

The Australian Youth Olympic Festival 2007 - Beyond medals to athlete perceptions

Sarah Leberman, Massey University

**Management/Leadership
Session 24**

**Saturday, May 31, 2008
1:15 PM - 1:40 PM**

**Presentation (25-minute)
Abstract 101**

Following the success of the Sydney 2000 Olympics, the Australian Olympic Committee developed the Australian Youth Olympic Festival (AYOF) to be a lasting legacy of the Games. There have been four AYOF since 2001 and the mission is to "discover future Olympic champions, provide them with an environment reminiscent of an Olympic Games and promote the Olympic ideals of fair play, honesty and pride in your country" (www.olympics.com.au). The AYOF is sanctioned by the International Olympic Committee, and in addition to the mission outlined above, sees the AYOF as "preparing athletes for competition at the highest level and enables them to become role models for future generations" (Australian Olympic Committee, 2007). The AYOF are modeled on the Olympic Games and include an Opening Ceremony, lighting the Olympic flame, the parade of nations, living in an athletes village and medal ceremonies. The 2007 AYOF included 1600 athletes representing 23 nations, competing in 16 sports spread over 13 venues. The model of the AYOF is based on sporting competitions (between athletes not countries), ceremonies (opening ceremony recognizing diversity and demonstrating unity), village life (fostering friendship and understanding through a shared experience) and a cultural festival (incorporating culture, arts, education and sport). Athletes participate in a celebration that promotes the balanced development of the body, will and mind through sport and the Olympic ideal. The slogan is "See tomorrow's Olympians today".

In 2007, New Zealand sent a 248 strong team to the AYOF comprising 177 athletes, coaches, managers and support staff. The AYOF is regarded as a critical step for young rising athletes on the path to the Olympic Games. The AYOF provides one of the very few opportunities for young athletes to compete in a multi-sport environment before attending a Commonwealth or Olympic Games. The New Zealand team was funded by the New Zealand Olympic Committee and Sport and Recreation New Zealand (SPARC). The financial support provided by the government mirrors what is happening in other countries to develop elite sporting success (Green & Houlihan, 2005), as the achievement of international, and especially Olympic, sporting success is seen as important to New Zealand. This is reflected in SPARC's high performance mission to have New Zealand athletes and teams winning in events that matter to New Zealand" (SPARC, 2006). The AYOF fits into SPARC's high performance support of the 'perform' and 'excel' stages of the athlete development and that 'athletes are regularly exposed to world class competition' (SPARC, 2006, p.4). The opportunity for athletes to compete in the AYOF will hopefully also give them the psychological skills needed to compete at the elite level. Research by Gould, Dieffenbach and Moffett (Gould, Dieffenbach, & Moffett, 2002), concludes that Olympic champions were able, amongst other things, to cope with and control anxiety, were confident, displayed mental toughness and the ability to block out distractions.

There is a lack of research surrounding athlete perceptions of participation in major events. Most research on athlete perceptions has been in the area of sport psychology and based on quantitative measures. The Australian Olympic Committee provided the author with information indicating that 28 AYOF participants were part of the 2004 Australian Olympic team and won 8 medals and would have finished 26th on the medal table at Athens. There were 22 competitors from other nations that made their own Olympic Team that attended either the AYOF in 2001 or 2003. New Zealand's most successful AYOF participant to date is Valerie Vili, who attended the 2001 AYOF and who has since won gold in the shot-put at the Commonwealth Games in Melbourne (2006) and became World Champion in 2007. However, apart from medal tallies and participation, little is known about the success of the AYOF and in particular its impact on athletes. To gain an understanding of the experiences and impact of events such as the AYOF on young emerging athletes, electronic surveys were sent to all athletes in the New Zealand team post the 2007 AYOF. The questions were open-ended and focused on whether they had attended similar events before, their personal highlight, questions about being part of the New Zealand team, village life, ceremonies and culture, Olympism, the educational value of role modeling, ethical principles learned and their goals for the next two years. Thirty-two surveys were returned, of which 30 were complete, giving a response rate of 17%. The author was the manager of one of the New Zealand teams and as such provides a participant observer perspective to the findings. This follows a social constructivist approach (Crotty, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 2000) where meanings are constructed by the athletes as they engaged within the AYOF. The responses were analyzed using NVivo 7. A summary of the findings is presented below.

Sixteen females and 14 males responded to the survey. They ranged in age from 13-21, with the average age being 17 years. Twelve sports were represented. Twenty athletes had never experienced international competition before and the remaining ten had competed in a variety of different international events. The main highlights were the level of competition experienced and the opportunity to meet people from different countries and make new friends. Being part of the New Zealand team was achieved through the welcome provided to athletes, the uniforms and the gifting of the bone carved koru to each team member. The athletes felt that they were inspired to achieve their goals by being part of the team and enjoying the level of competition in

2008 North American Society for Sport Management Conference (NASSM 2008)

their respective sports. The main benefits of the AYOF were seen as being the opportunity to bring about peace through sport and to learn about other cultures. They regarded the Opening Ceremony as a welcoming and inspiring event and village life was seen as being like the 'real' Olympics and an opportunity to meet new people. The principles of Olympism were seen to transfer to their life in general, particularly the balance of body, will and mind and the idea of joy found in effort. A range of qualities from sport were seen as transferring to their life, with determination and friendship being most frequently mentioned. They saw themselves as role models by being able to encourage younger athletes and by demonstrating the value of hard work. A number of different ethical principles were identified as having been learned through sport with fair play, determination to work hard and respect being most common. The future goals of athletes included to keep on improving in their given sport, as well as attending both world junior and world championships.

The findings would suggest that for the athletes who responded to the survey, the AYOF achieved its mission, particularly in terms of providing an opportunity to compete at the international level and promoting them as role models to up and coming athletes. Similarly, SPARC would regard its money as well spent, with respect to the level of competition experienced by the athletes. In addition, it appears to have provided an inspirational platform for the athletes to seek higher levels of competition. There also appeared to be a good understanding of the Olympic principles and their role in fostering a better and more peaceful world through sport. The role of psychological skills was less evident, although the common theme of hard work and determination may foreshadow the requirements identified by Gould et al (2002) to become an Olympic champion. This qualitative research has provided an insight into the experiences of junior athletes at the AYOF and provides useful information for sport managers and sport policy makers in terms of allocating funding to events such as these. To add to this a longitudinal study is needed to track AYOF athletes through to the next Olympics and Commonwealth Games.

References:

- Australian Olympic Committee. (2007). Australian youth Olympic festival 2007: Festival program 17-21 January. St Leonards, NSW: Australian Olympic Committee.
- Crotty, M. (1998). *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process*. London: Sage.
- Gould, D., Dieffenbach, K., & Moffett, A. (2002). Psychological characteristics and their development in Olympic champions. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 14, 172-204.
- Green, M., & Houlihan, B. (2005). *Elite sport development: Policy learning and political priorities*. London: Routledge.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (2000). Paradigmatic controversies, contradictions, and emerging confluences. In N. K. Denzin, & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research*. (2nd ed., pp. 163-188). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- SPARC. (2006). *High performance strategy 2006-2012*. Wellington, New Zealand: Sport & Recreation New Zealand.