A collection of ideas, suggestions and advice

Crew Cues

The Flip Side of the Home-Field Advantage

By Frank Perna, Ed.D.

Many stories captured the interest of the American public during the Barcelona Olympics. The adventures of the “Dream Team,” the tragedy that struck Ron Karranga, whose father died during the opening ceremonies, and the surprise finishes of the men’s and women’s gymnastics teams were just some of the memorable experiences.

Also of interest was the unprecedented performance of Spain’s Olympic team. Spain won 22 medals on its home turf, more than five times its medal count for the 1988 Seoul Olympics.

While most people refer to the proverbial “home-field advantage” to explain Spain’s performance, few understand the psychology behind this phenomena. On the one hand, athletes may feel a “charge” when playing in front of their home fans. But isn’t this likely to increase pressure which generally leads to poor performance?

A more likely explanation is that the visiting teams are adversely affected by away competitions. They may fail to play to their true potential. For example, the visitors may be taken out of their game plan when playing in unfamiliar arenas rather than the home team playing phenomenally well.

No doubt, part of the difficulty of playing on the road is due to the physiological effects of jet lag. However, most Olympians arrive in plenty of time for their bodies to adapt, and most are experienced travelers who are well versed on the “Dos & Don’ts” to minimize the effects of jet lag. So why might visiting athletes be affected by away competition?

For some athletes, traveling can be exciting. For others, the extra stimulation and the sheer number of details to remember can be both exhausting and distracting. For starters, athletes have to alter their usual routines when traveling. Furthermore, travel can be especially disorienting when athletes compete in areas with vastly different cultures. This is because the human brain is “wired” to pay attention to change. A drastic change in environment produces stimulation (e.g. arena noises, different sensations, etc.) that the athlete would not notice under familiar circumstances. The athlete thus has much more “noise” or irrelevant information to process when playing.

Can athletes learn to handle travel better?

Athletes can become “professional travelers” and learn to diminish the negative effects of travel on performance by following some simple guidelines:

• Be prepared for delays. Transportation mishaps, waiting in lines, practice and game delays are inevitable irritations. Bringing a book, magazine, cards or headset radio can help make these times less frustrating.
• Write down a travel plan. Planning will lessen the stress that usually accompanies travel. In your travel plan, include plans for meals and practice times.
• Carry necessary items with you. These include documents or personal products, such as contact lens solution or medications, as well as motivational or relaxation tapes that you routinely use.

• Avoid complaining. Complaining is typically not useful and only makes you and your teammates feel worse.

What can athletes do to mentally prepare for away competitions?

The main point is to stay focused on you. Most of the pressure you feel comes from you. You are in control of your reactions to any situation that arises. Keep in mind that it is the same you and the same skills that got you to this point. Below are some guidelines to help you stay focused and maintain a positive attitude:

Before you travel:

• Obtain as much information as you can about the venue where you will be competing. You may want to look at slides, videos, or talk to a competitor or coach who has been there.
• Mentally rehearse yourself competing at the competition venue. Try and imagine how you respond to the sights and sounds. Imagine hearing officials speak in a different language.
• “What if” sessions. Discuss what type of distractions are likely to be present and then plan how you would handle them.
• Set team and individual goals. The excitement and distractions of travel often contribute to athletes’ loss of focus. Asking “What do I need to do in order to perform well?” and “How will I know if I am doing it?” will help you to refocus on the behaviors that lead to solid performances.
• Decide roommate assignments in advance and go over acceptable and unacceptable behavior (e.g. volume of music).

At the venue:

• Familiarize yourself with the venue, locker room and playing surface. Schedule a light practice as soon as possible.
• Athletes who need a quiet place to collect themselves before competition should identify that place at this time.
• Go over team and individual goals.
• Familiarize yourself with your game, practice and meal schedule.
• Maintain your warm-up and pre-competitive routines. Routines help athletes block out distractions and refocus on competition.

Are there things athletes can do to help their sleep when travelling?

People vary with respect to the amount that their sleep is disturbed when they travel. Ideally, athletes can start adjusting their body to a new time zone before they
travel. A rule of thumb suggests one day of adjustment is required for each time zone crossed. Also, it is typically easier for a person to adjust to travel from east to west than from west to east. If traveling east, an athlete might attempt to retire an hour earlier at night and rise an hour earlier each day for several days before departure. Following the suggestions listed below will help athletes get adequate rest:

* Lie down only when sleepy or tired.
* Avoid activities such as watching television, reading and talking on the phone while in bed.
* If you are unable to fall asleep, do not stay in bed. Go to another room until you feel sleepy again. Do this as often as necessary throughout the night. If you have to compete the next day, go to bed and try to at least rest.
* Set your alarm to the same time every day, and avoid sleeping in.
* Do not nap during the day.

Begin these behaviors as soon as you arrive. If you are still not sleeping well by competition time, lying quietly will allow your body to get adequate rest. If possible, coaches may want to establish a "team room" for reading, watching television, or playing cards/games so that sleeping roommates will not be disturbed. Immediately adopt the local time for training, eating and sleeping schedules. It’s especially helpful to be outside (exposure to sunlight) during the day to help your body adjust to a new time zone.

The suggestions for travel preparation, sleep guidelines and mental preparation have been documented by research studies and interviews with athletes and sport psychologists. Incorporating these behaviors cannot guarantee perfect performance on the road. However, a popular saying suggests that athletes can’t control a game until they control themselves. Athletes who practice the techniques discussed above are likely to feel more in control of their away game experience.