

Kristiansen, E., Hanstad, D. V. (2012). Journalists and Olympic athletes: a Norwegian case study of an ambivalent relationship. *International journal of sport communication*, 5, 231-245.

# Journalists and Olympic Athletes: A Norwegian Case Study of an Ambivalent Relationship

Elsa Kristiansen and Dag Vidar Hanstad

Norwegian School of Sport Sciences, Norway

This case study explores the relationship between media and sport. More specifically, it examines the association (i.e., the contact and communication) between Norwegian journalists and athletes during the 2010 Olympic Winter Games in Vancouver, Canada. Ten athletes and three journalists were interviewed about their relationship. To regulate and improve the journalist–athlete relationship during special events like the Olympics, media rules have been formulated. In regard to the *on-site interactions*, they accepted that they are working together where one was performing and the other reporting the event “back home.” While the best advice is to be understanding of the journalists’ need for stories and inside information, the media *coverage* was perceived as a constant stress factor for the athletes. However, because of the media rules the athletes were able to keep their distance but one athlete did comment: “You will not survive if you take it personally.”

**Keywords:** personal relationship, media stress, coping, Olympic Winter Games, Vancouver 2010

Athletes and media representatives have distinct roles as actor and distributor of the act or sport performance which maintain the Olympic Games as one of the world’s most important sports feasts. While the Olympics have been analyzed as a mediated event by many scholars (e.g., Billings, 2008; Roche, 2009), more recently athletes’ perceptions of journalists during this major event have been addressed (e.g., Kristiansen, Hanstad, & Roberts, 2011a). This paper aims to fill a gap in research literature by investigating the interaction (i.e., the contact and communication) between journalists and athletes from Norway during the 2010 Olympic Winter Games (OWG) in Vancouver. Recent literature has revealed that the media may be perceived as a stressor for elite athletes performing at the highest level (Kristiansen et al., 2011a; Kristiansen & Roberts, 2011; Kristiansen, Roberts, & Sisjord, 2011b). Hence, the journalist’s point of view is not presented in this research. The essential question is how does the journalist–athlete working relationship function during major events? More specifically we explored the communication, contact, and understanding for doing their job in this *Norwegian* case study.

Norway has an extraordinary history from the Olympic Winter Games. This Scandinavian country is at the top of the medals score from all OWGs from 1924 until 2010, with 303 medals of which 107 are gold medals. The USA follows thereafter with 253 medals of which 87 are gold. Consequently, the Norwegian Olympians entered the OWG in Vancouver with high expectations for success on their shoulders; not getting a medal may easily be labeled a failure. This is further underlined by the number of Norwegian journalists covering the OWG and where a total of 106 accredited media representatives from Norway attended the Vancouver Games. The importance of the Games was further underlined by the extensive coverage on the main (state) TV Channel. For 16 days events taking place in Vancouver were the headlines in newspapers and the television.

Due to the athletes' increased emphasis on performance and winning an Olympic gold medal (Billings, 2008), the athletes may be more vulnerable to journalists' intrusion and presence at a major event. At the 2006 OWG in Turin, Italy, the media were experienced as a serious stress factor for the Norwegian team partly due to failure in achieving the high ambitions declared in the media (Andersen & Hanstad, 2011). This may be a result of the fact that journalists are supposed to create stories irrespective of the results and the preagreed media rules that regulate access to the athletes. The purpose of the present investigation was to gain valuable knowledge about the working relationship between athletes and journalists where both parties needed to contribute and show mutual respect to make it a positive and sound working relationship.

## Athletes and Sport Journalism

Since the 1990s the volume of sport journalistic reports has increased and the form has also become more tabloid. The development is related to sports impact as a global business and the huge amounts of money involved in the staging of events such as the Olympic Games and World Cup football. In this process of the rise of mass media, the previously narrow focus on results has expanded into an institutional complex of enormous social, cultural, political, and economic importance (Rowe, 2004), or as the former general manager of Boston Bruins, Mike O'Connell, has put it: "There are three components to the sport industry: the entertainment component, the talent and competitive component, and the business component" (2004, p. 30). As a result, Maguire and colleagues argue that *mediated sport* plays an important part in our existence as it is interpreted as exciting entertainment for the public at large (Maguire, Jarvie, Mansfield, & Bradley, 2002). Hence, this mediation is interesting to observe, and the interaction between journalists and athletes tends to be under constant development.

Clearly, this development has an impact on athletes in the media spot light. Elite athletes depend on the media for publicity, and star athletes are given a public image in their communities. Fans follow their careers and daily reports, and in team sports fans wear their jersey numbers (Woods, 2007). Athletes may conceive such media attention as fun and motivating when working hard to achieve goals. However, when becoming a sport star and consequently also a role model, elite athletes are scrutinized. During Christmas 2009 Tiger Woods truly hit the headlines, and not because his amazing golf results. Instead he had to make several public appearances and apologize to his wife (and also sponsors) about his infidelity. He

had to take a break from golf to recover from this public disgrace. Hence, if the framing is negative or critical, media reporting may affect the athletes' preparation and self-confidence (Gauntlett, 2008).

Unexpected, or simply a huge amount of media exposure, may totally change the athletes' task focus during the competition (Kristiansen et al., 2011b). In addition, apparently, successful professional athletes experience pressure from the coach and management to "deliver" the performances. Evidence has also been found of entire football teams' performance being affected by negative reporting (Kristiansen & Roberts, 2011). Higher expectations created by the media may evolve into increased performance pressure inside a team. This constant focus on high expectations may in itself lead to perceived exhaustion before the actual game and less effort and negative performance may be the result.

In periods with much media exposure, the daily worry of being negatively framed may influence the elite athletes to start avoiding contact with the media content about them as much as possible. Interviewed soccer players argued for the importance of "avoidance" strategies: they avoided reading newspapers and watching news reports on TV. Further, the athletes did not want their families to discuss with them what had been reported in the media, thereby isolating themselves from any criticism (Kristiansen & Roberts, 2011). In addition, they mentioned strategies to stand out as colorless or "grey" in the interview setting as an advantage because the journalists would rather approach more colorful personalities and the media would leave them alone. However, being in "show business" makes this a hard call since elite athletes have a responsibility to talk to the press because it is expected of them. Elite athletes in individual sports cannot hide among more "colorful" and talkative personalities in their team.

An immense amount of attention is one thing, what soccer players fear most of all is the reporting of their "failures." Failure is always "news." In a recent investigation into soccer goalkeepers' perception of the media as a source of strain (Kristiansen et al., 2011b), the media only reported when they failed to make a save or when they were selected for the national team. Major *saves* would rarely hit the headlines. In the interviews, one of the goalkeepers pointed out after having made several mistakes during the course of the season: "I was subsequently thrown away as bad meat." He concluded, "The media has a lot of power; they really have a lot of power" (2011b, p. 303). This perception of selective reporting in soccer media coverage was a common view of the goalkeepers interviewed.

During major events, contact between athletes and journalists can easily escalate. The stress of the competition itself is augmented by the presence of journalists (Kristiansen et al., 2011a). *Coping* is viewed as a dynamic process following appraisal because of a situation (identified as threatening, challenging, etc.) where an individual perceives an imbalance between the situation and personal resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). This imbalance is often referred to as stress, and McGrath's (1970) process definition underlines that stress is a perception of a "substantial imbalance between (environmental) demand and response capability, under conditions where failure to meet the demand has important consequences" (p. 20). The media-related environmental demands encountered by an athlete may become stressors for different reasons. Greenleaf et al. argue that media attention, both before and during competition, is experienced as stressful, making it harder for the athletes to focus on the event (Greenleaf, Gould, & Dieffenbach, 2001). Next,

the athletes may also react to the subsequent reporting as a source of strain during major competitions (Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2002; Gould, Guinan, Greenleaf, Medbery, & Peterson, 1999; Greenleaf et al., 2001).

## The Media Rules With Focus on the Journalists' Working Conditions

During major events, people at home are informed of the athletes' successes and failures, or what the media defines as such, and as Billings (2008) argues "the Olympics are the only television behemoth that can make all other mass media slow down to a near halt for weeks on end" (p. 7). It matters for entire nations. To protect the Norwegian athletes and enhance the journalist-athlete relationship, the administrators of the Olympic Top Sports program in Norway developed *media rules* for the Olympic Games. The work commenced before the 2000 Sydney Olympics, and in the process over the last decade cooperation with the Association of Sports Journalists has been included. In brief, the media rules regulate the relationship between journalist and the entire Olympic Team with emphasis on the athletes. Further, the rules underline mutual respect and define the interaction between the media and the Olympic Team. In the 2010 OWG version of the media rules, the athlete was expected to show up at press meetings two days before and shortly after every competition. In addition, the five press attachés would also update the journalists of their teams' whereabouts 24 hr daily, and assist the journalists when they needed to approach the athletes. In return, the media would avoid any other contact and let the focus of the athlete be on his/her respective event(s).

In a recent research project Hanstad and Skille (2010) found that the journalists experienced improved and better working conditions than expected. The improvement from previous Olympics was mainly due to the efforts of the five Norwegian press attachés, and that both parties managed to follow the media rules agreed upon before departure. Nevertheless, 27% of the journalists texted or called the athletes during the Olympics, contrary to the agreement in spite of the press attachés being available for the journalists at all times during the weeks in Vancouver. Even so, the journalists had two major concerns (or stressors) before the OWG: the availability of the athletes, and their hope of an *exclusive* story. Their concern is relevant when including the information that the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK) actually transmitted over 500 hr of live coverage. The most popular events had 1.8 million viewers (almost one-third of the entire Norwegian population) showing that these Olympics were of national interest and importance. Of course, the TV media have an extreme advantage over the newspaper journalists due to their *live* possibilities. Therefore the paper media had to find different angles to take up the competition.

## Methods

A qualitative case study is often characterized by researchers spending extended time on site and being personally in contact with persons and activities of the case (Stake, 2005), this case study being no exception. The second author, a former sports editor and commentator in Norway's biggest newspaper was present during the period of the 2010 OWG; he talked to journalists during their entire experience in Vancouver. Hence, we have chosen the case (and participants) based upon what

we felt we could learn the most, and who were accessible and willing to take part in the investigation.

## Participants

Two different samples were involved in this comparative study, and a convenient sampling procedure was conducted for both (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The first sample comprised 10 Norwegian winter Olympians with media experience. The athletes were chosen based on three criteria. First, we wanted to include both genders and all the various sports; second, the athletes needed to be a medalist in their sport; third, the interviewees needed to have extensive experience with journalists and different types of media coverage. All participants were in their 20s and early 30s ( $M_{age} = 27.7$  years,  $SD = 4.41$ ); half had previous Olympic experience. This was a very elite sample. The Norwegian Olympic team took 23 medals during the Vancouver Games and the Norwegian Olympic interviewees had a total of five gold, four silver, and four bronze medals.

The second sample consisted of three journalists from a leading Norwegian newspaper which had consistent and broad coverage of sport on a daily basis. These three journalists covered different sports during the 2010 OWG. Hence, issues concerning all athletes and venues could easily be discussed and reviewed. The three journalists (aged between 43 and 56) had more than average experience covering a wide range of sports, and are respected in the community. Vancouver was the seventh Olympic Games which they had covered; they may also be considered an elite sample. In addition, it is important to remember that the purpose of a case report is not to represent the world, but to represent the case. Stake (2005) states that the case study is not a methodological choice but a choice of what is to be studied:

By whatever methods, we choose to study the *case*. We could study it analytically or holistically, entirely by repeated measures or hermeneutically, originally or culturally, and by mixed methods—but we concentrate, at least for the time being, on the case. (Stake, 2005, p. 443, italics in original)

## Ethical Standards and Procedures

After obtaining approval from the Norwegian Social Science Data Services, informed consent was obtained from all participants before conducting the personal interviews in 2010. In-depth interviews were chosen because they can provide greater breadth and allowed the participants to articulate their own feelings about their mutual “working conditions.” At the beginning of each interview (both with individuals and the focus group), participants were informed that the information provided would remain confidential, and that they could terminate the interviews at any time.

The individual interviews with the athletes were conducted by both authors in different locations according to what was convenient for the athletes. In all ten interviews, the athletes considered the opportunity to inform how they coped with the media as positive, and some even discussed other aspects after we had finished. The journalist focus group interview was conducted in a room at their work premises. The interviews ended with a process feedback question: “What should I have asked you about, and do you have anything to add?” Each interview with the Olympians lasted between 35 and 50 min; the focus group interview with the

journalists lasted 66 minutes. The interviews were transcribed verbatim resulting in 102 pages of single spaced raw text.

## Interview Guide

The semistructured, *individual* in-depth interviews were conducted according to an interview guide that comprised three main sections: 1) experiences of journalist–athlete interactions during the Olympics (“How did you understand your relationship with the media during the OWG?”); 2) coping with the above-mentioned stressors if perceived as such (“How do you cope with this/these demands?”); and 3) general discussion and advice about how to create a well-functioning relationship with journalists.

The interview guide for the focus group interview was a little different. A focus group approach was chosen as this was considered an appropriate method in situations where the research aimed at generating new ideas, language, and applications, and which could also help to encourage participants to offer their opinions (Greenbaum, 1998). As a result, the interview guide comprised three main sections: 1) the journalists–athlete relationship (“How were the working conditions during the Olympics?”); 2) their framing of the athletes (“What is a good story/angle?”); and finally 3) the journalists read a quotation from the athletes’ interview and commented upon their statements. In many ways, these examples functioned as illustrative examples and as a clarifying strategy after having begun with simple, straightforward, open-ended questions (Patton, 2002). The group members influenced each other by responding to ideas and comments in the discussion, and also clarifying each other’s statements. The interviews went smoothly. In the interview guide, there was flexibility allowing a change in the order of questions, and follow-up questions were employed where it was considered necessary for a more detailed response.

## Data Analysis Procedures

The raw material was coded using content analysis procedures (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and the data analysis was conducted in three stages. First, the material from the individual interviews with the Olympians was coded. The material from the focus group interview was then coded since the aim of this investigation was to compare how the athletes and journalists experience their common working ground and interaction. Finally, the main themes and raw data from the coding processes were compared to reveal the similarities and discrepancies in the perceptions of the journalist–athlete relationship.

## Discussion of the Results

The journalist–athlete relationship during a major competition has two aspects. First of all the on-site interaction and the degree of cooperation is discussed. The Olympic athletes have learnt to walk a fine line of what can be mentioned to the press, and what should not be revealed. On the other hand, the journalists complained about the athletes’ lack of understanding that to talk to the press “is part of their job as elite athletes.” Next, the athletes also have to cope with the potential downbeat coverage that might follow the interaction and affect their relationship, and the journalists’ and athletes’ conflicting views of each other’s roles is then highlighted (see Table 1).

**Table 1 The Main Issues in Which the Journalists and Athletes Have Different Point of Views**

	The Olympic athletes point of view	The journalists point of view
Interactions between journalists–athletes	Must prepare for all sort of questions	Unacceptable not to talk to them
	Need time to recover before being questioned	Important to show the public at home all the emotions
	Some have always followed me	Have a special relationship with some of them, are as happy as they when they win
	We are in it together	We have a job to do, respect both ways
The media coverage	The press attachés are a help	The press attachés make things worse
	Negative framing and “distorting” the “truth”	Stories must be funny Obligation to report Protect the athletes from statements
	Avoid commenting upon something that might become a problematic issue	Need to create interest for the sport
	Avoid contact/knowledge of coverage	Represent the public back home
	Destroy the perception of performance	Never verbally abused (inexperienced) athletes

## Interactions Between Journalists and Athletes

The Olympians pointed out *preparations* as being crucial to the meeting with the journalists to reduce the perception of stress and also to feel some sort of control over the interview situation.

The journalists don't ask about our goals or what you hope to achieve. All they want is to find out the other stuff, things that I am not prepared for, and their questions may sweep my focus on task away. You never know [ . . . ] I guess I was not prepared for that as a young athlete, that a second or third place was not good enough for the press.

The elite athletes seemed to learn how to respond without being controversial, such as never to complain about their skies or a debate about the waxing team will last for days, though experience and age was noted as crucial in this process (Kristiansen et al., 2011b; Kristiansen & Roberts, 2011). Further, some also mentioned the briefings held by the press attaché as helpful in the preparation phase before the press meetings.

Coping with media attention may be stressful when the goal is to refocus (Greenleaf et al., 2001; Kristiansen et al., 2011a), and even worse when the failure is total. One Norwegian athlete, who was despondent after one of his performances during the Olympics, simply walked through the mixed zone (a designated area

where credentialed journalists are able to photograph and interview athletes immediately after the event) and did not return later to be interviewed. His self-chosen *media break* created a media storm in Norway (Ulseth, 2010). As a result, the athlete concerned had to attend a special press conference the next morning where he tried to explain his action by saying “This was my way of solving the problem. I needed to evaluate the incident in my own head first, I needed that time yesterday [ . . . ] I was disappointed, I needed to block it out before meeting the journalists” (NTB, 2010). In contrast, the leader of the Association of Sport Journalists is quoted in the same article: “It [his behavior] is totally unacceptable. We are talking about common courtesy here.” He was allowed to be disappointed, but his behavior was understood as disrespectful by the journalists who were unable to do their job.

What this incident also revealed was that the athletes might need some time alone and to prepare themselves before meeting the journalists. However, due to the preagreed media rules, the athletes were obliged to talk to the journalists in the mixed zone immediately after each event. For some, this was problematic as “I am the type of person who worries about things I say to journalists,” as one stated. In a similar vein, this athlete had a “complex-coping” ritual before entering the mixed zone:

My trick is to wait a few minutes (if possible) before entering the mixed zone and answer the questions about “what I feel,” “if I am disappointed,” or “what went wrong”? Importantly, I wait until I have normal pulse. As I don’t want to be taken for an impolite person I prefer to put things in perspective before answering any question. You know, things like “It is just sport,” “it is not life or death”! [ . . . ] And then, be honest—tell them that it was overkill, and that you were afraid of failure. Then the media questioning will go straight away.

The journalists, on the other hand, consider the athletes’ emotions “a good story when winning or failing,” and have no ethical problems broadcasting or describing them. They argue that the audience back home has the right to see the emotional scale presented in the competition. A deadline is an additional stressful factor for newspaper journalists, making it hard for them to wait until the athlete feels comfortable to meet them as they have to compete with the live broadcasts (Vancouver is nine hours behind Oslo). As one of them reflected, “We had to finish the stories hours before we actually had the opportunity to meet them.” Time zones did not make their work any easier.

One way around these barriers was to have a *personal relationship* with the athletes to “get something” before the deadline. The three sport reporters all claimed this to be the best way to compete with the TV and to get a different angle. Actually, both athletes and journalists talked about having a personal relationship as an advantage. In unison, the athletes admitted that the journalist–athlete relationship was frequently an encouraging relationship, especially when a journalist had followed the athlete’s entire career. Some journalists become part of the “entourage,” and we were told stories about one-man TV teams which did everything themselves. In other words, the journalists might be considered a source of *emotional support* for the athletes. Some journalists are even dedicated to the sport, as one athlete reflected:

You can really feel that he likes your sport, that he really wants you to succeed, and you naturally appreciate him all the more. More likely, you will answer his questions and not the negative ones of the journalist next to him.

The top athletes often had a few journalists that they trusted: “I can tell him things without it being broadcasted, and in return he gets exclusives and the opportunity to call me privately.” It is important for the athletes to monitor the information flow and at the same time be available. A personal relationship with the journalists is one way of doing this.

The journalists were in agreement about their being one of the athletes’ biggest supporters: “I think it is great when they win, especially when you have followed them for years and know about the hard work undertaken to reach the goal. And then they succeed.” This support is quite obvious in the televised reports. Naturally, the journalists are often the first to approach the athletes after a win, and quite often what one gets are scenes that are far from objective news reporting—but a shared joy over the victory.

By having a more personal relationship with the Olympians, the journalists also perceived the athletes as *easier* to work with. “An easy athlete to relate to is one who lets you tag along in a car ride, be present in your post-performance routines and at least gives you three or four different angles during a 20-minute conversation.” Of course, they only knew a few who were that easy to work with; such a relationship is built on trust and respect and commences years before an Olympic Games. Friendship also makes it easier to conduct the interview: “When you get to know the athlete, get to know the way he/she thinks, then, if you respect them, you get respect back and it is a pleasure to work with them.” This statement makes sense, and is probably even more important in the more stressful and tense on-site interaction between journalists and athletes. Naturally, only the biggest stars who actually make money in their sport know how to do it—and are then easy to work with.

Some journalists follow just a few of the leading athletes. They then feel that they have a right to get more out of the interview setting: “It costs money to travel around with them and that investment should result in being noticed and to get stories that would pay off the expenses. And it does; they answer the phone when we call them.” What this quote also implies is that to show up at an OWG without prior knowledge of the athlete or his/her support team will make it almost impossible to get an exclusive interview. As one of them stated, “It is a give-and-take relationship, and one must earn the athletes’ trust and show that you care about them over time.” Representing minor news organizations with less funding will make this a harder task to accomplish, and consequently these journalists may comprehend the situation as more stressful. However, several of the athletes felt extra responsibility toward their local newspapers to promote the sport and give back to those who helped out in the beginning of their careers.

As it turned out, due to the help of the five press attachés and the organized press meetings, the Olympians did not perceive the media as a major stress factor during this competition (Kristiansen et al., 2011a). The journalists on the other hand, had mixed feelings and experience with the press attachés.

From the moment a press attaché gets involved, our job becomes more complicated. During championships, a press attaché is in charge. You get one minute per journalist . . . and there is a press attaché in the mixed zone pulling the athlete, saying enough is enough, it is time for a shower, etc. This happens at a stage where the athletes are ready and committed to talk, and feel comfortable with the situation, but when the second the press attaché takes control and tries to drag the athletes away from you, the situation becomes difficult.

Apparently, the journalists made it clear that they were not the *enemy* in the mixed zone, and they constantly emphasized that “the athletes must understand the responsibility they have towards us: it is a two-way relationship.” Therefore, the journalists take home the message to the athletes is that it is not dangerous to talk to them. If the people around the athletes create a safe environment, then an interview should not turn out to be a distraction, irrespective of the result.

## The Media Coverage

What are the criteria of a “high-quality” story? The responses from the athletes and journalists differed broadly in the matter of sports reporting. The athletes were sometimes taken by surprise by the journalists’ angle of the story, and they interpret the story to circle around a subclause in a longer statement. As a result, the athletes conceived the “truth” to be distorted on occasion, and what they felt was important to emphasize was hardly mentioned. In other words, media reporting is not always factual (Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2002). As one athlete expressed: “It took me years to cope with their [i.e., journalists] framing,” where he meant the extensive focus on nonperformance, and often on organizational issues.

The journalists had several responses when confronted with the athletes’ opinions about their role at events and focus on their stories. First of all, the journalists stated that sport at this level is both *circus* and *entertainment*, and it was pivotal that coaches, team leaders, and athletes understand this aspect of today’s sport. For them, the worst thing they could do to the sport was to write in a boring manner about the athletes and the events. Therefore, they focused about the stories that were *fun*: “When two of our best athletes make a dispute public of course we write about it. It’s fun,” one of the journalists explained enthusiastically. Apparently, the word *fun* has an extended meaning for sports reporters. From the journalist’s point of view, to write in a light-hearted manner did not imply that that the truth had been distorted; it was more about giving the report the “appealing” framework.

Second, the journalists disagreed that they distorted the truth, but admitted that they often reported injuries, conflicts, and so forth to the public. From their point of view, it is their job and *obligation* to report home about what was seen from the athlete’s perspective as negative issues. “People back home need to have some background information that helps them to understand the results; they want the information TV cannot give them.” In other words, they are competing with other media and therefore they need another angle. A conflict can be elaborated into a “soap” which creates extra interest for both the sport and the media. In the history of sport there have been various examples of rivalries, real or created—or both, as in the case of the 1994 Oslo OWG involving skaters Nancy Kerrigan and Tonya Harding. Naturally, from a journalist’s point of view, covering such a scoop (or violent drama) may be considered a high quality story.

Thirdly, the journalists elaborated upon how they also tried to protect the athletes in the midst of this: “We try not to frame the athletes as idiots; we also want to create quality journalism,” a statement agreed by the three experienced journalists interviewed. However, on occasion they been approached by athletes who felt they had been misquoted. Frequently, the athletes’ concerns were the result of comments made by family members and friends who paid more attention to the reporting. When discussing with the athletes what they actually had written,

they usually agreed that the news report was correct. As an interesting side-note to this issue, the journalists also claimed that they sometimes asked twice before writing statements when they found the statements provocative. In other words, they felt “obliged” to protect and educate the athletes, something not mentioned in the athlete interviews.

The athletes did not want to create headlines. Therefore, they were particularly cautious about their statements to the press during major competitions such as the Olympics. The athletes considered that the media could easily “take away your entire self-confidence and self-worth.” This may easily happen when all they are being questioned about are injuries, failures, and conflicts within the team (Gauntlett, 2008). As a result, the Olympians reported avoiding making statements that would lead to negative follow-ups, and also discussing problematic issues even though they think debates are healthy. But as one commented: “You do not say something controversial and create a media storm two days before a major competition like the Olympics!” This seemed to be something they all agreed about.

To be cautious and avoid making statements was also due to the fact that *if* an individual or team did not deliver or failed to obtain a medal (preferably gold), then the athletes should prepare themselves for a discussion on what is an acceptable performance. Obviously, the goal for the athlete, and the media’s goal for the athlete and the event were not always compatible. Questions about unexpectedly poor performances are conceived as a source of strain among the Olympians, or simply why they ended in fourth place (which under some circumstances may be a personal best for the season as well!). “Tomorrow is another day with lots of possibilities; but they make it hard for us to get there by their questioning.” Hence, the journalists distorted or slowed down the athletes’ coping process by continuous questioning about an unsuccessful performance.

The journalists replied to some of the athletes’ criticism by again stating that the athletes are not aware or do not know enough about the interview situation and what a good story is for them.

It is naïve of the athletes to come to interviews and believe that we will ask them about their anaerobic threshold or the training results the past week or what they are planning to do the following week. [ . . . ] We are supposed to create an interest for their sport, and we have to *entertain* our readers. The athletes need to understand this.

The journalists also felt that athletes from the minor sports often had excessively high expectations and rather unrealistic hopes for both the angle and the number of pages and location an interview would result in during an Olympics. Again, popularity of the sport (and in many ways the popularity of the athlete) is a factor which that determines the actual coverage. One journalist said (with a laugh) that some of them seemed to expect four pages of coverage after a longer interview. Therefore, the journalists firmly suggested that not only should athlete be prepared for the interview setting, but also what the following sports reporting would result in.

Therefore, some of the elite athletes tried to be as “vague and humble” as possible to avoid glaring headlines (see also Kristiansen et al., 2011b), and they tried to *avoid* reading, seeing or hearing anything about themselves or the team

distributed by the Norwegian press during the Olympics. Further, most athletes were committed to their own rules whereby they would not read internet articles—one they shared with their teammates and coaches. In other words, they tried very hard to avoid press coverage of the press meetings they had to attend during the Games. This might be a useful strategy when the results really matter (Kristiansen et al., 2011b). Most importantly, the athletes were clear about the fact that this strategy was both important and necessary, and to stay focused on their task they preferred to live in their Olympic “bubble.”

At the end of the group interview with the journalists, the three interviewees were presented with some of the athletes’ quotes about media coverage from the 2010 OWG and also some statements in general about media coverage. The themes in the following quotes focused on the athletes’ perception of the coverage and the possibility for the slant of an article both to reduce the perception of success and self-confidence (see also Kristiansen & Roberts, 2011). The journalists simply replied that they had *never* intentionally written a story that would harm an athlete: “I cannot recall one incident when we have verbally abused inexperienced athletes.” However, they did admit that they are in a position where they have the *power* to change what the athletes consider important. Their main aim during a major event such as the Olympic Games is to keep the readers back home informed and to assist newspaper sales. It is their duty to report conflicts, injuries, and why athletes fail to win the gold medal. They have a professional relationship to what they report, and the journalists expect the same approach for the athletes. Their coverage is never personal: “It may be that they chose to interpret what we write as negative criticism instead of positive speculation.” The important thing for them was to inform “everybody interested in the Olympics why some succeeded and others didn’t.” Put into perspective: “We don’t recognize a journalist–athlete conflict; we do not intentionally go after them. We have never had something similar to the Tiger Woods storm here in Norway.” However, the journalists were opinionated about this as well and argued that the athletes “need to have the ability not to be distracted. If they consider our stories a distraction, they want make it to the top.” Consequently, there are obvious and groundbreaking differences in the perception of media coverage between the athletes and the journalists.

## Conclusion

This case study revealed that there is room for improvement in the working conditions for both Norwegian journalists and athletes. Due to the media rules that organize these working conditions, the athletes are only too aware that it is expected of them to talk to journalists; they have the responsibility to meet the press and reflect upon their performance. With regard to the on-site interactions, the statements between journalists and athletes are generally in agreement. Both parties understand the importance of the interaction, and accept the fact that they are working together where one is performing and the other reporting. The journalists would, of course, like more access and not always have to use the press attachés to come into contact with the athletes. However, the media rules may be considered as an adaptive coping strategy for the athletes while, on the other hand, the journalists may find this more controlled athletic behavior giving the journalists tougher working conditions when aiming for an exclusive story.

When turning to the results of the actual contact and interview setting, the following coverage, the differences in perception are more apparent. It is in the matter of the coverage and what constitutes a good story that there were clear differences between athletes and journalists. The athletes talked a lot of what they regarded to be negative coverage while the journalists did not recognize anything of the kind when being confronted with the athletes' statement. Hence, the athletes' main concern for improving working conditions was to be handled more carefully when the results matter (for the entire nation). Interesting to note, the journalists believe that athletes without the ability to cope with a more tabloid news coverage have nothing to do at this elite level of sport. In support of such a claim, the athletes with the most medals have understood this and developed a personal relationship with the journalists and feed them with stories also from their blog.

To cope with all sorts of scrutiny (both personal and professional in character) by the media, the athletes must learn to use strategies which may directly attempt to change a situation perceived as stressful (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985) and to regain some sort of control when they feel that the questioning is becoming intrusive. In this process, guidance from the press attachés is vital and the preagreed media rules helpful. Especially, the press attachés were regarded as providing important support for the athletes in the interview setting as they were always present and monitored the sessions. In many ways the athletes understand this help as a means of taking control over something usually experienced as hard to control! This is in line with previous research on social support, which is often considered a coping resource that helps people to manage the negative effect of stress (e.g., Holt & Hoar, 2006) and which has also been found useful for elite athletes when coping with the media (e.g., Kristiansen & Roberts, 2011). This (unique) Norwegian regulation of the interaction between athletes and journalists has clear advantages for both parties, also the journalists as they are granted access—but not always the unique angle that they crave for.

Finally, what the results of the research also highlight is the fact that even though journalists and athletes cause each other stress, there is also evidence of mutual support. Their relationship is clearly *ambivalent*; it is a give-and-take situation, and for the athletes journalists are something unavoidable in the end when they have sponsors that expect appearance. Several cases revealed that the professional relationship between journalist and athletes had turned into a personal contact as well. The joy of victory was shared. Hence, naturally both may be disappointed when the athlete does not live up to expectations and a completely different story needs to be told.

## Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Undoubtedly, when only interviewing three journalists from one newspaper there are several obvious methodological limitations of the representativeness of this group. However, we wanted to provide insight into journalists' experiences, and these three represented a certain level of expertise that added depth to the information obtained. In accordance with Stake, we are "optimistic that we can learn some important things from almost any case" (2005, p. 451). The sample in this study was small and specialized. Consequently, generalizations based on the findings are limited. Conversely, the strength of this investigation is that it provides one of

the first systematic examinations of the contact, communication, and perception of each other among journalists and athletes. Yet, this study deals only very superficially with some important issues in the journalist–athlete relationship, especially the issue regarding what is a negative coverage and how athletes are expected to cope with what they understand as negative media coverage. Or are they simply whining over nothing? Following team sports participation and perception of the journalist–athlete relationship in a major tournament (such as the World Cup in football) would contribute to more in-depth knowledge. Further, it would be interesting to compare the differences between a team with scandals and unforeseen distractions, and teams without this extra stress and less coverage. In addition, an interesting question for future research is whether the gender of the journalists influences this ambivalent relationship. In conclusion, within the limitations of this research, we demonstrate that it is a viable area of research to which more attention should be given.

## Case Questions

- In this case study the journalists and athletes perceived the media coverage of the athletes differently. Are there issues, including personal matters, that the media should avoid commenting upon during major competitions like the Olympics?
- What information do you think the press attaché should convey about the journalists' work when explain this to the athletes?
- What kind of negative consequences can a (personal) relationship on this level create for quality (and critical) journalism?
- As a journalist, what kind of stories would you like to report home from the Olympic Games—in addition to the competition?
- Headlines sell! But athletes frequently expressed skepticism toward what they considered as negative headlines. How can journalists overcome athletes' skepticism concerning apparent negative reporting?

## References

- Andersen, S.S., & Hanstad, D.V. (2011). "Den som er godt forberedt, har ikke uflaks"—Norsk OL-deltakelse i Vancouver: risiko, forberedelse og resultater [«If you are well prepared, you will not experience bad luck»—Norway in the Vancouver Olympics: risks, preparations and results]. *Scandinavian Sport Studies Forum*, 2, 75–98.
- Billings, A. (2008). *Olympic media: Inside the biggest show on television*. London: Routledge.
- Durand-Bush, N., & Salmela, J. (2002). The development and maintenance of expert athletic performance: perceptions of world and Olympic champions. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 14, 154–171.
- Folkman, S., & Lazarus, R.S. (1985). If it changes it must be a process: A study of emotions and coping during three stages of college examination. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 48, 150–170.
- Gauntlett, D. (2008). *Media, gender and identity. An introduction* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge.

- Gould, D., Guinan, D., Greenleaf, C., Medbery, R., & Peterson, K. (1999). Factors affecting Olympic performance: Perceptions of athletes and coaches from more and less successful teams. *The Sport Psychologist, 13*, 371–394.
- Greenbaum, T.L. (1998). *The handbook for focus group research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Greenleaf, C., Gould, D., & Dieffenbach, K. (2001). Factors influencing Olympic performance: Interviews with Atlanta and Nagano U.S. Olympians. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology, 13*, 154–184.
- Hanstad, D. V., & Skille, E. A. (2010). Journalisters syn på samarbeidet med den norske OL-troppen under vinterlekene i Vancouver 2010 [Journalists' opinion on the cooperation with the Norwegian Olympic Team during the winter Olympic Games in Vancouver 2010]. *Norsk medietidsskrift, 17*, 348–363.
- Holt, N.L., & Hoar, S.D. (2006). The multidimensional construct of social support. In *Literature reviews in sport psychology* (pp. 199–226). New York: Nova Science Publishers.
- Kristiansen, E., Hanstad, D.V., & Roberts, G.C. (2011a). Coping with the media at the Vancouver Winter Olympics: “We all make a living out of this.” *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology, 23*(4), 443–458.
- Kristiansen, E., & Roberts, G.C. (2011). Media exposure and adaptive coping in elite football. *International Journal of Sport Psychology, 42*, 339–367.
- Kristiansen, E., Roberts, G.C., & Sisjord, M.K. (2011b). Coping with negative media coverage: The experiences of professional football goalkeepers. *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology, 9*, 295–307.
- Lazarus, R.S., & Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, appraisal, and coping*. New York: Springer Pub.
- Maguire, J., Jarvie, G., Mansfield, L., & Bradley, J. (2002). *Sport worlds. A sociological perspective*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
- McGrath, J.E. (1970). A conceptual formation for research on stress. In J.E. McGrath (Ed.), *Social and psychological factors in stress*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Miles, M.B., & Huberman, A.M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis*. London: Sage.
- NTB. (2010, February 21). Dette sa Petter Northug [This was said by Petter Northug]. *NTB*. Retrieved from <https://web.retriever-info.com/services/archive.html?method=displayDocument&documentId=055013201002211702151002211806&serviceId=2>
- O’Connell, M. (2004). The three components of the sport industry. In K. Nguyen (Ed.), *Career insight. Landing a job with a sports team* (pp. 30–41). US: Aspatore Books.
- Patton, M.Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Roche, M. (2009). Mega-event mediation, governance and the Olympics. Retrieved from <http://www.psa.ac.uk/journals/pdf/5/2009/Roche.pdf>
- Rowe, D. (2004). *Sport, culture and media* (2nd ed). England: Open University Press.
- Stake, R.E. (2005). Qualitative case study. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The sage handbook of qualitative research, 3rd ed* (pp. 443–266). London, UK: Thousand Oaks.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Ulseth, O. (2010). *Petter Northug—jakten på dyret*. Oslo: Aschehoug.
- Woods, R.B. (2007). *Social issues in sport*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

Copyright of International Journal of Sport Communication is the property of Human Kinetics Publishers, Inc. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.