

Olympic Perspectives

By Olympic Champion Ben Peterson

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Every year people around the world are busy seeking to be the best in any number of sporting events. Fans of all kinds want to see, and athletes in every event want to prove who the top performer really is.

Athletes participate in many events held at local, regional, national, and world levels. But once every four years, something special occurs: the “Olympics”. The same athletes in the same events as the World Championships meet for the “big one” – the big event with a special mystique and glamour – the one that wows them all – The Olympics.

The Olympic fanfare and glitz captivates the contestants and fans alike. Some competitors get sidetracked and do not reach their full potential in their competitions. Others rise to new heights in the Olympic atmosphere. As a former Olympic Champion let me offer my perspectives as a help to this summer’s Olympians, family members, fans and coaches.

What is *Not* Real About the Olympics

As a young competitor, I often found myself thinking that wins in significant events would solve my problems. Somehow, the praise from fans, coaches and teammates can make us think when we win we can live on a different plane. We begin to believe that school, work, and other responsibilities will be easier, and that personal fears, negative habits and weaknesses will melt away. Sometimes, we even imagine that the consequences of our actions will be changed.

Personally, I had a time that I thought my shyness would disappear when I won a National Championship. I have heard of more than one wrestler give in to drinking and drugs because he felt proud and confident he could handle them once he was winning.

The reality is, we are still the same people afterwards and many new pressures will come because of the limelight and attention. We are not automatically different, better, or immune to danger by excelling in the Olympics. We are not immune to bad days just because we won an Olympic medal.

People will tell an Olympic Champion he is the best in the world – the greatest in his event! This may be true for the event, for that day. But things can change so quickly. While people were praising me for winning the 1972 Olympic gold in Munich, Germany, I was definitely aware of the fact that a man named Bill Harlow was back in America. He had defeated me 9-0 five months earlier in the National Freestyle Tournament. At age 22, I struggled as to how I could beat him to make the Olympic team. But Bill was 29, a full-time high school teacher and coach. With a young family and a newborn daughter, he had important concerns at home. Training and competing were not his priority. Bill chose not to attend the Olympic Trials. In a similar way, John is thankful to this day that Fred Fozzard, the reigning National Champion and ’69 World Champion, did not show up for the final Olympic trials. So much of making an Olympic team is being in the right place at the right time.

The thought of Russ Hellickson also kept me humble. Though I won the 2 Olympic Trials matches, Russ was badly injured in the 2nd. I knew he was capable of winning the medal also. Timing was extremely important for me. Yes, I worked hard, but God blessed and had me ready at just the right time when the opportunity was available.

What is Real About the Olympics

The fanfare is real and greater than anything else I was ever involved in as a wrestler. But this hype is temporary. Be prepared to fight to keep your focus, as you will be distracted and tempted to live as if the fanfare is permanent. One wrestler was so caught up in the vacation atmosphere of Munich Germany that he failed to make his weight. He was flown home before the day was over.

People respect Olympians and Olympic results more than any other competitor or competition. Although the same athletes compete yearly for the World Championships, the Olympic Games are raised above all others.

The Olympics are a great place to prove and exhibit excellence. Those who rise to the occasion may be honored in exceptional ways. Various aspects of the magnificence of “The Games” will linger with them for life.

The Olympics are also a significant place to manifest patriotism. The flag, team uniform, and country scores all elevate the visibility of honor to America. Though John & I traveled regularly representing U.S. teams, nothing was more visibly “American” than the Olympics.

For John and me, the Olympics were the arena to prove our wrestling capabilities and patriotism. We have always been thankful and proud to have had these opportunities.

In Conclusion

The advice John & I give to all Olympians is to give it all you have. Don't hold back in your training and preparation in any way. You will only regret not being more prepared. Keep a good dose of patriotism at all times as motivation to defeat each opponent. Focus on the techniques and tactics that got you this far. Do not give in to the temptation to change your strategies just because you are on the world's biggest stage.

And when you return, keep it all in proper perspective so you can be proud and thankful the rest of your life for the opportunities you have enjoyed at the Olympics.

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