Mind game in the Olympics with La Trobe University’s Dr Mandy Ruddock-Hudson

My area of interest looks at the psychological aspect of athletic performance and injury, so I think I’ll be look at the Olympics from a different aspect to most people. Probably looking at it from the perspective of the preparation they’ve put in, the sacrifice that comes with it, and also whether they’ve had previous injuries and what are the obstacles they’ve had to overcome to get there.

I think a lot of athletes refer to the journey, and what they’ve done to be able to get to the peak of their performance. The journey for out athletes might refer to the sacrifices, injuries, obstacles that they’ve had to overcome. We see in the media, Australia as a nation we’re very much a sporting nation and if we don’t see our athletes on the dais, the first, second or third generally we may see them as being unsuccessful but I think what we forget is what these athletes have done throughout their journey to actually be where they are today. They are the best in our country, and that in itself is an amazing achievement and I think we need to remember where they’ve come from and what they’ve had to do to be there representing our country.

Different athletes obviously have to overcome different obstacles. Probably some examples that I could give you, one of them would be Steven Hooker, our pole vaulter. Steven actually had to cease competition just so he could focus on his training to simply qualify for the Olympics. His story was about overcoming his mental demons, and some issues that he was having with respect to his take off in the pole vault and then actually trying to get over the height that he had trained to get over. His qualification took part in a private training environment with only about 150 people, and it seemed that that’s what he needed, that was his psychological edge to be able to qualify for the Olympics. When I reflect as well I think of Stephanie Rice, the media has portrayed her as a party girl, but really she’s a young female, she’s a talented athlete and she’s the best in Australia at medley swimming and she’s actually had two shoulder reconstructions recently and it’s my understanding that she still swims with pain at the moment, so for her to just go to training and to actually cover the kilometers she needs to in the pool for her preparation would be very challenging. And then I also reflect back to the Sydney Olympics, we all remember Cathy Freeman in her bodysuit and how much pressure we placed on her as a nation and she won the 400 which was fantastic, but my reflection would be the relief and probably just the stress that was released from her when she actually finished that race thinking that its over, I’ve done what I’ve set out to do.

The Olympics is definitely a mind game. I think the person who is the psychologically stronger athlete will win on the day. If we were presented with two athletes who trained the same way, who did the weights the same way, there’s always going to be one winner and it’s going to be because one person is psychologically stronger than the other. Mainly probably due to their self confidence, their self efficacy which is the belief in themselves, or the internal and external pressures that they have had to face. So I think when we talk about the Olympics it is a mind game and I think about some of the athletes in particular, the hundred meter sprinters, we might see them as being very confident individuals but that is their competitive edge, that is how they beat their competitors.

I think t he mind is a very powerful tool, and I think we forget, as a nation, that they have sacrificed so much pysically and psychologically, but really these are ordinary people. They’re young athletes. They are just put in extraordinary circumstances and they have been training extraordinarily hard for 60 seconds of what they see to be their goal, their achievement., And I think we, as a nation, need to get behind them. Whether we see them in the finals, whether we see them on the dais. Whether we see them in the gold medal contention, they are the best athletes in our country and we really need to support them for who they are and what they do.