or quantify, but something that good coaches can readily and almost immediately identify in an athlete after a single competition. Perhaps this killer instinct is also linked to genetics- as this killer instinct is a really hard thing to ‘teach’ an athlete who does not have it. Perhaps someday we will identify a gene that is linked to this character trait. Successful elite athletes have to be ‘wired to win’; they have to want to win and have to be disappointed in themselves when they do not win. Nearly every world-class runner I know has this ability to 'flip the switch’ and turn on this ‘killer instinct’ come race time. They may be the most humble and meek individual off the track, but watch-out come competition time!

Unfortunately, exercise physiologists cannot measure things such as: determination, pain tolerance, heart, will to win and confidence- which play huge roles in separating the medalists from the rest of the finalists. Of course, some of the differences do indeed come down to physical conditioning differences that are too small to detect via the normal battery of exercise testing. Furthermore, we are just starting to gain insights into the impact that natural talent, or genes, can play in a performance outcome.

**Olympics = Pressure + Stress—for some athletes at least**

**Remaining calm in a sea of chaos**

The Olympics are indeed the “IT” place to be—where to be seen, where to have a presence, where to make an impact. The number of global political leaders at the opening ceremonies was as impressive as any global UN or G6 meeting. The number of stars who are there are incredible: Michael Phelps (Swimming)-USA; Yao Ming (Basketball)-China; Kobe Bryant (Basketball)-USA; Roger Federer (Tennis)-Switzerland; Usain Bolt (Athletics)- Jamaica and Brazilian football player Ronaldinho, the #1 player in the world, basically shut down the Village Dinning Hall when he entered. Beyond this, people like David Beckham and Led Zeppelin’s Jimmy Page were included in the closing ceremonies. This does not include any of the extra media attention and the incredible amount of free parties around town sponsored by different companies.

So, despite an incredible buzz and energy that is associated with the Olympic Games, athletes still need to remain calm and grounded and perform. When at the Olympics for the first time, no matter what your previous experiences as an athlete, it is truly a grand experience. There are thousands of extra police, security guards, fences, security checkpoints, volunteers, shuttle-buses, dignitaries, fellow athletes, coupled with hundreds of thousands of spectators- it is truly something that takes getting used to. Beijing was transformed into this incredible flow of people, sights, sounds and energy. But despite all of this hype and chaos, each athlete needs to find their own unique way to harness this energy and atmosphere towards a positive performance outcome, instead of becoming overwhelmed and having a negative performance outcome. In the sport psychology discipline, this is known as trying to achieve the ideal performance state (IPS). But this is hard to do for a young or first-time athlete on this grandiose world stage, as they have no prior experiences to draw upon.
What can be done? First, planning goes a long ways. Planning and preparation, that includes mimicking Olympic procedures as much as possible, will help the athlete when they are faced with it the first time. Every elite level athlete should have a set-routine that they go through in the days leading up to a major championship. If this IPS includes hanging out with family and friends, then as long as this can be accomplished without undue distress and energy, it should be included. It appeared to me that some athletes tried to unduly over-isolate themselves leading into the Olympics. It is certainly OK to enjoy some of the atmosphere, as long as energy and priorities are in check leading into competition time.

Every athlete is unique when it comes to their individual IPS. Some need to really get pumped-up and excited, to the point of being over the top to reach their IPS. For others, this would be disastrous, and a very calm approach is needed to reach their IPS. By implementing different IPS approaches in meets prior to the games, each athlete should know exactly what their ideal build-up in the days preceding their event is, including their ideal routine and also their IPS, in terms of emotions leading into race day.

**Bolt—is this truly the best track and field name ever or the most relaxed athlete ever?**

So is ‘Bolt’, which can literally mean a sudden dash, run or escape, the best track and field name ever? Of course there are also several track and field athletes with the last name Swift. Regardless of his name, there was one athlete that really appeared to have an ideal IPS, and that was Jamaica’s Usain Bolt. I will give some background insight on Bolt, as I had the most access to him at the athletics warm-up track and in the Bird’s Nest. If you have been under a rock for the last month, to bring you up to speed, Usain Bolt won an incredible 3 gold medals in Athletics, all in world-record time including, 100m in 9.69 sec, 200m in 19.30 and as part of the gold medal winning Jamaican 4x100m relay team. He has become an instant bona-fide world-wide star, who even appeared on the David Letterman show in the US after his exploits.

But, beyond his truly incredible Olympic performances, what also endeared global fans was Bolt’s truly relaxed, open and confident (cocky?) attitude – this kid was having fun! This 22 year old, who celebrated his birthday during the games, and actually had 90,000+ people in the Bird’s Nest sing him Happy Birthday, was probably one of the most relaxed
individuals in all of China. Nothing seemed to stress Bolt out. Again, every athlete has their individual IPS, but Bolt’s IPS, for a sprinter, was probably the most relaxed I have ever seen. Most sprinters tend to play many macho head games during the calling to the blocks. But Bolt tended to not try and intimidate any of his competitors, through macho bravado. But, instead, just tended to lap up and enjoy the attention. Perhaps, by being so relaxed he indirectly intimidated his competitors? To see Bolt both before and after a race was both fun and refreshing- he was truly there to entertain and not necessarily intimidate. He appeared to put to undue pressure upon himself, other than to have fun and see what the outcome was. For Bolt, the outcome was 3 gold medals and 3 world records.

Bolt’s Incredible Performances—is it the yams, genetics or “vitamins”? Of course, with Bolt’s incredible exploits on the track, along with the rest of the Jamaican team, came all the rumors around the track and field community, at the warm-up track and beyond, that his performance were too good to be true, and could be due to more than just hard-work and genetics. Unfortunately, in our current track and field sports climate whenever someone does well, there will always be rumors regarding whether this person possibly had a scientifically designed “vitamin” program that is against the rules of the game. Hopefully someday Hilary will have these same rumors—then she will truly have made it, and running incredible at a world-class level to deserve these rumors! Of course, rumors do not prove anything, other than intrigue and interest. One newspaper article had Bolt’s father claiming that the local rural Jamaican yams (basically a sweet potato) were the reason why his son could run so fast. Anyone still reading this, if you are going to Jamaica, please get me some yams and I’ll have them analyzed. One needs to realize, Bolt has been an absolute phenom sprinter since the age of 15. This kid ran a 20.13 second 200m at the age of 16 years, which would have been a Canadian record, for all ages!

To me, it is very hard to believe that he would be on a systematic doping program, already at the age of 15 or 16 years in rural Jamaica. There are lots of examples of genetic “pockets”, or locations, around the world that dictate certain physiological attributes upon individuals. For example, the obesity rate among Samoans, or the fact that, on average, the Dutch are the tallest people in the world. The Caribbean Islands
have had a long history of producing the fastest people in the world. What do you think all of these people have in common: Usain Bolt (2008 Olympic 100m Champ), Asafa Powell (2nd fastest ever over 100m), Donovan Bailey (1996 Olympic 100m Champ), Ben Johnson (former 1988 Olympic 100m Champ), Linford Christie (1992 Olympic 100m Champ), Don Quarrie (1976 Olympic 200m Champ), Veronica Campbell (2004 Olympic 200m Champ), Arthur Wint (1948 Olympic 400m Champ) and George Rhoden (1952 Olympic 400m Champ)? They are all from Jamaica, a country of less than 3 million, less than the size of the city of Toronto. Now obviously not all of these athletes were clean. But, certainly one needs to recognize the incredible genetic talent that Bolt is (running 20.13 as a 16 year old), among a nation that is filled with incredibly fast individuals, before stroking the broad biased “he must be doping” brush upon him.

**Luck?**

Most athletes, coaches (and scientists) generally loathe the word luck. Luck is the belief in an organization of fortunate and unfortunate events of which the individual has no control over the outcome. Athletes are much more comfortable with situations they can control, but some believe that sometimes good or bad luck can play its hand in an athlete's ultimate performance. Most would suggest, however, that luck plays a very small role (if any!) and that there are many tactical choices an athlete can make in a race or event to make sure that they stay in control of their situation and keep luck out of it. Athletes only seem to blame poor performance on bad luck, and never want to believe that their great performances were due to good luck. So, I tend to place very little stock on luck, but instead, look to many of the outlined parameters above to analyze an athlete’s performance.

**Are the best, or most deserving, athletes even at the Games?**

To be honest, the answer to the question above would be NO. This answer may surprise most people watching the Games who are not intimately involved in sport. First off, each country can only send a maximum of 3 athletes per track and field event. Obviously, some countries are very good at certain events. For example, in most instances the 4th ranked 100m runner from Jamaica or the United States is going to be far better than most other 100m runners from around the world—but this athlete would not be able to compete at the Olympic Games.

The same can be said about men’s 10,000m race. Right now, when looking at the rankings of the top-30 fastest men’s 10,000m runners in the world, 14 of these men are from Kenya, and a total of 22 (or 73%) of the top-30 men in the world are just from two countries: Kenya and Ethiopia. Obviously, Kenya and Ethiopia can only enter 3 men per country, thus there are another 16 men from Kenya and Ethiopia who are ranked top-30 in the world who are sitting home watching the Games. In this regard, in previous years it has been argued that it is harder to get top-3 at the Kenyan or Ethiopian Olympic selection trials than it is to get top-3 at the Olympics. Actually, some would argue that the 10,000m race put on at the Brussels’ Golden League a few weeks after the Olympics was actually a stronger race. At this open meet, there are no rules on selection and 16 of the 22 athletes were from Kenya and Ethiopia and the depth and strength of this race would have actually made it harder to win than the Olympic 10,000m final.

**My Personal Games Highlights**

So I have been asked by several people, “what were the real highlights of the Games for you?” To be honest, this is very hard to put into perspective. So to be safe, I would say, 3 ties:
1) Watching Usain Bolt actually work very hard for that 200m world record of 19.30-incredibly raw effort and raw speed, incredible effort.

2) Simon Whitfield’s silver medal in the men’s triathlon, 8 years after his gold- honestly, this guy fell off the pace in the run like 3 times, and still battled back. Finally he threw down his hat and went for the win, only to be reeled in over the last section of the race.

3) Jessica Zelinka’s 5th place finish in the Hep -- mainly due to the fact that i have been working with her for a while on her nutrition around training, supplements, nutrition at the events, recovery etc.-- and she went out and set personal bests in 5 of the 7 events for a new Canadian record!

To be honest, all of those experiences above, for me, were much more exciting than having the opportunity to walk in the closing ceremonies—although that opportunity was great as well. The personal touch of having a relationship as part of their integrated support team, with an athlete involved in the events is much more inspiring than any personal experience, such as the Closing Ceremonies. However, hearing and seeing Jimmy Page (Led Zeppelin lead guitarist) cranking out “Whole Lotta Love” up close was also a personal highlight for me.
Personal photo taken from the infield during the closing ceremonies.

(note: you do not need to be a facebook member to see this album.)