

MINDGAMES

BY KAREN CLARK

Photography by Ewan Nicholson

Once every four years amateur athletes are catapulted into the media spotlight with just one shot at Olympic glory. Not only do they have to be prepared physically, they also need to be as mentally trained as possible.

THE 2004 SUMMER GAMES in Athens are three months away and it's crunch time at the Canadian Sport Centre Calgary (CSCC). Earle Connor, Christine Nordhagen-Vierling, and Kyle Shewfelt are three of Canada's medal hopefuls, and while they all have the potential to be champions, their approach to mental preparation could not be more different.

Connor has a Paralympic gold and silver from Sydney, in the 100- and 200-metres respectively. He is a four-time world champion and has set 21 world records. "I get mentally prepared by convincing myself there is no chance I'm going to lose," says Connor. "I'm not trying to sound cocky, but as far as I'm concerned, I'm going to win. I don't look at the possibility of losing, only winning—anything else is not an option."

**CHRISTINE
NORDHAGEN-VIERLING**
Six-Time Wrestling
World Champion

Canadian
Sport
Centre
Calgary



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After his devastating second-place at the 2000 Games, Connor had a tattoo, “Silver Hurts” engraved on his foot. “I never want to feel that way again,” he says. The sprinter thinks about winning double gold in Athens at least five times a day. He doesn’t let outside pressure enter his mind and worries only about disappointing himself.

For six-time wrestling world-champion Nordhagen-Vierling, winning is not the focus. “I don’t concentrate on winning or losing,” she says. “I think about enjoying training and the process. I work very hard, so I know I’ve done everything I can, and then I’ll be satisfied whatever the result.”

Nordhagen-Vierling practices positive self-talk as part of her mental training regime. “We say something to ourselves every 11 seconds, it can be positive or negative. I used to be negative and I didn’t even know it. We have a choice, and I’ve decided no matter what, I am going to approach all aspects of my life positively.”

The 72-kilogram wrestler is also watching extensive videos of her opponents to get ready for the psychological factor of her matches. “By understanding my opponents’

moves, it helps me feel more comfortable going in, and I can simulate their style and prepare counter moves.”

Mental preparation is an integral part of Shewfelt’s Olympic plan. The two-time world-champion bronze medallist carries the weight of a sport desperate to make a mark—Canada has never won an Olympic medal in artistic gymnastics. “I do feel the pressure,” says Shewfelt. “I want to do Canada proud, but the most pressure comes from myself. I have invested almost all of my life in this goal and the opportunity to make it a reality is almost here. When it comes down to it, I can only control my performance, and I’m going to work hard to make sure it’s the best it can be.”

Shewfelt says that he’s always been able to focus on what’s important when it counts. He starts keeping a training journal two months before a big competition. He keeps track of his goals and feelings, recording what goes well in training and what needs to improve. “I set big goals for what I want to accomplish at the competition, and I set little goals for every day that will keep me on track.”

Dr. Kimberley Amirault is the director of sport psychology at the CSCC. “Mental preparation is the one thing that can override everything an athlete has done to prepare physically,” says Amirault, who also works with the New York Rangers and New York Knicks. “The role of the sport psychologist is to help athletes know themselves. The better they know themselves, the better able they are to perform consistently at the highest level.”

Amirault sees common attributes in athletes that are mentally tough. “They are able to have their best performance regardless of circumstances. Mentally tough athletes are able to handle adversity, focus regardless of distraction; they love what they do—passion for their sport has to be there—and they learn from both success and failure.”

According to CSCC sport psychologist Dr. Hap Davis, who has worked with the Calgary Flames and Olympic athletes in swimming and synchro, training the coach to be mentally



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ADVICE FROM THE MENTALLY TOUGH

“Our minds are our most powerful tool. We can make ourselves sick or walk on coals depending on our state of mind. The difference between first and second is minuscule—it’s our mindset that can make the difference. I trained my mind as hard as my body, so it was automatic that everything came together at once and I had no shortage of energy.”

— MICHELLE CAMERON
Olympic Gold medallist, Synchro

“I was really in my own head when I competed at my very best. It’s about knowing yourself and knowing what works best for you. When I was in the zone, I was rarely aware of exterior factors like rain and wind; I would just get inside the performance and have only my event on my mind.”

— MICHAEL SMITH
Two-time World Championship medallist, Decathlon

“Hard work builds confidence—knowing that you’ve put in your time and you deserve it. There’s so much going on at an Olympics, it’s hard not to get overwhelmed and distracted by the sheer size of everything. You’ve got to be ready physically and mentally; you can’t just show up and expect confidence to be there.”

— CURTIS MYDEN
Three-time Olympic Bronze medallist, Swimming

tough is a vital part of giving athletes a competitive edge. “We focus on enabling coaches to be relentless and unforgiving,” says Davis. “The coach demands a really high standard, so when the athlete gets to competition, they have responded to stress exposure many times before, and the athlete can cope, and they can produce.”

For athletes like Connor, Nordhagen-Vierling, and Shewfelt, the test of physical and mental preparation and whether or not they can produce is just around the corner.

To keep up to date with how Canadian athletes are doing as the Olympics approach, visit www.canadiansportcentre.com.