



How Can Olympic Friends and Family Help Olympians Perform Their Best?

"You know what is funny? I knew that this would be televised all over the world, that hundreds of millions of people would be watching, and I knew that there were tens of thousands of people in the stands, but all I could think about was my family. I was wondering what they might say when I was done. I don't think friends and family realize how important they can be to a performance. Knowing I could count on their support grounded me, and kept me focused on my job. I feel bad when I hear all the stories of families or friends who create stress for their athletes, because my friends and family helped me succeed."

–Successful Olympian

"I knew that however I performed, my parents would still love me."

–Greg Louganis,

when asked what he was thinking about
just before diving for a gold medal

Introduction to the Landscape of the Olympics:

At every Olympic Games, athletes and their friends and families are surprised by the special pressure and stress created by this event. There are a number of unique aspects of the Olympics, including:

- **It's a party for the world, but serious business for the athlete.** Maintaining a high performance focus during the world's biggest party is a new challenge for most athletes.
- **Security restrictions make "casual" meetings impossible.** Family and friends used to "hanging out" with their athlete during down time are often shocked to discover meetings need to be meticulously planned or they don't happen, due to security zones and athlete-only accommodations.

- **Travel logistics make even brief meetings a lengthy ordeal.** A routine ten-minute trip may take ninety minutes during the Olympics, and rest and relaxation time can be devoured by travel difficulties. This is as true in Canada as in Italy or China. At the Olympics, it is very hard to get anywhere quickly.-
- **Almost everyone gets “overwhelmed” by the Olympics.** It doesn’t matter how much international experience you have. The Olympics are bigger, and everyone knows it. If you have a legitimate chance to medal, you know it can change your life.
- **Coaches want greater control of their athletes in this most important event, but feel like they have less control.** All of the “normal” methods of operating are removed at the Olympics, and this puts coaches on edge. Pushing coaches for individualized plans to accommodate friends and family tends to irritate them. It is unrealistic to expect or request individual assistance to accommodate the athletes’ family or friends.
- **There are many “special events” for athletes that interfere with ideal training and rest schedules.** One sponsor party or TV interview may not seem like a big deal, but there are so many of these opportunities that valuable time for training recovery is lost.
- **Many more family and friends show up at the Olympics than at other events.** Everybody wants to go to the Olympics, and they want to connect with the athlete once they arrive. This can put pressure on athletes as well as their friends and families who don’t want to hurt the feelings of relatives who have come a long way just to see them. We expect many more people to show up in Vancouver than at a European or Asian Olympic Games.
- **Many of these family and friends don’t know “how to act” at competitions.** Some relatives or friends may not know that the time just before competing is not ideal for family photographs with the Olympian. Or they may ask why the Olympian can’t go out to dinner. Family and friends need to understand this is not the time to spend with the athlete – their focus needs to be on their performance.
- **Housing, meals, and travel situations are often less than ideal for family and friends.** Paying a lot of money is no guarantee of a great situation at the Olympics. This can cause frayed nerves.
- **If you don’t have tickets to events, there is often little to do at the Olympics for family and friends.** Some families have found the best way to deal with the down time is bring along good friends or family to have fun with.
- **Family and friends feel a desire to be part of the athlete’s performance, to give encouragement and support, but aren’t integrated into the “normal” performance teams. Their encouragement may not always be what the athlete needs.** This is a delicate point that athletes are afraid to talk to friends and family about. Athletes tell us that new people in a competitive situation can create stress, even if they are loving and supportive people.

Some Tips for Friends and Relatives of Potential Olympians:

“My mom used to get so freaked out at my competitions, that she would have to leave the stands and go to the ladies room. If she started to hear the crowd, she would go into a stall and start flushing the toilet to drown out the noise. After a while, we decided that maybe she shouldn’t come to the competition at all. ESPECIALLY high pressure events like the Olympic Trials. It was better for her and me.”

–National Team Member

Before The Olympics

For many athletes, there is a great deal more pressure before the Games than during the Games. Families and friends can be a great resource during this time if they understand the pressure the athletes are feeling. The following tips are based upon the experiences of Olympic friends and family members during the last year before the Olympics.

- 1) Do not make a decision about going to the Games based upon whether the athlete you know makes the team. Athletes often won’t know until the last minute whether they have made the team, and knowing that people are waiting for them to qualify before tickets are booked creates tremendous pressure.
1. Make your plans early. Lock in housing, tickets, etc. as early as possible. The best way to get information is through the official site of the 2010 Olympic Games (www.vancouver2010.com), the Official Sponsor/Ticket Sales Agent (www.cosport.com), or by calling 1-877-45-RINGS.
- 2) Make sure your passport is current or make sure your passport application is in early.
- 4) Make your plans assuming you will not see the athlete you know until after their event. A schedule of events will also be available at the above website or at www.usolympicteam.com.
- 5) Don’t ask the athlete about the logistics of the Games. They won’t know. The best way to get information is through the official site of the 2010 Olympic Games (see #2 above).
- 6) Try not to ask the athlete if they think they are going to make the team. It is an honest question, but elite athletes know that focusing too much on a potential outcome can interfere with that outcome. Even strong favorites to make the team hate this question. It makes them nervous.
- 7) If you have been a regular fan and supporter of an athlete as they have competed over the years, by all means keep it up – now more than ever. However, if you haven’t ever really talked to your nephew, cousin, or friend about their sport before, it’s not a good idea to call up the athlete during the Olympic Trials to offer your support. It’s not that the support isn’t wanted, it’s just that it is new and different and can be a distraction for athletes who need routine.
- 8) If you are very close to an athlete, one of the best things you can give is affection and support for the PERSON, not the athlete. As an athlete, it is great to know that people care about you, not your recent race results (see the Greg Louganis quote).

During the Olympics

“It was really important for me to know that my parents were there to see me wear the Team USA uniform in the Olympics, and see me compete. It felt like a way that I could pay them back for everything they had done to help me. On the other hand, my parents are not part of my normal program at competitions, and ESPECIALLY AT THE OLYMPICS, I wanted things to be normal. We had to talk about how I couldn’t really see them at all until I was done competing. This was very hard for me because I didn’t want to seem ungrateful to my parents, and they didn’t know how much little things like the wrong question could upset me under pressure. They had never really seen me with my competition face on, and I didn’t want to have to explain.”

–Medal Winning Olympian

Olympians have told us that, during the Games, family and friends can be an enormous asset or an unanticipated problem.

- 1) Be low maintenance. Make your own plans, your own schedule. Figure out your own logistics. Communicate clearly that you are self-sufficient.
- 2) Make your own schedule and keep yourself busy. Try to get tickets to lots of events if you can afford them. Do pin trading, shop, go sightseeing in Vancouver. This relieves worry in the athlete.
- 3) Be happy. This is contagious. Even if logistics are a nightmare, try to find a way to be upbeat with the athlete.
- 4) Don’t ask the athlete to try and find you tickets. This creates a new stress, uncertainty, and guilt if they cannot find them.
- 5) Make a pre-Olympics plan and follow it, regarding communications with the athlete by phone or other means. This may be harder than you think to pull off, as you get more and more nervous. Stick with the plan – agreed upon by you and the athlete. Remember that some coaches and/or teams have policies to restrict cell phone use during the Games and/or in the Athlete Village.
- 6) Expect to be nervous. Talk to someone other than your Olympian about this nervousness. Nervousness is also contagious.
- 7) Expect the athlete to be different. Even if you have a lot of experience at competition with the athlete, expect a certain increased intensity and pressure in the athlete.
- 8) Have a great time!



“After the National Anthem played, I turned to the people who made it possible (my family) and waved. Even though I know they were just happy I was an Olympian, I was so happy I could share this win with them. I could have done anything after winning, but all I really wanted to do was hang out with my family and let them enjoy this with me. I couldn’t see them before I competed, but the wait was worth it.”

–Gold Medal Winner

Written By:

Sean McCann, Ph.D.

USOC Senior Sport Psychologist

(719) 866-4516