

Olympians' Emotions Greatly Affected By Prior Expectations Says CU Professor

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Olympians' expectations going into the games often affect how thrilling their victories or agonizing their defeats will be, according to a University of Colorado at Boulder professor.

Peter McGraw of the CU-Boulder Leeds School of Business studies human emotions and has found that Olympians often weigh their achievements against their expectations, and the comparisons have a big effect on how happy they are with their medals.

In a recent study, McGraw found that when Olympic athletes' expectations were lower than the actual outcome of their competition, the athletes' happiness increased slightly. But when expectations were

higher than actual outcomes, happiness decreased, sometimes quite sharply. They also found that bronze medal winners expecting no medal seemed happier than silver medal winners expecting the gold.

"In the study we found the higher the expectations, the bigger the let down can be if you fall short of those expectations," said McGraw, an assistant professor of marketing.

McGraw published the study last summer in the Journal of Experimental Social Psychology. He expanded on a now classic study by researchers at Cornell University who found bronze medalists appeared happier than silver medalists immediately after the competition and while on the medal stand. The researchers reasoned that reaction most likely was because the medalists were thinking about what could have been, according to McGraw.

For bronze medalists, "the most likely thought process is, 'Hey, at least I got a medal. I could have been one of those athletes who didn't receive one,' " McGraw said. "On the other hand, silver medalists are more likely to look up and say, 'I came so close, I could have had the gold. I could have had all the accolades that go with being the best.' "

In part of his recent study, McGraw had undergraduate students view television footage of Olympic athletes immediately after their events and on the medal stand, and judge their emotional reactions based on actual finish and how the athletes expected to finish.

"What we found was that throughout the realm of outcomes there was an effect of prior expectations," McGraw said. "It was a bit blunted for gold medalists -- they're ecstatic almost regardless of their expectations. But there were strong effects for the silver and bronze medalists and even the non-medalists. Those folks who had reason to expect the gold and didn't earn a medal were obviously most disappointed."

A lot goes into making up one's expectations, such as previous performances, media exposure and personal expectations, according to McGraw.

For example, the Jamaican bobsled team was just happy to be in the 1988 winter Olympics, while many American competitors are expected to excel. In the case of the 1980 U.S. hockey team that beat the highly favored Soviet team, the U.S. athletes' expectations weren't as high. The loss was much harder on the Russian team because of their high expectations.

"What really matters is what their expectations were prior to the event," McGraw said. "How they performed in trials leading up to the game, what experts expected them to do . . . these things have a big effect on how happy they are with their finish."

Olympic athletes are of great interest to psychologists and others studying happiness and emotions because the Olympics involve competitions that people have prepared for their entire lives, and it's difficult to recreate such emotional events in a laboratory, McGraw said.

Thankfully, people can put losses behind them, McGraw said. Expectations fade from memory, and people also have what researchers call a psychological immune system.

"We're really good at coping with negative events in our lives," McGraw said. "It's really quite adaptive for us to do that. It allows us to pick ourselves up and dust off and move forward. We can rationalize things, selectively forget our role in a failure or attribute a failure to situations beyond our control."

Source: University of Colorado

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