

# Are you committed to the next Olympic cycle?

My last article showing the Commitment Continuum got some interesting responses from curlers placing themselves along the continuum and reflecting on it. Several conversations that folks had with me were about answering the questions “How do you know when someone is committed to qualifying for the Olympics?” and “How do you know someone is serious about attacking the (Olympic) podium?” I thought these were interesting questions to answer from a psychological perspective. But in order to do that, first I will show how elite performance is viewed globally in most sports that see themselves as competitive and where mental skills training fits in.

As I write this piece I wanted to remind readers of my background too. I have been working in curling since December 2008 and was part of the support staff for the Vancouver Olympics. Recently I begun working with triathletes and my research beginning later this year will be investigating applied sport psychology in triathlon. In 2009-2010 I worked with a World Cup Sevens Rugby Team and professional boxer. I have coached at the World Cup level and represented my country in international competition. In addition, my academic preparation and sport qualification training has meant that the perspective I share is based on studying, experiencing, researching and working in competitive sports over the last twenty years.

I will add two things, first, curling is the most unique sport culture I have ever encountered and requires a measured approach to working effectively and second if you are not interested in learning about commitment, elite performance and sustained success do not read this article.

## **Model of Sport**

The Model of Sport has four levels 1) physical 2) technical 3) tactical (strategic) and 4) mental. Elite sport professionals (coaches, trainers etc) generally accept worldwide that without the necessary physical conditioning that optimizes technical and strategic performance and creates energy. No athlete will compete consistently at the top level. Technically, an elite athlete ought to be able to do what they need to do because they have superior technique and it is consistent and proven under pressure against top opposition. Strategy is concerned with the expert decision-making process being used in a given situation and then the effective execution of technical play to achieve the strategic goals. Great technique with lousy strategy does not achieve sustained long term success at the elite level and when both are inconsistent often you get 'flash in the pan' success more frequently. Finally, mental preparation is the polishing process for the elite curler.

Elite coaches and athletes know that if their physical, technical and strategic preparation has been done optimally over several years they have already been developing very strong mental skills. What is left is the 1% that makes the difference at the top level and that should be where a sport psychology consultant brings their value.

We know that someone is committed to sustained achievement and attempting Olympic qualification because we know the behaviors, beliefs and values that top athletes should act with. We also know that the behaviors of the year preceding the Olympics should be focused on the reality of competition not 'five rings fever'. Five rings fever is the phrase used in the Olympic movement to describe the excitement of the Olympics overcoming the focus to perform at your best level. Many

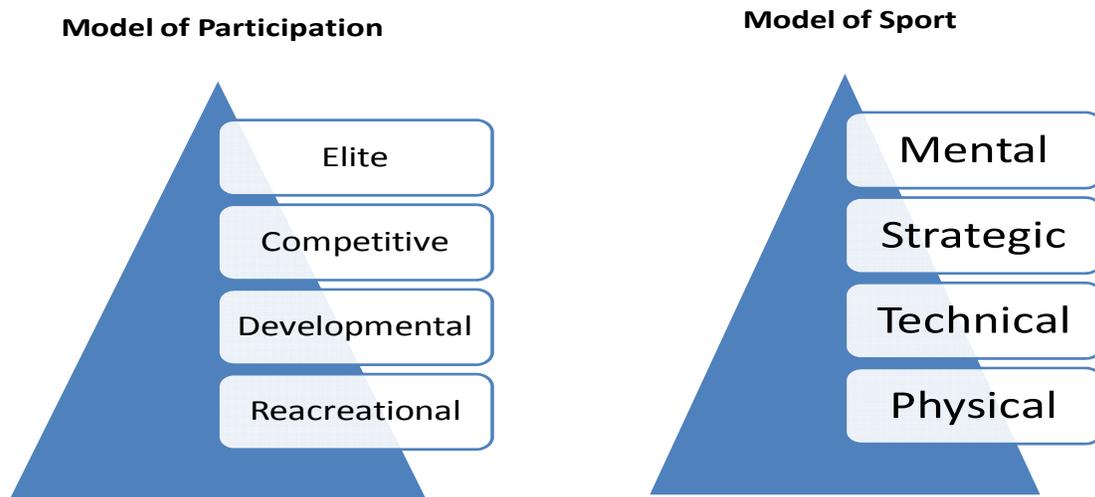
athletes have to cope with people around them being more excited than they are for the Olympics. This can add pressure and expectation to the athlete. Sometimes the Olympic experience seems all too surreal when in reality all it is a sport festival where the best in the world come together. But it is just a competition. Successful Olympians often settle down and treat it as a competition. Watch the final game in the movie Hoosiers and Gene Hackman measuring the court and you'll get the idea.

### **Model of Participation**

The Model of Participation is very important to the sport psychology consultants because it matches the expectations of the Commitment Continuum with the appropriate level of consultation. At the top of the pyramid there are very few people capable of competing consistently at the world and Olympic level. When we say "compete" we mean top five placing consistently in major events. If a team finishes lower than fifth on a sustained basis is considered not competitive at the elite level. Being elite there is an expectation that no stone is left unturned in what legendary contributor to the field Terry Orlick describes as the Pursuit of Excellence. This means doing what is necessary and using the resources and approaches that will help top competitive play happen every time.

As we descend the pyramid, sport psychology is most useful in the developmental and competitive levels. This is because the focus of these levels is on learning, growth, improvement and skill acquisition. All of which we know through practice and science from many Olympic sports that when these phases are well executed the sport experience

and performance are better. What does this mean to Olympic hopefuls now? It means that you should be working consistently with a sport psychology consultant in the Olympic preparation years 1-4 and require them to provide you with a planned and systematic psychological skills program at the team, unit and individual level. Why? Because we know it works. It works even better when the coaches and team leadership are committed to the process of learning, improvement and achievement. At the Olympic level we know that mental toughness is developed over years not in months.



## **The Olympic Plan (Quad cycle) Year 1**

In 2000 I began studying the question “What mental skills should an athlete learn and when should they learn them?” Many other sport psychology researchers and practitioners have tried to answer this question including my own mentor Dr Gloria Balague, the former President of the Association for Applied Sport Psychology Dr Damon Burton and leading applied practitioners Dr Robin Vealey and Dr Tim Bacon. Additionally, we know from science and practice through Tudor Bompa what periodization (planned preparation) is, how it works and how commitment to excellence can be translated into athletic achievement. This is important because it provided the framework that is outlined below.

### **Assumptions about people in Year 1 of the Quad Cycle**

A team has formed and avoided the ‘speed dating’ nature of the April team change fest that is a feature of the curling culture.

An individual and a team of 5-6 curlers with a coach and regular access to a sports psychology consultant, performance analyst and strength and conditioning professional are available as they are presently through the USCA high performance program.

The team is in the developmental/competitive phase and the focus is on learning and improvement.

The commitment to the idea of participating at the Olympics is strong but the commitment to performing at personal best level and team best level at the Olympics is stronger.

## What does Year 1 mean to mental skills training?

Committed curlers are going to take a “no holds barred” approach. This means that they are going to assess the four areas of their approach to the game: physical, technical, tactical and mental. Once that is done, then they will set their goals and start the performance improvement process on an individual, unit (front end-back end) and team basis with their coach involved every step of the way. They will access their support staff and communication will be transparent, integrated, and mission driven and vision led. Sounds clichéd but without it no Olympian achieves sustained success without a team behind them.

### Individual mental skills according to the planning phase

General preparation	Specific preparation	Competition	Transition
Self motivation Concentration Imagery Leadership	Self-confidence Imagery	Self-reflection Self-confidence Self-motivation Imagery Concentration Communication	Self-reflection Self-motivation Self-confidence Concentration Positive mood

Table 1

Table 1 shows the responses from nine elite team sport coaches that had competitive teams on consistent basis. This information tells us what we need to do psychologically this year. It also infers that if practice is deliberate and there is a focus on personal growth, leadership then improvement happens at all levels. You will be on track.

# Year 1

The Annual Plan – “Preparation and learning”					
	Preparatory		Competitive		Transition
Phases Of prep.	Determine the priorities for the team in year one; establish the budget for the season; establish team structure, and behavior norms and expectations		8-10 events including two international events and domestic qualifiers		Season’s ending. Evaluate, celebrate and recalibrate for year 2. Prepare tentative course correction plan with team.
Sub-Phases	General Prep. June-Mid July	Specific Preparation Mid July-September	Pre-Comp. October	Competitive	Transition
MST Strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Evaluate mental skills</li> <li>•Skill development</li> <li>•Physical activity</li> <li>•Lifestyle balance</li> <li>•Goal setting</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Goal setting</li> <li>•Comprehensive curling assessment for each team member, front end, back end and team.</li> <li>•Use specific performance plan</li> <li>•Maintain skill development and application</li> <li>•Physical conditioning for strength</li> <li>•Technical development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Goal setting</li> <li>•Adapt and practice mental skills in sport-specific situations</li> <li>•Develop and practice mental preparation plan</li> <li>•Train for physical power</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Goal setting</li> <li>•Evaluate and refine focus plan</li> <li>•Use mental game plan to prepare for specific opponents; including tactics and strategy; competitions.</li> <li>•Evaluate and reset goals and expectations on week to week basis</li> <li>•Continue strength and core stability training</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Use mental skills to aid regeneration and lower stress</li> <li>•Maintain fitness and prevent staleness through recreational activities</li> <li>•Prepare for a lifestyle change</li> </ul>

Adapted from Bacon, (1989) in Bompa, (1999).

## The Olympic Plan (Quad cycle) Year 2

The different focus of year two is testing yourself against international competition in Europe and Asia (If you have the budget to travel). Why is this important? To compete with higher levels of confidence testing and proving preparation by competing against Scottish, Swedish, Swiss, Chinese, Norwegian as well as Canadians is important for four reasons

- 1) At the Olympics only one Canadian team needs to be competed

against 2) the majority of competition is northern European and US teams have a poor track record against European teams 3) Getting a Russian experience will differentiate your team against the stay at home teams that can only guess at what Russia is like 4) By competing and winning on someone else’s turf earns you respect beyond domestic borders! With these experiences you will develop mental toughness and your preparation will put you in a position to compete at your personal best at the end of year three.

## Year 2

<b>The Annual Plan – “Learning and performing”</b>					
	Preparatory		Competitive		Transition
Phases Of prep.	Determine the priorities for the team in year one; establish the budget for the season; establish team structure, and behavior norms and expectations		8-12 events including four international events and a Russia event		Season’s ending. Evaluate, celebrate and recalibrate for year 3. Prepare tentative course correction plan with team.
Sub-Phases	General Prep. June-Mid July	Specific Preparation Mid July-September	Pre-Comp. October	Competitive	Transition
MST Strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Goal setting</li> <li>•Evaluate team skills and team progress</li> <li>•Skill development</li> <li>•Physical activity</li> <li>•Lifestyle balance</li> <li>•Observe the performance data of opponents and self</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Goal setting</li> <li>•Comprehensive curling assessment for each team member, front end, back end and team.</li> <li>•Use specific performance plan based on data</li> <li>•Maintain skill development and application</li> <li>•Physical conditioning for strength</li> <li>•Technical development</li> <li>•Have at least 2 team camps with the best technical assistance accessible.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Goal setting</li> <li>•Practice mental skills to compete against the top competition</li> <li>•Develop and practice mental preparation strategies</li> <li>•Train for physical power</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Goal setting</li> <li>•Evaluate and refine focus plan</li> <li>•Use mental game plan to prepare for specific opponents; including tactics and strategy; competitions.</li> <li>•Continue strength and core stability training</li> <li>•Evaluate and reset goals and expectations on week to week basis</li> <li>•Use performance data to drive weekly improvement plan</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Use mental skills to aid regeneration and lower stress</li> <li>•Maintain fitness and prevent staleness through recreational activities</li> <li>•Emotional and mental recovery is required</li> <li>•Use passive and active recovery strategies</li> <li>•Prepare for a lifestyle change</li> </ul>

Adapted from Bacon, (1989) in Bompa, (1999).

## The Olympic Plan (Quad cycle) Year 3

Year three is focused on translating the learning from years 1 and 2 of the Quad cycle into competitive advantage. Under the current Olympic selection system the peak performance would be nationals and winning the right to represent the United States of America at the highest level of curling.

There are many consistencies in the plan’s details during the Quad cycle. What is different is that each phase is tailored to each individual and at times improvised to allow the committed elite amateur to live a life and recover from inevitable setbacks.

### Year 3

The Annual Plan – “Performing and competing”					
	Preparatory		Competitive		Transition
Phases Of prep.	Determine the priorities for the team in year one; establish the budget for the season; establish team structure, and behavior norms and expectations		8 events including two international events and domestic qualifiers		Season’s ending. Evaluate, celebrate and recalibrate for year 4. Prepare tentative course correction plan with team.
Sub-Phases	General Prep. June-Mid July	Specific Preparation Mid July-September	Pre-Comp. October	Competitive	Transition
MST Strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Evaluate mental skills</li> <li>•Skill development</li> <li>•Physical activity</li> <li>•Lifestyle balance</li> <li>•Goal setting</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Goal setting</li> <li>•Comprehensive curling assessment for each team member, front end, back end and team.</li> <li>•Use specific performance plan</li> <li>•Maintain skill development and application</li> <li>•Physical conditioning for strength</li> <li>•Technical development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Goal setting</li> <li>•Adapt and practice mental skills in sport-specific situations</li> <li>•Develop and practice mental preparation plan</li> <li>•Train for physical power</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Goal setting</li> <li>•Evaluate and refine focus plan</li> <li>•Use mental game plan to prepare for specific opponents; including tactics and strategy; competitions.</li> <li>•Evaluate and reset goals and expectations on week to week basis</li> <li>•Continue strength and core stability training</li> </ul>	<p>Use mental skills to aid regeneration and lower stress</p> <p>Maintain fitness and prevent staleness through recreational activities</p>

Adapted from Bacon, (1989) in Bompa, (1999).

## The Olympic Plan (Quad cycle) Year 4

When you have earned the right to be at the Olympics you have to prepare to attack the podium. Year 4 is about polishing the 1% that will make the difference between winning and losing and living the roller coaster of Olympic preparation. The start line is the Olympic Opening Ceremony and the finishing line is the final match of Olympic competition and your preparation should reflect that.

### Olympic Year

The Annual Plan					
	Preparatory		Competitive		Transition
Phases Of prep.	Determine the priorities for the team in year one; establish the budget for the season; establish team structure, and behavior norms and expectations		8 events including 3-4 international events with a trip to Russia		Two weeks before Olympics
Sub-Phases	General Prep. June	Specific Preparation Mid July-September	Pre-Comp. October	Competitive	Transition
MST Strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Goal setting</li> <li>•Lifestyle coaching</li> <li>•Media training</li> <li>•Family preparation</li> <li>•Evaluate mental skills</li> <li>•Skill development</li> <li>•Physical activity</li> <li>•Lifestyle balance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Goal setting</li> <li>•Comprehensive curling assessment for each team member, front end, back end and team.</li> <li>•Use specific performance plan</li> <li>•Technical refinement</li> <li>•Physical conditioning for strength</li> <li>•Technical development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Goal setting</li> <li>•Adapt and practice mental skills in sport-specific situations</li> <li>•Develop and practice mental preparation plan</li> <li>•Train for physical power</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Goal setting</li> <li>•Evaluate and refine focus plan</li> <li>•Use mental game plan to prepare for specific opponents; including tactics and strategy; competitions.</li> <li>•Evaluate and reset goals and expectations on week to week basis</li> <li>•Continue strength and core stability training</li> <li>•Media support</li> <li>•Lifestyle coaching</li> <li>•Family preparation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Use mental skills to aid regeneration and lower stress</li> <li>•Maintain fitness and prevent staleness through recreational activities</li> <li>•Final preparation for family, friends work.</li> <li>•Gather as much energy as possible</li> </ul>

Adapted from Bacon, (1989) in Bompa, (1999).

## **What does this mean to me?**

As the old adage goes if you have no destination in mind then any path will get you to where you want to go.

Determine what your goals really are. If you are not committed to long term success then say so, admit it, don't waste other people's time on a mission you know is half hearted and go do your thing and let your method get the results it is designed to achieve.

However, if you want three years of commitment, international travel, to experience the highs and lows of sport and life with team mates and staff that believe in the same thing and are committed to their highest levels. Then set your quad plan and follow five basic steps:

- 1) Include every one that can help you and use all the available resources that will make an improvement to your performance.
- 2) Remove and reject all toxic, negative and energy sapping people that prevent you from achieving your Olympic journey goals (including team mates, coaches, so-called friends etc).
- 3) Accept the journey to the Olympics is hard and the enjoyment of the struggle is as important as the final result.
- 4) Recognize there is more to life than curling and there is more to curling than curling.
- 5) Mental skills training can happen every day.

*Contact Dr John Coumbe-Lilley USAC Sport Psychology Consultant at [jcl@usacurling.org](mailto:jcl@usacurling.org)*