

## **THE IMPACT OF THE MEDIA ON ATHLETES**

The modern media environment and how to help Olympic athletes navigate it successfully



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Strategies for performance success

# Introduction

Successful athletes need to know how to work with the media. They will be interviewed before and after events, be followed on social media and often work with sponsors who require them to behave in a certain way and provide them with opportunities to get coverage. These requirements and expectations can be really exciting but they can also have some detrimental side effects, including poor sporting performance when they do not handle the requirements well or manage the stress it causes effectively.

These side effects were clear in the summer of 2015 when Mo Farah, the 2012 double Olympic gold medallist faced numerous questions, interview requests and pressures from the media after a doping investigation against his coach. As a result he withdrew from his next scheduled Diamond League race. Only a few weeks later Olympic Tennis player, Heather Watson, spoke out about online trolls sending her messages, including death threats, that upset her and ensured she no longer checked any social media messages. In both these cases the media had a significant negative impact on these athletes' ability to perform.

To date, little work from either the media and communications perspective, or the sports psychology perspective has considered the impact of the media on athletes. However, if we increase our levels of understanding about the causes and impacts of negative reactions when the media behaves as a stressor, then we can better support athletes so their performances are not negatively impacted.

This paper began with an extensive literature review from the sports psychology and media and communications perspectives and was then developed through in-depth interviews with 10 athletes from six Olympic sports who between them have won 11 Olympic medals and 24 World Championship medals. The findings offer those working with athletes from a psychological, coaching or press office perspective, current and methodologically sound research from a sports psychology consultant with a background in media management. The information within it should increase your knowledge of likely stressors, identify the type of mindset your athlete has regarding the media and provide you with applied advice for improving the skills of your athletes when they engage with the media to minimise any negative impact it can have on their performance.

The paper will guide you through the modern media environment, highlighting the range of unique and complex challenges and stressors that it creates for Olympic athletes. It includes quotes from the 10 athletes interviewed to highlight the points being made in their own words, in ways which should hopefully resonate with your athletes. It will then offer you with a number of tools and tips for you to help your athletes navigate these stresses successfully.

# The modern media environment

The media environment in which athletes now compete is significantly different from the one that athletes would have been in only 20 years ago.

	1995	2005	2015
<b>Number of websites worldwide</b>	23,500	65,000,000	992,000,000
<b>Number of website users worldwide</b>	45,000,000	1 billion	3 billion
<b>Percentage of UK population with internet access</b>	6%	54%	86%
<b>Percentage of UK adults with a mobile phone</b>	7%	82%	93%
<b>Percentage UK adults with digital TV</b>	Digital didn't exist – minimal satellite usage	62%	98%
<b>Time spent watching TV a day</b>	2 hours 43 minutes	3 hours 5 mins	3 hours 40 mins
<b>Hours spent online a week</b>	Minimal	9.9	20.5
<b>Key sites / innovations</b>	Yahoo (1994) Amazon (1995) eBay (1995) Internet Explorer 1 (1995) Playstation (1995)	YouTube (2005) Facebook (2004) LinkedIn (2003) Wikipedia (2001) PayPal (1999)	Instagram (2010) Pinterest (2010) Whatsapp (2009) Tumblr (2007) iPhone (2007) Twitter (2006)

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The media environment has developed in the last 20 years from a system hosting a limited number of media outlets employing journalists who only had a few ways to contact athletes, into one that encompasses social media, internet coverage, thousands of broadcast channels and a much larger field of 'journalists' who can contact athletes through press officers, on their mobile phones, via email or over social media. Coverage is no longer in the delayed form of TV, radio, magazines or newspapers but also instantly over the internet and directly from fans or distractors on social media. Mobile phones take and store hundreds of photos which can be shared instantly online or through text, email, Whatsapp, Twitter or Facebook and with the rise of the selfie, athletes will be asked for pictures continually. Newer innovations such as Google glasses and the Apple watch may start to clutter and change the environment further as will the use of sport and fitness information sharing sites like Garmin or Strava.

# Impact of the modern media environment on athletes

Six main ways have been identified where the modern media environment could significantly impact on an athlete.

## Continual performance

Athletes no longer only perform in their field of play, but all the time, in interviews, on social media:

- Every comment, from how well a training session has gone, though to team banter that was previously private, is now visible to millions on social media.
- Athletes feel they need to cover up injuries so that their competitors cannot see their weaknesses or try to benefit from them.
- Athletes often feel they must moderate their behavior and put on a 'media face' to hide any upset or frustration they feel which can slow down their self-reflection process, preventing them from moving forward.

"There were a number of occasions where I would come out of a championship final and be mentally strong because I didn't want the media to see the emotion, I'd never be angry, I'd never be upset but I'd go away afterwards and let my emotions run... If you do that in front of cameras the media can often see you as a person out of control... it was just a frustration I suppose. I couldn't give the emotion that I wanted to at that moment in time."

## Heightened expectations

The media highlighting expectations around how athletes may perform:

- Can cause stress as athletes become sensitive and highly aware of how they and their performances are perceived.
- General media pressures and expectations have been found in the general public to impact on eating disorders and body image dissatisfaction. Female athletes told by journalists they are the wrong shape or size for their sport have become distraught and unwilling to continue performing.

"I'm close to the national record and have admitted I'm targeting it. But I was thinking of doing it on a nice course... Unfortunately I did [a different race] ... Missed the record by just over a minute and you kinda feel like you have to explain why you didn't do it when it wasn't even on your radar for that race."

## Sponsorship and profile requirements

The time that it takes for athletes to raise their profile and do proactive media work for sponsors has a number of impacts:

- Limited time to train & recover.
- Restriction of their natural behaviors.
- Increased likelihood of attracting negative and upsetting social media comments.
- Drains the athlete of their mental energy.

"I had to tell the same old story over and over again. And just because one person has heard it, it doesn't mean that everyone has heard it and, and that can get mentally exhausting."

## Focus on medals and 'stories'

The media can seem fixated with simple linear stories, medals and comparative standings. This can cause:

- Frustration for athletes who are improving and feel this is not recognized.
- Increased anxiety and tension for athletes trying to achieve specific times or placings that have been highlighted by media.
- Frustration for female or disability athletes who receive less coverage about their sporting achievements but more about their appearance or background stories.

## Intrusion

The ease of access to athletes and the thirst for stories and information can see athletes feeling the media are intrusive:

- This is particularly strong when it concerns weight, body, age or family or personal relationships and causes hurt & anger.
- Frustration comes when they feel judged by those without knowledge of their sporting performance. These are usually non-expert journalists or members of the public.
- To try to restrict this intrusion some sports governing bodies try to limit access and engagement directly between journalists and athletes but this can restrict autonomy.
- Some athletes have a continual fear of being 'knocked down' by the media and seem pleased to have a lower profile and less 'risk'. Could this have a knock on effect on their motivation and goals, limiting their successes in sport?

## Reduced distance

Social media provides numerous opportunities for members of the public to interact with and impact athletes directly.

- Positively, it can keep athletes in touch with friends and family when competing or training away from home and provide clubs and teams with an intimate and immediate engagement resource to build support.
- Negatively, it is a direct immediate risk to an athlete's performance due to trolling or criticisms. Athletes who see negative messages and respond to their detractors can cause additional unnecessary stress to themselves.

"At the Commonwealths he had so much pressure because of his expectation I think it impacted his training, and not just his training, his performance, because he was being told he was going to win a medal so many times by so many media that when it didn't happen, they were quite happy to denounce him."

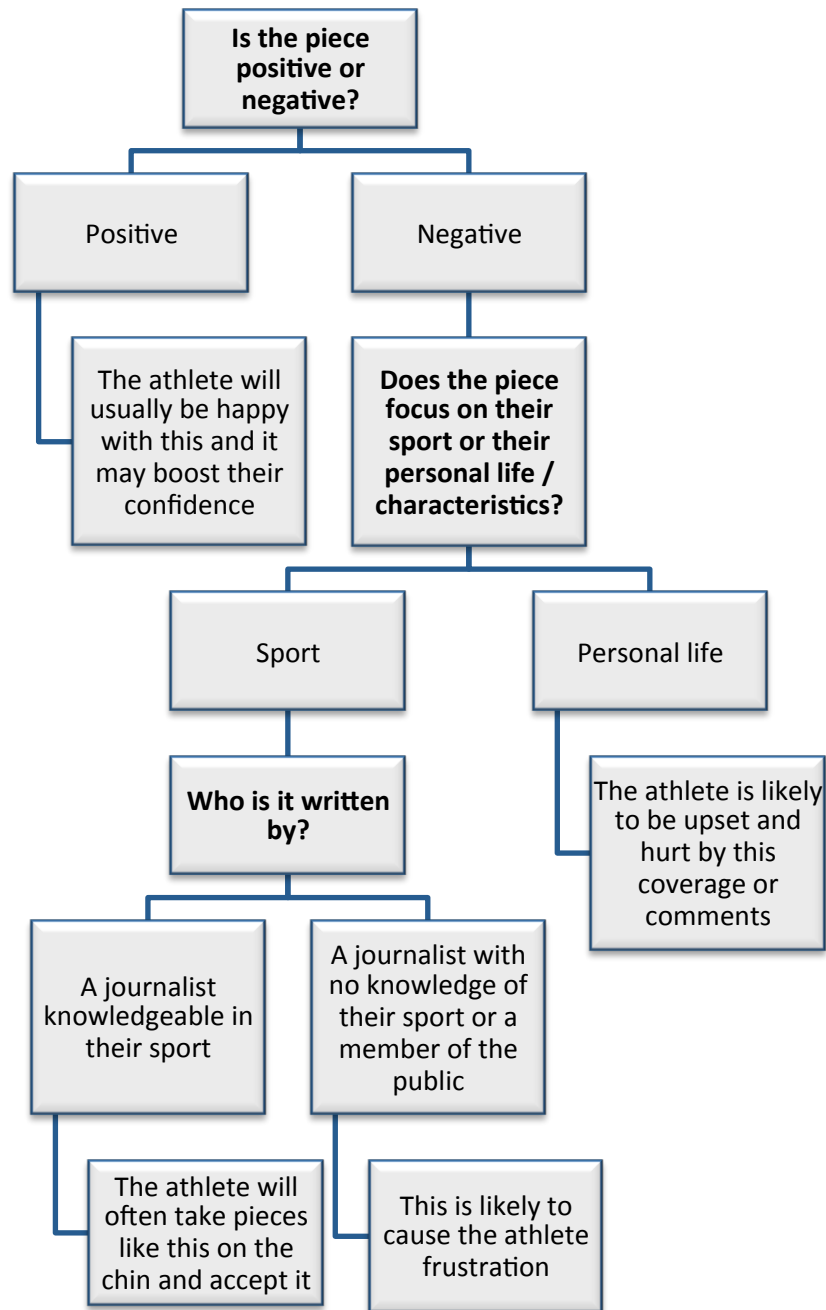
"The higher you are the greater you've got to fall and the more things that can go wrong, whereas I'm a lower profile athlete my extremes of media exposure aren't as risky."

"People saying after we finished, don't worry, we know you are unhappy with your result but the country is still proud of you...without social media, without twitter, you wouldn't actually hear that."

"It is the one troll saying something really personal that will stick with you."

# Supporting an athlete dealing with their coverage

Athletes remember headlines about themselves, whether negative or positive, for years after a paper has been published. They may see this one line as an assessment of themselves and it can have a long-term impact for their self-identity and their self-confidence. The judgment that the headline and following coverage conveys upon athletes means that media coverage should be considered as an important external potential stressor and an area which coaches and psychologists need to work with athletes to ensure it can be used in a facilitative manner. The way an athlete reacts to coverage will often be dictated by the answers to three questions which are highlighted in this flow chart.



# Media mindset

The six impacts of the media and the coverage flow chart highlight where there may be a risk to an athlete from the media. But it doesn't always mean it is a negative impact. A number of individual variables were identified in the research which appear to dictate the way an athlete approaches the media and together these create an overarching mindset indicating how an athlete will behave towards journalists, how they will react to coverage about themselves and how they engage on social media. In short athletes seem to have either a facilitative or debilitating mindset towards the media and this mindset seems to dictate the way they process, engage with and let the stressors caused by the media impact them. There are a number of variables which dictate which mindset an athlete has:

- Do they find media work distracting or motivating?
- Do they see 'the media' as a threat or an opportunity?
- Do they think media work promotes team building or prompts jealousy?
- Is engagement with the media required for their post retirement plans?



# A facilitative media mindset

Athletes with a facilitative media mindset use their media engagement and interaction to give them the motivation and boost they need to perform at their very best. The facilitative mindset is illustrated by athletes suggesting that the media creates the atmosphere they need to perform to the best of their ability and that activities like pre-competition interviews and press conferences are a part of big championships that can be used to their advantage. They take the attitude that the media is unavoidable so they will perform better and feel more comfortable if they choose to accept its presence and frame their interaction with journalists positively.

“There will always be media. You can’t escape it ...There is no such thing as intrusion by the media, it is just poor relationship management and if you allow a bit of inquisition then you can find great interaction and great support from the larger fan base without it being intrusive.”

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Athletes with a **facilitative media mindset** tend to see the media as:

<b>Motivating</b>	<p>They thrive on the activity they do around profile building and sponsorships, valuing this work as a way to thank and give something useful back to their supporters.</p> <p>They enjoy the interview, event and fan engagement process.</p> <p>They find media work a good way to relax and recover for a few months after the Olympic period.</p> <p>They feel the engagement and coverage gives them confidence.</p> <p>They see negative coverage as motivation to prove detractors wrong.</p>
<b>A great way to build team cohesion</b>	<p>They feel media profiling can build a team, crew or pair identity.</p> <p>They feel social media helps them to feel more part of Team GB.</p> <p>They believe that social media creates wider engagement with sports fans and helps them feel like they are representing the whole country.</p>
<b>A tool for their future</b>	<p>They want to build up a nest egg or open doors for media or commentary work for when they retire.</p> <p>They are aware of the commercial opportunities working effectively within the media can bring.</p>



# A debilitating media mindset

Athletes who find the media debilitating seem to do so because the media is unpredictable and uncontrollable which makes it hard to plan for it or fit into their psychological preparations. Those who find it debilitating often develop strategies and tactics to prevent it from impacting on their performances, either by avoiding the media altogether or making a specific decision not to care about how they are portrayed.

"I decided it was all rubbish. Not rubbish necessarily but it was completely irrelevant to what I was trying to achieve. To my goals... It wasn't something I should invest, tie up any energy in one way or another. Not that I was gonna be standoffish but that I would be civil but not to invest any energy in worrying about whether you got any media exposure or whether the facts were correct or anything like that."

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Athletes with a **debilitative media mindset** tend to see the media as:

<b>Distracting</b>	They feel media and sponsorship work as a double edged sword as organisations will only sponsor athletes who maintain good performances and yet sponsorship work will distract them from being able to produce a good performance as it will decrease time to train, prepare or rest effectively. They see the media as interference.
<b>Threatening</b>	They feel pressure to live up to expectations, especially if they have set out their goals clearly such as aiming for a national record or a time goal. They find if they don't live up to media set expectations they lose any joy from the race.
<b>A cause of jealousy</b>	High levels of competitiveness and limited sponsorship can induce jealousy between athletes across sports but also within their own sports and their own teams, crews or sports partners. This jealousy can negatively impact team cohesion and become divisive as athletes. Individuals in teams competed for Twitter followers by putting out funny but embarrassing stories about others. Athletes have labelled popular athletes as 'media whores'.

# Supporting athletes with a debilitating media mindset

The greater awareness an athlete has of their psychological reactions to potential media stressors and the distractions they can cause, the more they can work on controlling its impact. If you identify an athlete as having a debilitating media mindset there are a number of actions you can both take to prevent this mindset impacting negatively on their performance these actions and tactics sit under four key areas:

1. Understanding your athlete's engagement with the media
2. Going into the bubble
3. Teaching your athlete strategies to stay in control of their media environment
4. Creating easy guidelines for your athlete

Performance in Mind can help you to understand each of these areas and how you, as press officers, can develop your athlete's ability to work more effectively with the media and not let it impact on their performance. Contact us on:

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