



COMMAND PERFORMANCE

The time, location, and conditions of the race of their life are all out of their control. An athlete can be sick, tired, having a bad day—it doesn't matter. Athletes are faced with having to perform under intense pressure and produce on the day.

By KAREN CLARK LE POOLE
Photography by EWAN NICHOLSON

"It's a little bit scary," says 2004 Olympic champion Kyle Shewfelt. "There are a lot of expectations, and you don't want to let anyone down. I turn the pressure into a positive. I figure a lot is expected of me because I've proven my capabilities." Shewfelt's capability is undeniable after a virtually perfect floor routine in Athens earned him Olympic gold. Canada's first and only Olympic medallist in artistic gymnastics picks a motto before every competition. He repeats the motto again and again to build his confidence and control nerves. "I chose 'Make It Happen' for Athens," says Shewfelt. "I was physically and mentally ready to perform and get it done."

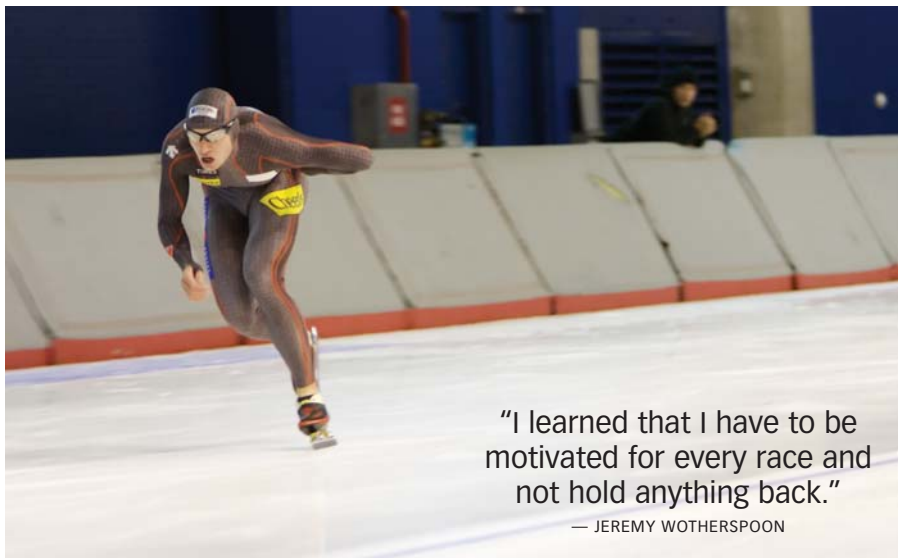
Training athletes to perform under pressure is the job of Dr. Kimberley Amirault, director of sport psychology at the Canadian Sport Centre Calgary (CSCC). “Athletes have to embrace fear and pressure,” says Amirault. “They have to push their limits daily so it scares them. When they’re pushed internally, the external pressure is not such a big deal.”

Athletes describe the pressure of Olympic competition as severe. “At the 2002 Olympics there was more pressure than I have ever experienced,” says two-time Olympic gold medallist in speed skating Catriona Le May Doan. “When I had a baby I had a cesarean section, and I was kind of freaked out and nervous. Afterwards I said, ‘I would rather have 100 c-sections than go through the pressure of the Olympics again.’”

The demand to perform at the Olympics is so intense that many world champions fall short. “There were 301 events in Athens,” says CSCC President Dale Henwood. “That means 301 athletes were world champions in 2003 going into the Games. Only 31 per cent of those athletes became Olympic champions.”

And that’s the worldwide figure. Henwood says Canada went into Athens with six world champions—Alexander Despatie and Emilie Heymans (diving), Perdita Felicien (athletics), Karen Cockburn (trampoline), and men’s fours and eights in rowing. In the end, not one of Canada’s world champions won gold in Athens.

“When an athlete is in the position to be expected to win, everything around them changes, including media comments, family and friends’ comments, and comments from



“I learned that I have to be motivated for every race and not hold anything back.”

— JEREMY WOTHERSPOON

their fellow athletes,” says Clare Fewster, mental training consultant for the CSCC. “Athletes need to have a great support system around them that knows them well, knows how to react, and tries to keep things as normal as possible.”

Hayley Wickenheiser has seen both failure and success in an Olympic gold medal hockey game. “In Nagano we put too much of ourselves into the pressure, and the media, and outside factors,” says Wickenheiser, who won silver in 1998 and gold in 2002. “In Salt Lake we were able to focus on ourselves and let go of the outcome so we could perform our best and just remember to play good hockey.”

Amirault says one of the best ways to over-

come pressure is to bring it out in the open and deal with it.

“We talk about what goes wrong so we can discuss possible solutions,” says Amirault. “They say pressure builds diamonds. When athletes practice under adverse conditions—when they aren’t feeling well or haven’t slept—and they perform, athletes learn conditions will never be ideal, but they can still achieve their end result.”

Three-time Olympic bronze medallist in cycling and speed skating Clara Hughes tests herself daily at practice so that she’s prepared for the day that counts. “I push myself beyond my pain threshold,” says Hughes. “You have to get past the very real physical pain and learn to thrive in the big races. My energy never fails to be there when I get to the line.”

But even with the best training, things can go terribly wrong under pressure. “I have seen athletes do a number of things,” says Fewster. “They may change their entire routine or game plan because they want it so bad. If this is a new feeling or experience for them, it can be difficult to stay focused on themselves and their plan.”

Speed skater Jeremy Wotherspoon, a four-time world sprint champion, experienced a fluke fall just seconds into his Olympic race. “It was a weird fall, and I’m not sure why it happened,” says Wotherspoon. “I had pressure because I was capable of winning. Maybe I had extra energy that I wasn’t used to. I learned that I have to be motivated for every race and not hold anything back.”

When it comes down to it, if an athlete wants to win Olympic gold it’s likely they’ll have to be higher, stronger, and faster than anyone in history. “You’ve got one shot to do it right and not just as good as you’ve done in the past,” says Hughes. “World records and Olympic records are smashed. You have to go faster than you have ever gone in your entire life if you want to win at the Olympics.” **i**

Performing on Demand

“You learn to perform through experience. At the 2002 World Championships I was under pressure to be the first Canadian to win a world title on the floor. I thought about that expectation, and I fell on my butt on my first line—I felt so small and so alone, I was dazed for the rest of the routine. I learned from that, and now I know how to downplay the pressure and not let it overtake me. I have come to grips with it and learned how to perform.”

KYLE SHEWFELT

2004 Olympic Gold Medallist, Gymnastics

“To ensure you can perform on demand you have to treat every day, every practice and every competition like it’s an Olympic gold medal final. Then when the situation arrives and the stakes are high you are not so overwhelmed. You want to imitate that pressure and demand to perform every day—that’s the secret.”

HAYLEY WICKENHEISER

2002 Olympic Gold Medallist, Hockey

“For me it’s about motivation. It’s tough to always be motivated so I try to motivate myself for a race no matter how big or small. Stress and pressure take the fun out of racing, so I remember why I skate. I perform when I’m myself and not in a special zone or frame of mind. I relax before the race so that I am ready to explode when I’m on the line.”

JEREMY WOTHERSPOON

Four-time World Sprint Champion, Speed Skating