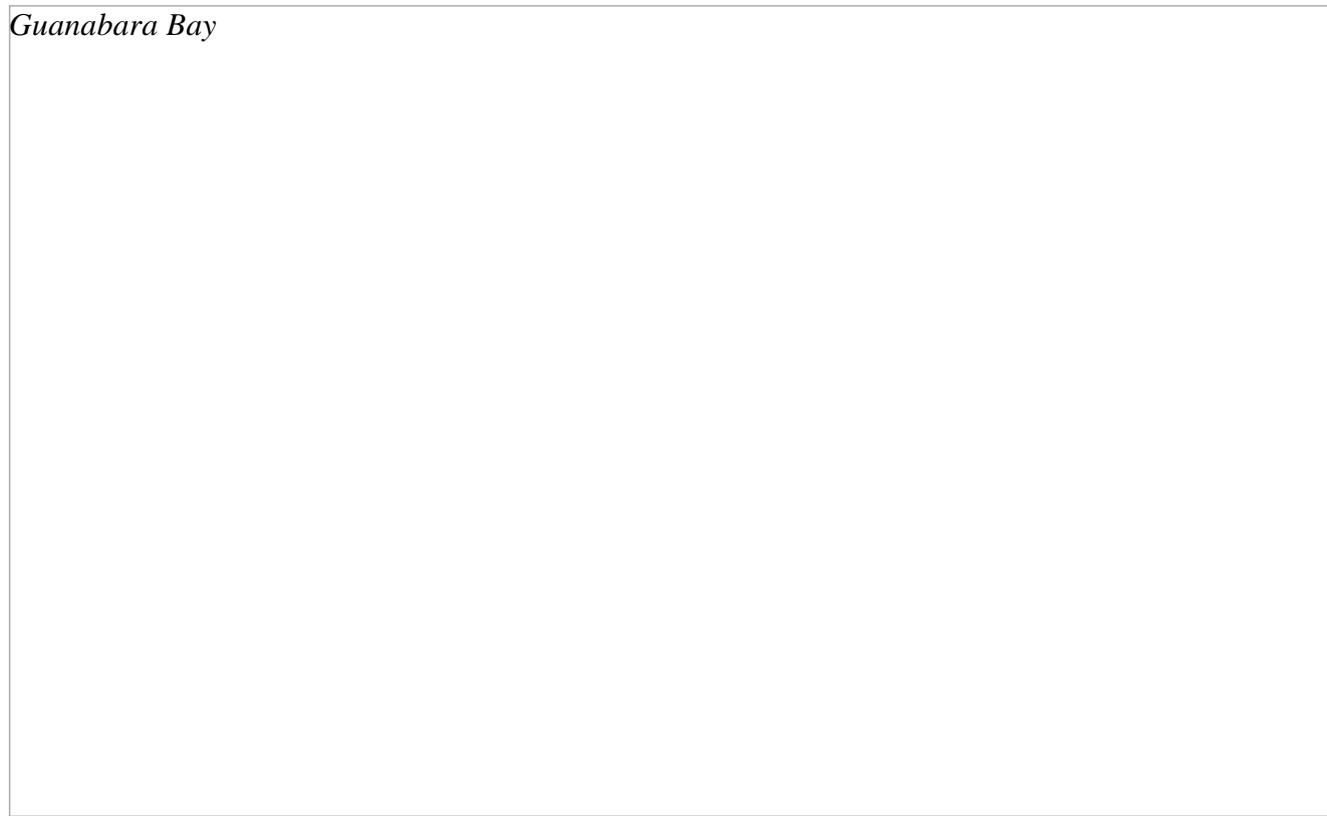


How to manage athletes' expectations at an Olympic Games

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Guanabara Bay



The sailing competitions for the Rio 2016 Olympic Games will be held at Guanabara Bay. Here it is in all its panoramic glory

We talk to Olympic sailing coach and ConnectedCoaches member [Ian Barker](#) about how he keeps his athletes grounded before and during the biggest regatta of their lives, and his methods for dealing with disappointments, complacency and increased expectations to ensure they remain mentally strong and impermeable to outside influences.

Ian Barker has flown to the moon and back in his preparations for The Rio 2016 Olympic Games.

When I spoke to the Olympic and Paralympic sailing coach before Christmas for our first feature, on [Olympic training cycles](#), he was already busy clocking up the Air Miles.

He had just returned from trips to Buenos Aires, Argentina, for the 49er World Championships, and Melbourne, Australia, for the Para World Championships, and was preparing to jet off to Brazil for another Rio reconnaissance mission.

When I catch up with him again, he is in the south of France for the Sailing World Cup regatta.

Considering the moon is 238,900 miles from earth, and that it is 10,571 miles as the crow flies to Sydney from London, give or take the odd mile, I don't think you can accuse me of exaggeration to say Ian is a stellar traveller. He crosses the equator, flitting between northern and southern hemispheres, more often than box-to-box midfielders cross the halfway line.

Stellar is the appropriate word for his career as an athlete and coach too. Since the former Olympic silver

medallist and World Championship gold medallist hung up his captain's hat and donned his coaching hat, he has guided Great Britain Paralympian Helena Lucas to gold at The London 2012 Paralympic Games in the 2.4mR class and has worked with the Great Britain (2008) and Ireland (2012) 49er teams in Beijing and London respectively.

He will be in Helena's corner again in Rio, and will be hoping to inspire Irishmen Ryan Seaton and Matt McGovern to a big improvement on their 14th-place finish from London – buoyed by their performance at the Bay of Palma in Spain in April when the duo clinched their first major regatta win.

Professional help

I want to know from Ian how he manages the fluctuating emotions of his athletes in the run-up to, and during, the mental roller coaster that is an Olympic Games, and if it is difficult to keep them grounded.

'It can be quite tricky,' he admits. 'Psychological work is a big area of my coaching, and it is something I deal with on a daily basis – and every athlete needs a different approach.'

'They all have access to professionals quite a lot of the time too.'

'The British team has a psychologist in attendance at all the major regattas. The Irish team has psychologists at home, although they are always on the end of a phone if you need advice or if the athletes need them.'

Each athlete has an individualised programme, involving one-to-one sessions with a psychologist.

With such a dedicated network of performance staff, it makes the task of putting up a mental barricade to shut yourself off from all the distractions that an Olympic Games brings that much easier.

But the pressure of expectation is always threatening to break through that force field.

Having a symbiosis of mindsets between coach and athlete is one way of managing heightened expectation.

Ian explains: 'The levels of expectation should be similar. And you must ensure you keep those expectations aligned through constant communication between regattas. It helps if you work together a lot.'

'Also, by having been at previous Olympics as both a performer and a coach, it does mean I am able to help my athletes with their expectations of the event, including what to expect around media hype and opening ceremonies.'

'There is a lot of razzmatazz around the Games. The key is to divorce yourself from all that – it **can** blow your mind, all the shenanigans – and try and treat the regatta itself like any other. You have to be in regatta mode before the racing starts.'

Ian says that sailing is not a sport where you need to treat the bigger events any differently.

'They don't need to crank up their adrenaline levels, they don't need any extra encouragement, they just need to think properly in order to produce their best performance, and that's the important thing,' he says.

Ian Barker

Olympic silver medallists Ian Barker and 49er partner Simon Hiscocks, centre, with the other Sydney 2000 medallists as they sail under their national spinnakers after the final race on Sydney Harbour

Recommended action plan

Familiarisation with the venue is key to ensuring athletes are in the correct state of mind.

According to Ian, Guanabara Bay, the venue for the sailing events in Rio, is ‘quite tricky’, with lots of variable currents to work out and lots of land mass, which affects wind direction.

It has also come in for severe criticism for being a dumping ground, [with sewage, discarded furniture, floating dog carcasses and even human corpses](#) polluting certain parts of the bay.

Getting a feel for the venue and having the chance to experience the conditions – good, bad and ugly – can give athletes a psychological advantage – ‘We have been working for the last couple of years on spending as much time there as we can.’

As can an unflinching confidence and trust in your equipment.

One of Ian’s crews took ownership of a new boat earlier in the year, and they have been validating the equipment changes in every regatta since.

Ian is at pains to point out that this is not like a golfer changing their clubs at the last minute before contesting a Major, more like a Formula 1 driver changing to a slightly better set of tyres.

‘We’ve been working on the new equipment since the end of the London Games,’ he explains. ‘We had a benchmark there with equipment, and we’ve been trying to improve everything bit by bit ever since.’

‘The whole process takes a long time, but we always aimed to be finished six months before the start of the Games so that we can take delivery of the kit, put it all together and not have to worry about any more technical stuff until the Games and just get on with the sailing.’

But being able to tick off venue familiarisation and equipment quality assurance does not mean athletes will be immune from crises of confidence or dips in morale.

I throw a few scenarios Ian’s way, asking him how he would tackle a situation where his athletes were

dispirited and disillusioned on the back of a poor run of form.

‘You do get that, of course. I will get them to think logically about what’s going on rather than think emotionally.

‘So the times when they are down and they need cheering up, you can point to certain moments, to certain aspects of their performance for example, that were causing the problem, and provide an answer for them.

‘It is important to reflect on what went wrong, determine the reasons why and reassure them you will work with them to put it right for the next time.’

Great expectations

What if you were to turn the question on its head? How do you guard against feelings of complacency, which can have a detrimental psychological effect? If you have been in formidable form, your mind can begin to drift, and direction can be lost.

Is there a danger that athletes going into an Olympic Games on the back of an unheralded triumph or three could see their expectations rocket to hazardous levels?

‘It’s not often they will go running and jumping about afterwards but if expectations **are** too high, in that case, I will have a chat to them beforehand and we will talk it all through so we can get the expectations down to a reasonable level that all parties are comfortable with and that gives the athletes something to aim at.

‘Whatever you think their level should be, it needs to be aligned with the long-term goals as well.

‘They might be delighted at finishing 30th, for example, but you will stress that there is still the long-term goal to work towards of finishing in the top 10.

‘After you’ve been working with somebody for a little while, you both see the level you have been performing at and have a target you want to reach. You set the targets together as you go along, and you are expected to improve and meet those targets as time goes by.’

Ian is hoping that Irish eyes smile on him and his 49er duo in this month’s Olympic Games, and that Ryan and Matt will be flirting with the podium places.

If they can become history boys like their footballing compatriots, who competed in their first European Championships this summer and came within a whisker of reaching the quarter-finals, then all will have reason to paint the town green on their return to home shores.

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