Distractions and Coping Strategies of Elite Decathletes During Their Most Memorable Performances

Gregory A. Dale
Winthrop University

The decathlon is a unique track and field event with a storied history in the annals of track and field. Yet, little has been written in the sport psychology literature about the decathlon and the experiences of its participants. The purpose of this study was to describe the experience of elite decathlon participants during their “most memorable performance.” Participants were seven decathletes who have competed at the national and international level. Each athlete had previously scored 8,000 points or more (the standard for excellence in the decathlon) in at least one competition. Because of its emphasis on the participant as the expert, phenomenological interviews were conducted with each participant and transcripts were content analyzed. Two major themes emerged from the interviews: (a) distractions and (b) coping strategies. These themes along with their corresponding subthemes are discussed in relation to other coping research in the sport psychology literature.

I think of the decathlon as a big, high, brick wall that nobody is ever going to be able to climb. It’s cold and heartless. It has no mercy. It’s awesome and scary. It will knock you down so fast. Nobody ever beats the decathlon. You might set a record and kick the hell out of it one day, but you know that it’ll always be there, standing there, waiting for you to try again, telling you, “Okay, you son of gun, try and get me this time.” (Jenner & Finch, 1977, p. 4)

As one might surmise from the description given by Bruce Jenner after he won the gold medal in the decathlon competition at the Montreal Olympic Games in 1976, the decathlon is a grueling competition. With ten different track and field events contested over a two-day period, the decathlon tests endurance, strength, skill, and personality. The events are sequenced so the athletes compete in five events each day. The first day emphasizes speed, jumping ability, and explosive—

The author is with the Dept. of HPE at Winthrop University in Rock Hill, SC 29733.
ness through competition in the 100-meter dash, long jump, shot put, high jump, and the 400-meter dash. The second day involves events that require emphasis on technique and power (110-meter hurdles, discus throw, pole vault, javelin throw) as well as endurance (1500-meter run). Scoring for the decathlon is based on a scoring table that awards a specific number of points for times in the running events and distances in the field events. Final standings are based on the total accumulation of points, and the athlete who has accumulated the most points at the end of the ten events is declared the winner.

The decathlon has been called the most difficult of athletic events, and the Olympic champion is often referred to as the “world’s greatest athlete.” Decathlon participants experience a unique challenge that individuals or other multi-sport athletes, such as triathletes, do not have to contend with when preparing for and participating in competition. That is, they must be able to compete in a multitude of events with long periods in between where the possibility of fatigue and inner fears of failure can take their toll (Zarnowski, 1989).

With the storied history of the decathlon as a glamour event in the Olympics and the unique challenges (particularly psychological) it places on those who compete in it, one might think there would be numerous examples of research on the decathlon or decathletes in the sport psychology literature. However, this is not the case. A computer literature search revealed only one case study (Dale, 1994) investigating the experience of decathletes while preparing for and competing in the decathlon.

In a phenomenological interview study investigating the experience of an elite decathlete during preparation for and participation in his “best-ever performance,” Dale (1994) discussed three themes: a) imagery, b) narrowing focus of attention, and c) awareness of others. This athlete was able to perform well because he effectively utilized imagery and narrowed his focus of attention before and during competition. Even though he was keenly aware of family members, coaches, the crowd, and his opponents during competition, his awareness of others was experienced as an asset to his performance. His family and coaches served as a comfort to him, while he only noticed the crowd in one event (pole vault), and they served to heighten his arousal level by chanting his name. This athlete indicated that this meet was a special time in his life and it was a memorable experience for him.

While no evidence of research was found in the sport psychology literature, research on most memorable experiences has been conducted in the general psychology literature (e.g. Kaslow, 1996; Tinsley, Hinson, Tinsley & Holt, 1993; Woike, 1995). One study in particular, (Woike, 1995) investigated the link between implicit (those we are unaware of and seem to be linked to affective experiences) and explicit (those that are well articulated and seem to be linked to self-concept) motives on cognitive processes during memorable experiences. One hundred and ninety-five undergraduate psychology students reported most memorable experiences during their daily lives via the “Most Memorable Experience Questionnaire” developed by the author of the study. Participants were asked to write down their most memorable experiences at the end of each day for 60 consecutive days. Their memorable experiences were divided into four categories based on “the conceptual definitions of social concerns and task achievement as well as the distinctions drawn between implicit and explicit motives” (Woike, 1995, p.1084).

Within task achievement, the category of affective task experiences involved most memorable experiences that included feelings of accomplishment and per-
sonal self-efficacy. Specifically, these statements referred to being able to effectively deal with task-related demands (i.e., handling pressure well in a Biology exam) and overcoming difficult circumstances (i.e., dealing with being nervous about an upcoming event or battling through adversity). Similar to these experiences of effectively dealing with adversity or difficult situations, researchers, in the general psychology literature (e.g., Compas, 1987; Folkman & Lazarus, 1985; Lazarus, 1966; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) have investigated the coping strategies people use to manage stress associated with various situations.

Coping has been defined as “constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 141). Lazarus and Folkman elaborate on this definition by indicating that they view coping as an ever-changing process (i.e., a person must utilize varying coping strategies depending on the situation). They see coping not as an automatic behavior, but one that requires effort on the part of the person to handle the stressful event. Coping is said to involve any means one uses to manage stress. And, coping is not viewed as mastering the situation, rather it is merely “dealing with” or handling it.

The recent increase in research on coping in the sport psychology literature (e.g., Crocker & Graham, 1995; Eklund, Gould & Jackson, 1993; Gould, Eklund, & Jackson, 1993; Gould, Finch & Jackson, 1993; Goss, 1994; Gould, Tuffey, Udry & Loehr, 1996; Madden, Kirkby & McDonald, 1989; Madden, Summers & Brown, 1990; Sellers, 1995; Tammen, 1996) has provided needed insight into strategies athletes use to cope with various factors that might adversely affect them and/or their performances. Similar to the current study, several of these inquiries were conducted via qualitative methods. In one study by Gould and colleagues (Gould, Finch et al., 1993), national champion figure skaters were asked to describe the coping strategies they used after winning their title. In addition, the researchers sought to examine the relationship between specific stressors and coping strategies these athletes might have used. Coping strategies used by these athletes included time management and prioritization, social support, rational thinking and self-talk, positive focus, precompetitive mental preparation and anxiety management, training hard and smart, isolation and deflection, and ignoring the stressors. Results also revealed that these athletes used a variety of coping strategies depending on which stressor they were attempting to handle. For example, a majority of the skaters used rational thinking and self-talk as well as precompetitive mental preparation and anxiety management when faced with physical or psychological demands. They used time management and prioritization when they were faced with environmental demands.

In a second study, Gould, Eklund, et al. (1993) investigated the coping strategies used by U.S. Olympic wrestlers in the Seoul Olympics. These athletes reported having many adversities to overcome during the Olympics and discussed a variety of coping strategies they used to help deal with these adversities. These included strategies that allowed them to control their thoughts, focus on the task at hand, control their environment, and control their emotions. A difference between medalists and nonmedalists was also found in terms of their ability to cope with adversity. The medalists were found to be much more effective in coping because their strategies were more well-practiced and required little conscious effort. Interestingly, the medalists even viewed adversity as less threatening and even positive at times.
To determine if there were any differences among the medalists in this study, Eklund, et al. (1993) conducted further analysis on the comments made by these individuals regarding their strategies for coping with adversity. Results indicated that each of the medalists was aware of external expectations from coaches, family, and others. However, none of them viewed this as negative. The wrestlers reacted to the expectations in different ways. Some of them viewed the expectations as energizing, and some viewed them as having a neutral effect. Even though the expectations were not viewed as negative, they were unwelcome in some cases and had to be handled.

Results of this study also revealed that mental preparation strategies were an important part of the medalists' ability to handle distractions and prepare to compete. While all of the medalists utilized mental routines, there was variation in the actual routines in terms of complexity and thought patterns.

The current investigation was an attempt to further the findings of research on the experience of elite decathlon participants with emphasis on their experience when they were competing. Specifically, the purpose of the study was to arrive at an accurate description of a larger group of elite decathlon participants' most memorable performances in decathlon competition. By memorable, the researcher intended for the participants in the study to describe experiences that "stood out" in their minds. They were reminded that these experiences did not have to be important or interesting to other people—just to them (Woke, 1995).

To allow participants in this study to best describe their experiences from a first-person perspective, the researcher felt it important to ask open-ended questions. It was felt that these open-ended questions would allow the researcher to avoid stimulus-response interactions with the participant that tend to occur with questionnaires or restrictive interview guides (Dale, 1996). Therefore, following steps outlined by Polkinghorne (1989) and applied to sport psychology research by Dale (1996), the researcher utilized phenomenological interviews.

While the phenomenological interview has not been utilized in sport psychology research to any extent, it offers potential for obtaining valuable information regarding the experience of athletes. It allows the person being interviewed (the athlete in this case) to be the expert as opposed to the researcher in more standardized modes of inquiry (Giorgi, 1970). This concept is similar to the interaction between a sport psychologist and an athlete in a mental training session. Hopefully, the sport psychologist avoids asking every athlete a set of "canned" questions within the mental training process (Hanson & Newburg, 1992). Every athlete must be allowed to describe the experience, and any assistance on the part of the sport psychologist is based on that experience.

**Method**

**Participants**

Participants in phenomenological research are chosen because of their experience with a particular phenomenon and for their potential to provide a rich description of this experience. Similar to purposeful sampling (Hanson & Newburg, 1992; Jackson, 1992; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), the participants are chosen with a specific purpose in mind. Phenomenological researchers do not select participants at random in order to meet statistical requirements. The point of participant selection is
to obtain richly varied description, not to achieve statistical generalization (Polkinghorne, 1989). Ideally the researcher selects a variety of participants who have different experiences of the same phenomenon.

The participants in the current study were 7 elite male decathlon participants ranging in ages from 26-30. These athletes were chosen because they were considered to be at the elite level in the decathlon, and it was assumed they would be able to describe their most memorable performance. All participants had scored at least 8,000 points in a single decathlon competition, which is the standard for excellence recognized throughout the world in decathlon competition (Zarnowski, 1989). Each of the athletes has represented the United States in international competition and several have participated and medaled in both the World Championships and the Olympic Games. These athletes were all U.S. citizens and living in the United States at the time of this study.

Procedures

Each of the participants was initially contacted in person at the USA Track and Field Championships. The researcher met with each athlete and discussed the topic of the study. All indicated they would be interested in participating and provided their home address and telephone numbers. All participants were then contacted by telephone to confirm a commitment to participate in the study and to determine a convenient time and location to conduct the interviews. The researcher traveled to each of the participant’s hometown with the exception of one who was met at a neutral site.

Bias Exploration/Bracketing Interview

Bracketing (Merleau-Ponty, 1962), or suspension of a priori assumptions to the best of the researcher’s ability is an important step in conducting reliable qualitative research. While suspending the researcher’s a priori assumptions is the goal of all qualitative methods, the bracketing interview is unique to phenomenological research and allows for in-depth examination of potential bias. To accomplish this, the researcher must first engage in self-reflection on the topic investigated (Valle, King, & Halling, 1989). This minimizes researcher bias by creating more awareness of preconceived notions regarding the topic. To assist with self-reflection, the researcher participated in a bracketing interview with a skilled qualitative researcher not involved in the study. In the process of the interview, the researcher was asked questions regarding any personal experience of a most memorable performance in sports as well as notions of elite decathletes’ experience of most memorable performances. The interview was transcribed and then analyzed to discern particular themes of researcher biases. This analysis was conducted by a research group (described in more detail in the data analysis section of this paper) comprised of individuals with extensive experience conducting qualitative research. Presuppositions about what decathletes might say about their most memorable performance were written down and referred to throughout the study to assist the researcher in being more cognizant of them.

This bracketing interview confirmed the researcher’s preconceived thought that these athletes would identify their most memorable performance as the one where they scored the most points. It was expected that these athletes would experience a sense of camaraderie with other decathletes with whom they competed. In
addition, they were expected to be very aware of the other competitors and to compare themselves to how the other competitors were doing as well as to their previous best performance or to the point table. Finally, it became clear that the researcher was familiar with the language elite decathletes use because of an ability to define terminology and explain jargon and slang the athletes used when discussing the decathlon.

It should be noted, as Merleau-Ponty (1962) emphasizes, that it is impossible to achieve total reduction or bracketing of presuppositions. The bracketing process in phenomenological research does not involve a total absence of presuppositions, but a consciousness of presuppositions. This makes the research process difficult and possibly susceptible to criticism by some proponents of the more objective scientific method. It is, however, useless to pretend presuppositions do not exist, and researchers must acknowledge this and attempt to take it into account. To further assist the researcher in being cognizant of presuppositions, two additional bracketing techniques were used in this study and are discussed in the data analysis section.

**Interview Protocol**

The initial, and perhaps most critical, stage of the phenomenological interview (Dale, 1996; Polkinghorne, 1989) is the building of rapport between researcher and participant. It is of vital importance that the person being interviewed is at ease and trusts the researcher. Being a good listener who is empathetic and shows interest in the participant also enhances the rapport between researcher and participant. To nurture this rapport, the researcher insured confidentiality and emphasized that the interviewer would not attempt to discern whether or not the participant’s experience was real (i.e., the participant would describe his experience just at it happened).

Each interview in this study began with an open-ended question asked in a way that gave direction to the interview: “Would you please take a few minutes to think about your most memorable decathlon competition and describe your experience during that competition?” From this point on, the direction of the interview was dictated by the participant. Every effort was made to avoid leading the participant, and each question followed the dialogue. To facilitate the interview, follow-up questions such as the following were asked: What was that like? Can you tell me more about...? How did you feel when that happened? When asking these clarifying questions, every effort was made to use the participant’s vocabulary. Each interview lasted between one and a half and three hours.

**Data Analysis**

Once each interview was complete, every effort was made to analyze the transcripts and interpret the data with allegiance to the experience of these athletes. Data analysis steps consistent with the phenomenological method and outlined by Dale (1996) were followed:

1. Each interview was audio-taped and transcribed verbatim.
2. A research group (Dale, 1994, 1996) composed of the researcher and six other individuals trained in qualitative research methodology was utilized throughout the data analysis process. All members had access to transcripts of the interviews (each athlete was aware that this process would take place during data analysis and signed an informed consent form agreeing to it). The re-
researcher protected the anonymity of the athletes by assigning each one an alias. Also, all persons involved in the research group process signed confidentiality forms agreeing not to jeopardize the anonymity of the athletes.

3. The entire transcript of each athlete was read several times by each member of the research group to begin to get a sense of the athlete's entire experience.

4. Once this was done, the group met to begin discussing the transcripts. One member of the group read aloud the questions asked by the researcher. In turn, the researcher read the remarks of the participant aloud to allow the group to gain a clearer picture of the nature of the data. Notations regarding emotions, changes in voice tones, or other possible situations that might not be noticed while merely reading the transcript were enclosed within the transcript (i.e., “laughing,” “said in a loud tone”; Dale, 1996).

5. As the dialogue was read aloud, the group paused and discussed the potential meanings of a phrase or group of phrases. Discussions continued until a consensus among group members was achieved regarding the meaning of the particular text in question. Significant statements that directly pertained to each experience were then utilized in the formulation of meanings as they emerged from these statements.

6. The researcher then placed these emerging meanings into clusters of themes. During this process, the hermeneutic procedure (Bleicher, 1980; Dale, 1996) was used to more accurately interpret the text. This procedure involved a continuous process of relating early portions of the text to latter portions and, conversely, relating latter portions to early parts of the text (Dale, 1996). In essence, the newly formed clusters of themes were continually related back to the whole text, and the original data was continually referred to in order to determine if any new themes might emerge. If different themes did emerge, they were considered in the ongoing analysis of the data.

7. Continuing with the hermeneutic approach, idiographic and nomothetic interpretations of the data were conducted (Dale, 1996; Eklund, Gould et al., 1993). Idiographic descriptions involved interpreting the transcript of each participant as a case study. Nomothetic descriptions involved interpreting each participant's interview in relation to all of the other interviews. It was not the researcher's intention to generalize across interviews but to determine how one experience resembled another.

8. Resulting idiographic and nomothetic interpretations were then brought back to the research group for discussion. As termed in Marshall & Rossman (1995) and similar to the additional researchers in Bianco, Malo, & Orlick (1999), the group served as “devil’s advocates” in this portion of the analysis process. They questioned procedures and results of both idiographic and nomothetic analyses of the data.

9. Throughout the data analysis process, an additional bracketing technique was utilized to assist the researcher in constructing an accurate description of each athlete's experience. This involved using the participant's language in the interpretation of the data, a methodological criteria in phenomenological research (Dale, 1996). The goal in phenomenological research is to describe the experience of the participant in “lived rather than conceptually abstract terms.” To best capture a more experience-near description, the researcher made every attempt to stay at the level of the experience of the participant and to use his words when describing the experience.
10. Finally, after all analysis of the data was complete, the researcher returned to each participant and asked whether the description of his experience provided an accurate account of the experience. According to Polkinghorne (1989), the researcher should ask each participant, “How do my descriptive results compare with your experience?” This was done for each athlete via a copy of the written case report of his experience. If anything was added or deleted by the participants, it was incorporated into the final draft of the project.

**Issues of Validity**

The validity of a study is an essential basis on which it is judged. In phenomenological research, a study lacks validity if it lacks a first-person description of the phenomenon (Giorgi, 1970). It has been proposed that the key criterion of validity in qualitative research is whether a reader who adopts the same viewpoint as the researcher can see the same things the researcher saw whether she/he agrees with it or not (Giorgi, 1970). It is the researcher’s duty to provide an appropriate description that allows someone else to see the same things.

Every effort was made in this study to describe the experience of each athlete from his perspective. By participating in a bracketing interview and using the participants’ language whenever possible, the researcher was able to provide a first-person description of this particular group of athletes. Interpreting the data in a research group where the researcher was able to hear other interpretations of the text also allowed for an accurate description of these experiences. And finally, by returning to each athlete and asking for confirmation of the description of his experience during his most memorable performance, the researcher took the ultimate step in defending the validity of the study.

In addition to the methods mentioned, the researcher also maintained a methodological log throughout the process of the study. It represented a chronology of thought processes, reasoning, and actions throughout the project. Daily entries were made in a separate computer file. This log contributed to the validity of the study by providing a way for the researcher to reflect on personal experiences of the study and was helpful in keeping the study focused on the experience of the participants.

**Results**

When asked to describe their experience during their most memorable performances, the decathletes in this study provided rich details about the distractions they encountered and the coping strategies they used to deal with those distractions. These experiences were first categorized into raw data themes. The raw data themes were then organized into higher order themes and finally into general dimensions. Raw data themes along with each of the higher order themes and general dimensions can be seen in Figure 1.

In an attempt to provide an idea of the experience of these decathletes, excerpts from the dialogue with them are provided herein. Distractions the atheletes experienced are highlighted first followed by the coping strategies they used. These higher order themes are not presented in any particular order. Additional information is provided in Tables 1 and 2 regarding the number of decathletes providing higher order themes that were organized into general dimensions.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Raw data themes</th>
<th>Higher order themes</th>
<th>General dimensions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not as fast as others</td>
<td>Lack of confidence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not as strong as others</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor training</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less talented</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felt tired</td>
<td>Fatigue</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not feel sharp</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worn down</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lethargic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kept slipping in shot put ring</td>
<td>Bad event</td>
<td>Distractions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arm felt heavy in javelin</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hit too many hurdles</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couldn’t get steps in long jump</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broken foot from the beginning</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tight hamstring during 400 meters</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sore knee after hurdles</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Side stitch during 1500 meters</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afraid of not being able to finish</td>
<td></td>
<td>Fear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of not making a mark</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of letting coach down</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afraid of failing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very cloudy and cold</td>
<td></td>
<td>Weather</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High headwinds</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swirling winds</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cold and rainy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knew a competitor was going to run fast</td>
<td></td>
<td>Other competitors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worried about another’s past performances</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counting up points of others</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being both friends and competitors</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thinking about it from the first event</td>
<td></td>
<td>The 1500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worried about the pain</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Always looming in the background</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hated event</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moving the pain to the side</td>
<td></td>
<td>Imaging/visualization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeing a good performance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling a strong follow-through</td>
<td></td>
<td>Being aware of cues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling proper leg extension</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keeping thoughts simple</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using new cues</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keyed in on one thing</td>
<td></td>
<td>Coping strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reminder to “let it fly”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focused on the scoring table</td>
<td></td>
<td>Competing only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparing to personal performances</td>
<td></td>
<td>against self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ignoring results on score board</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keeping eyes straight ahead</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior work ethic</td>
<td></td>
<td>Confidence in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>one’s training</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1 — Examples of raw data themes and resulting higher order themes and general dimensions.
Raw data themes | Higher order themes | General dimensions
---|---|---
Well prepared mentally and physically | Consistency | 
Believed in coach’s training methods |  |
Felt very strong and fast |  |
Focused on being consistent |  |
No major mistakes |  |
Not too excited or too mad |  |
Performed consistently well |  |
Good distraction | Camaraderie |  
Felt comfortable around others |  |
Joked around and stayed loose |  |
Felt good to be part of a team |  |

Figure 1—Continued. Examples of raw data themes and resulting higher order themes and general dimensions.

Table 1 Number of Decathletes Providing Higher Order Themes Falling Into Categories for Distractions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Distractions</th>
<th>No.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of confidence</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fatigue</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A bad event</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pain</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weather</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other competitors</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The 1500</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. n = 7

Table 2 Number of Decathletes Providing Higher Order Themes Falling Into Categories for Coping Strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coping strategies</th>
<th>No.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Imaging/visualizing</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being aware of keys</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competing only against self</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence in one’s training</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consistency</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camaraderie</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. n = 7
Distractions
When asked to describe their most memorable decathlon competition, each participant talked about a competition where he had the ability to overcome various problems and/or distractions to perform well. All of the decathletes in this investigation had competitions where they scored higher, yet these meets were not discussed as memorable because the distractions and problems were not as numerous and were easier to overcome. For example, the weather might have been ideal or maybe all of the other competitors had exceptional performances on those two days as well.

Lack of Confidence
The athletes who participated in this study were the best at what they do in the United States and several were among the best in the world. However, five of the seven participants indicated that they were not as fast or strong as some of the other competitors. Whether they were actually less talented than the other competitors or not, that they were even thinking about it created a distraction. Their lack of self-confidence was an obstacle these athletes perceived they had to overcome to be competitive.

One athlete alluded to his lack of self-confidence when he described his feelings of being less talented than some of the other competitors.

I guess every time I place in the top ten in the world championships I really feel like I’ve achieved something. Because personally I feel I’m not near the athlete that all these other guys are. I can’t jump as high as them, I can’t run as fast as they can, I can’t really do anything as well but I find a way to be competitive so anytime I rank in the top ten I think [boy I’m doing something]. I’m really proud of that and that I’m at that level because I never thought I’d make it. It crossed my mind a few times that day that I didn’t really belong up there with some of those guys.

Being prepared to compete was also very important to these athletes. Often, the reason they could not train and prepare like they wanted to was because they were physically injured and had to abstain from doing the physical work it takes to prepare them for competition. Consequently, their level of self-confidence was affected when they felt their training had been hampered by the injury. One athlete emphasized discouragement with his inability to train like he wanted.

So I basically took that whole period off, swam a little, lifted weights and prayed a lot for strength through pain, the whole month before the Olympic games. It was hard not to train and not to get myself completely ready, to mentally know that my body was completely ready. It was really discouraging at times and it had an effect on my confidence in that meet.

Fatigue
Just the sheer amount of time it takes to compete in a decathlon tests an athlete’s endurance both physically and mentally (Zarnowski, 1989). In most decathlon competitions, there are at least thirty minutes between events and in international competition, the interval is often much longer. This length of time between events
is due to the larger number of competitors at international competitions, and each event has several flights or heats.

Each of the athletes in this study indicated that the amount of time he spent competing over two days created an inherent barrier of fatigue. If broken down into the actual time they competed during their most memorable decathlon, it would have been less than thirty minutes. The time in between events, however, made the total time on the site more formidable. One decathlete attributed a less than expected performance in the hurdles to fatigue from the first day.

I didn’t have a good race. It wasn’t horrible, I just felt like I ran alright, but my time wasn’t all that good. It was probably fatigue from the first day. Um, I just didn’t feel really on or sharp. I was a little worn down because of all of the time we have to sit around and wait.

This time in between events was alluded to by another decathlete while discussing his frustration with the judges and their inability to be organized. Such disorganization increased the normal time between the discus and the pole vault to several hours.

We went to the pole vault and the referees were completely incompetent. They couldn’t get the bar up for practice. We were supposed to go at like 1:30 or something. We didn’t go till 3:30 because they couldn’t get the bar up. They kept putting it up, it would fall down. They’d put it up, it would fall down. So the fans started booing the meet officials. It was hilarious. After a two-hour delay because of how long they fumbled around, by the time we got there, they didn’t even have the pits ready. It was really frustrating and just made me even more tired.

A Bad Event

The decathlon is an event where a competitor can have a less than desirable performance in a particular event all the way up through the 1500 meters and still have the opportunity to make up for it at a later time during that competition. Unlike single track and field events, the decathlon is somewhat forgiving if a person does not perform up to his capability in one particular event.

It was difficult for these athletes to be exceptional in all ten events. In their description of their most memorable competitions, all seven of the athletes talked about their ability to overcome a bad event by “leaving it behind” and not letting it affect the rest of the competition. One example is when a decathlete had a bad event in the shot put.

The shot put wasn’t good and I kind of used my technique but it didn’t work and I was like, well there’s always going to be one event that’s not quite up to par. Actually, I was pissed that I didn’t do as well as I would have liked and it took me a little while to get my mind back on track. You know! I was being a knucklehead.

Another example was described as frustrating.

I did not have a good javelin. I was worried about throwing my elbow out and did not get everything into my throws. It was just frustrating to not be able to give everything I had.
Pain

Pain was a distraction discussed by all seven participants at one time or another. Some participants seemed, however, to be aware of pain more than the others. The following excerpts from the dialogue are examples of their experience of pain. The pain for one decathlete was evident throughout his description of the decathlon. This particular excerpt describes the extent of the pain and how it affected him emotionally.

The pain was getting really bad. It was almost unbearable at times and I was afraid again that I wouldn’t be able to run like I needed to. There was so much doubt, fear, and questioning all at the same time. I was questioning what I was doing out there with so much pain. I was going to make a fool of myself.

Pain was figural for another of the decathletes during the initial segments of the 400-meter run.

That’s one-fourth of the way through your quarter. And then 100 meters and you’ve got three to go and it hurts, but it’s still working properly. I was thinking, “how bad can I stand the pain?” It hurt and I knew it didn’t matter how fast I was going to run, it was still going to hurt.

Fear

Fear is a distraction four of these athletes experienced in a variety of ways. One decathlete feared having to run fast. All of the other events were contested with him knowing the better he did in those events the slower he could run in races. He was afraid, and it was a distraction for him. He elaborated on this by describing his fear of the pain he thought was inevitable.

That’s what you fear. You fear that pain and stiffness creeping in, like am I going to be able to handle it? Am I in shape enough? Am I warmed up enough? So when it happens, it isn’t always easy to deal with. I had these fears in my mind like “my legs are going to fall off” or something crazy like that.

Another time fear or worry was a distraction for these athletes was when they were afraid of fouling. In the decathlon, a competitor is allowed three fouls in the field events and three false starts in the running events before he is disqualified from a particular event. One athlete indicated that in the running events this was usually not a factor, although in the field events a fear of fouling or “no heighting” (which is where an athlete does not successfully clear an opening height in the high jump or the pole vault) could cause a great deal of anxiety and keep the athlete from performing to his potential. A description of another decathlete’s experience of the fear of “no heighting” in the high jump follows.

I just had this fear and I started real low to make sure I wouldn’t miss. I didn’t like being afraid of fouling but I was, and that was something I had to deal with. I just entered at a height that I knew I could clear, and that helped give me confidence.
Weather

One factor that all athletes must contend with when competing outside is the weather. This is something they had no control over, and yet it often had a significant impact on their preparation and performance. For six of the seven decathletes, the weather conditions were not ideal during their most memorable performance, yet they were able to perform well despite this distraction.

One athlete was competing in a foreign country and had arrived several days before the competition to adjust to the time change and weather. The weather was significantly different than what he was used to where he trained in the United States. It was difficult for him to adjust.

England is real cloudy and gloomy all the time, a lot of rain. I was depressed after about four days because we’d seen the sun and it’s hot and nice weather around here, and it was cool and cloudy and rainy and I was like depressed and I was thinking "let me out of here."

The weather continued to be a distraction for him once the competition began. He was especially aware of the wind and rain in the long jump and the pole vault.

It was rainy and headwinds and stuff. It was very difficult to get a good attempt in the long jump and the vault.

Another decathlete also had difficulty with the wind. Normally the officials coordinating a meet will allow the competitors to compete in an event with the wind at their backs. In this particular meet the winds were not consistent and the judges were not always able to run the events with the wind.

I remember there was—we had some really crazy winds. The winds were never consistent whenever you get in those stadiums that are kind of like—you never know what to expect from the wind.

Other Competitors

Throughout their descriptions of their most memorable performances, all seven of the decathletes revealed the complexity involved when comparing themselves with the other competitors. Ideally, each athlete would have liked to focus on himself and not really worry about what the other competitors were doing; in reality, each was very aware of the others involved in the competition.

If participants were aware of what the others were doing, they were not able to focus exclusively on themselves as they had indicated they would like to do. When asked to describe their experience of being aware of the other competitors, five of the participants indicated that it was just part of the competition. One explained that being aware of the others was his way of “sizing up” the competition. He felt it helped his confidence to know he was better than his competitors. Yet, he also indicated that he couldn’t control what the others were doing, and he felt it could be distracting to worry too much about them.

I mean it's not because you can control what they do, but you're always sizing up your competitors. If you compete overseas or something against an international team, there's always guys that you never know what they can do. You may see them do a great 100 meters although they may have had
four or five terrible runs coming up but you don’t know. You’ve got all that anxiety of “oh my God, look how fast he is, look how strong he is.” I guess I was very aware of the other guys that day, and I’m not sure how helpful it was.

Another situation where all seven of the athletes described awareness of the other competitors involved their sense of camaraderie with each other. Ironically, this was viewed as a distraction at times because it was often difficult for them to separate friendship and competition. This relationship was even more complex in larger “more important” meets like the World Championships and the Olympic Games.

It was good to have the other team members there, but it’s so much different, there’s so much more pressure. You have USA on your chest and you try to help each other out, but the mental picture is far greater of where you are, and you tend to really try to focus on yourself more, try not to goof around too much. At the Olympic games, there’s a chance for the other Europeans to pull a fast one on you. It’s definitely different there; it’s a different place, a different meet.

Following is a good example of the complexity of the relationship when another athlete discussed the camaraderie he felt with his fellow competitors.

It is always great to see the guys again and be together and compete with them when you see them. I think we are all good friends, and that is probably one of the most important things about my decathlons is the people I have met, places I have seen and the friends I have made. But, I just tried to get by myself and alienate myself during the actual competition that day. It wasn’t easy though. It can be distracting if you aren’t careful about separating friendship and competition. It was hard for me to do that day.

The “1500”

The 1500-meter run is the last event of the decathlon. It is 100 meters short of four complete laps around the track. Most of the athletes included in this study have the ability to run this distance in under 4 minutes and 30 seconds. Despite this, all seven athletes reported being aware of the 1500 meters early on in the competition, and much of what they reported doing in each of the other nine events was done with the 1500 meters in mind. It was described as the most difficult of the events for these athletes, because it required them to run a very challenging event at the end of the second day when much of their energy was spent.

Many if not all of the different aspects of the experience these athletes described during each of the other nine events were also present in the 1500 meter event. There were distractions and they had different methods of getting rid of the distractions and focusing on what they could control. One decathlete discussed this apprehension as early as the 400-meter race on the first day.

Going into the 400 there was fear. Plain old fear, that I needed to get my lead back because [opponent #1] had an excellent javelin and a good 1500 to finish with. I think I do a lot of things well because I fear having to run a certain time in the 1500, when it comes down to it.

Having made it through the previous nine events, another athlete was doubting whether he would be able to make it through the 1500 meters. He made a decision to run and experienced a great deal of pain.
So I decided I’d go out and if it hurts too much, I’d just stop. I’ve done a lot and I won’t run if it’s going to be a life-threatening, crippling kind of thing out there. I’ll just stop. Started the race, major pain, almost fell down because I tripped on something. The first 800 meters—a lot of pain.

At this point in the decathlon (i.e., just before the 1500 meter race) each athlete was very aware of the other competitors and how he compared with them in the standings. There was a great deal of strategy involved.

One athlete described how he knew exactly what place he was in at the start of the race, and he set his sights on trying to beat two of the people who were ahead of him in the standings. He indicated that it was important for him to pay attention to what place he was in, because that was what ultimately determined the outcome. He also indicated that he shouldn’t pay too much attention to what the other competitors were doing.

So we went to the 1500 and the situation was I was in 8th place. I had [opponent #1] ahead of me [opponent #2] ahead of me and [opponent #3] ahead of me. I thought I could catch two people. I thought I could catch [opponent #2] and maybe [opponent #3]. Being in 8th, I thought maybe I could get 6th. But, I knew I was paying too much attention to the other guys and what they were doing.

Coping Strategies
These athletes were acutely aware of the various distractions during the competitions they described as memorable. They also described in detail the various methods they used to cope with the distractions and narrow their focus or make things simpler.

Imaging/Visualization
It was important for four of these seven athletes to image themselves handling various situations throughout the competition. In earlier themes, it was apparent that one particular decathlete was in severe pain throughout his most memorable competition because of an injury he had sustained before the competition began. He provided a detailed description of how he used imagery to overcome the pain he was experiencing. He also used imagery to help “get the adrenaline flowing” in certain events that required a sudden burst of power.

So I thought of where the pain was and everything and then I said “okay, I’m going to take where that ball of pain was and I’m going to set it over on the side.” So you mentally have a picture of something that’s being taken away from you. So it helped a little bit. I also had to try to get the adrenaline flowing. In that situation I thought of life or death situations, like a little baby that’s trapped under a car, that’s going to die because the car’s leaking gasoline and a flame, and if you don’t pick that car up and throw it off this baby, the car’s going to explode and the baby’s going to die. So I tried to think of that situation, the kind of adrenaline, the kind of force I would produce in that kind of situation.

A second athlete attempted to use imagery before an event to help him see and feel how he wanted his body to perform. It was difficult for him to image himself doing certain events where he didn’t perform well.
I go through an event in my mind before I do it. Probably the events I’m not that strong at, I probably don’t do it. Sometimes I’m sure I have a negative attitude. Like that day at ... I was saying, “oh crap, here comes the long jump.” I don’t have a complete grasp of the long jump! I see myself outside my body and watch what I do. But I sort of forced myself to do it from what I see. That helped me look for the keys. The images that I had at that competition were about like they are normally, but I did a better job with the long jump and I think it helped me deal with my nerves about it.

Being Aware of Cues

All seven of the athletes in this study had various cues they tried to utilize when performing. Cues are specific aspects of performing a task that athletes might utilize to assist in achieving the desired outcome (e.g., a key phrase such as “extend” or “finish it” to ensure that they achieve the desired outcome). Having certain cues on which to focus allowed them to narrow their attention to a few relevant aspects of the event.

One athlete provided some specific examples of the cues he used in the pole vault, high jump, and the javelin.

All you have time to remember is “I’m three steps out, get your pole plant up.” It’s all anticipation. That’s all the field events are. Here comes the long jump—anticipate jump. Here comes the throw—anticipate timing. Here comes the javelin, you rotate your shoulders. Those are just simple key words that I told myself to keep things simple.

Another indicated that having specific keys on which to focus helped him avoid other possible distractions.

If you’re completely engrossed and focused on your keys and what you’re supposed to be doing, you really can’t be thinking about anything else. That helped me to stay focused at . . .

Another athlete described his awareness of different cues and feeling awkward when he changed his cues, but he realized that it is normal to feel awkward when changing bad habits into good ones. He also described what it was like to focus on just one cue, and the importance of continuing to focus on that cue during performance.

When I do things wrong, I have those cues, they’re the wrong cues. When you do something that feels awkward, it’s cause you’re changing your cues. Before . . . I was changing my approach and had new cues, and it felt awkward, but I was jumping much better. So I had to repattern my body and my mind to use those new cues. When things are off, it’s probably because you’re not doing your cues. You’re not doing what you trained to do or you’re not doing it correctly. If you do the same thing every time, and have one cue it can make you do that, boom! You focus on that one thing.

Competing Only Against Self

As demonstrated earlier, one of the distractions that was evident in the descriptions provided by these athletes was that, at times, they focused on what other
competitors were doing rather than on themselves. They indicated that their ideal situation would have been to focus on themselves and not concern themselves with others. They would like for the comparisons to involve what they have done in the past or what they know they are capable of. In some situations they were able to do this better than others. Five of the athletes discussed their attempts to focus on their own performance.

For example, while discussing comparisons with the other competitors, an athlete indicated that he tried to compare how he was doing to what he has done in the past and not compare himself with the other competitors. He knew he had to compete against himself in order to perform well each day.

I tried to compare it more with what I had done in the past than other things. If you're competing against other people, there's going to be a lot of meets where you're not going to achieve what you want to achieve. The way the decathlon is set up with the scoring table and everything is you have to compete against yourself and I tried to keep that frame of mind.

While discussing comparisons with the other competitors, another decathlete indicated that he went into his most memorable decathlon to compete against himself and what he had done before. Each time he competed in an event, he would compare it to his personal record.

I don't. I don't do that. I don't compare myself to what the other guys are doing. I step into the decathlon; I just go at it. I just do my very best, not really worrying how many points I'm gaining or losing. But as I was at the Olympic Games, I knew that when I ran (time), I knew I was losing points compared to a (time). I was losing points away from my best, my PR. At the Olympic Games I wanted to at least do my best. Mainly against myself. I really wasn't thinking a whole lot about what the other guys were doing. Every now and then I would catch myself doing that and I would remind myself to focus on what I was doing.

Confidence in Training

All seven of these decathletes indicated that being confident in their training was a critical aspect of the experience. They spent many hours training for the different events of the decathlon. Training played a vital role in whether these athletes felt confident in their ability to perform well in competitive situations. Training also played a role in how consistent they were able to perform from day to day and event to event. If they had trained well, they felt they would have a better opportunity to perform on a consistent basis. And when they began to doubt whether they would do well, they would remind themselves that they were prepared.

One athlete was confident in his ability to do well going into the meet because his training had been going well and he had been working very hard. He also provided a descriptive metaphor for training that he drew confidence from during the competition.

But leading up to it I was training, busting my butt and everything was positive. I went to the meet knowing what I could do. It's kind of like an analogy of having a lot of money in the bank—you just keep putting money in, keep training, keep training, everything is building up and looking good at a good interest rate or whatever, and then when it's time to withdraw, you have all that money.
Another athlete pointed out that he chose the World Championships as his most memorable competition because he was as prepared as he could have been. He was very confident that his training had prepared him for the meet, yet there were brief moments when he doubted himself.

I think my most memorable decathlon ever was in the ... World Championships, because I went into the competition as close to 100% prepared as possible. I had a solid 9 weeks of training and I was in very good shape for all the events. My steps were on; everything was ready to go. I just had a lot of confidence going in. After my long jump, I was beginning to doubt myself because I was a little behind where I wanted to be. But, I reminded myself that I was ready for this meet and that the training would pull me through. And it did.

**Consistency**

It has been mentioned several times throughout this paper that the decathlon is a unique track and field event because the athletes are not necessarily striving for perfection in all ten events. This would be virtually impossible. While perfection is not always attainable, each of the seven athletes in this study discussed a desire to be consistent in their performance over the two day, ten-event period. One athlete noted the relationship between confidence and consistency.

Confidence, if you have the confidence you’re going to be consistent. Being consistent is absolutely what I was trying to accomplish that day.

Another example of the importance of being consistent is illustrated in the following.

Consistency plays a major part, and I think that is why we practice at being at a consistent level and then when we get into the meet, we want to be above that consistent level. Consistency has always been good for me, and that has helped me stay in the decathlon. I am not very erratic. My events are all pretty much even. Not all decathletes are like that and they are up and down. That throws you off mentally because you are thinking what if I had done this or done that. If you can stay at a consistent level, you aren’t surprising yourself one way or the other. I was consistent that day and it was important.

**Camaraderie**

This theme of camaraderie is in contrast to the earlier discussion of it as a distraction. In its distracting form, the athletes revealed that the camaraderie they felt with the other competitors created a complex system of competitor-friend relationships.

In its facilitating form, camaraderie functioned as an outlet from the pressure of the competition. All seven of the athletes described camaraderie as a means of coping with distractions at one time or another. At times, athletes described camaraderie as a way to keep from becoming exhausted and at other times, being able to relax with friends between events. It allowed them to have a better focus on the event when it was time to compete. One athlete described camaraderie as a "positive distraction," one that helped take his mind off of the pressure of the competition.
But I sat down and really tried to talk to the guys around me to distract me from thinking too much about the next event coming up, distracting me from thinking about how poorly I did in the last event. So you need people around you to distract you and make you think of something else, to calm yourself down. So, yeah, there's definitely a kind of fraternity thing.

The following describe clear examples of how “joking around” with the other guys between events helped them be refreshed when it came time to focus on their next event.

I was joking around and having fun. It helped me relax some. At the World Championships having fun with the team and having fun in . . . which goes hand in hand with doing well.

I was like, “Oh #$%&*, you blew it here.” So I went back and joked around with the guys and tried to stay relaxed and I took my second jump and made it. Those guys really help me keep things in perspective sometimes.

So I joked around with everybody and when I saw that it was close to being time for me to go, I grabbed my headphones, put my headphones on, and just kind of started getting fired up. They helped me take my mind off the pressure.

**Discussion**

Participants in this study were chosen because of their unique competitive situation; they were experienced decathletes and highly ranked nationally and internationally. When describing their most memorable performance, the similarities between the decathletes’ descriptions were striking. It is interesting to note that when asked to describe their most memorable performance, none of these decathletes described their best performance in a decathlon (i.e., one in which they scored the most points). Rather, each of the athletes described a competition in which he had to handle many distractions in order to perform well. It was memorable because each of them persevered in a less than ideal situation.

The experiences of these athletes compare to the affective experiences Woiske (1995) discussed in a study of most memorable experiences. These affective experiences involved being able to handle difficult situations or demands and were seen as important, personal, and rare occurrences. As with the decathlete in Dale’s (1994) study, the experiences of these athletes during their memorable performances were emotionally intense and significant to them. This helped create personal memories that were easy to recall (Conway, 1990).

While the decathletes in this study did not describe their distractions as stressful, there are some similarities in the distractions they discussed and sources of stress discussed by highly competitive skaters (Gould, Jackson et al., 1993; Scanlan, et al., 1991) and Olympic wrestlers (Gould, Eklund et al., 1993). For example, decathletes and skaters described worrying about other competitors, dealing with less than ideal practice situations going into competition, feeling fatigued, and the dynamics of relationships with others. Similar to wrestlers, these decathletes discussed distractions in the form of past mistakes, injuries, and other competitors. These findings indicate that athletes at the highest level in their respective sports are dealing with a variety of distractions that can adversely affect performance.
Of special interest to the researcher was how the skaters (Gould, Jackson et al., 1993; Scanlan, et al., 1991), the wrestlers (Gould, Eklund et al., 1993) and the decathletes in this study were aware of other competitors. This is interesting because while wrestlers need to be somewhat aware of their opponents' strengths and weaknesses, opponents of skaters and decathletes have little to do with their own performance. The decathletes reported being aware of what other competitors were doing more often than they would have liked. This made it difficult for them to only compete against themselves and served as a distraction. As hard as they tried, they were unable to focus completely on themselves without being affected by what or how other competitors were doing. In fact, several of the athletes talked of being able to avoid focusing on other competitors in one sentence and then began talking about how another competitor was doing in a particular event in the next sentence.

All seven of the athletes experienced another distraction when they had a sense of connection with the other competitors. This connection was described as camaraderie among these athletes and was described as getting in the way of them being able to compete as effectively as they wanted. There were times when they felt they were too friendly and respectful of the other and found it difficult to separate friendships and competition.

While each athlete reported experiencing a number of distractions throughout the competition, at one time or another, all were aware that they had to do something to combat such distractions. Much like the skaters interviewed in Gould, Finch et al. (1993), the athletes in this study were very effective in their ability to appraise and reappraise various situations and determine that they needed to change their current thinking or behavior to better handle a particular distraction. To provide one example, on several occasions the athletes discussed their difficulties with thinking about many different aspects of a particular event (i.e., four or five different components of the shot put or long jump). They described wanting to narrow personal awareness to only a limited number of things when performing. In these most memorable performances, the athletes were able to distinguish between what was irrelevant and relevant, which enabled them to concentrate only on the relevant cues.

Finally, once these athletes were aware that they needed to react to distractions during their performances, they were able to effectively cope with them. Consistent with the coping literature in general psychology (Compas, 1987; Folkman & Lazarus, 1985) and the sport psychology literature (Gould, Eklund et al., 1993; Gould, Finch et al., 1993; Gould, Tuffey et al., 1996; Sellers, 1995; Tammen, 1996), the coping strategies utilized by these athletes were varied. Six different strategies emerged from the data in this study. These included (a) imaging/visualization, (b) being aware of cues, (c) competing only against self, (d) confidence in one's training, (e) consistency, and (f) camaraderie. These strategies consisted of both emotion-focused and problem-focused coping (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985; Gould, Finch et al., 1993). That is, strategies such as camaraderie and the confidence the decathletes had in their training were used to cope with the distractions. Problem-focused strategies consisted of imaging/visualization, being aware of cues, reminders to compete only against self, and consistency.

When comparing the coping strategies the decathletes in this study used with other athletes in the sport psychology literature, there are some interesting findings. Similar to the wrestlers in Gould, Eklund et al. (1993) and skaters in Gould, Finch et al. (1993), five decathletes in the present study utilized imaging/visualization as a coping strategy to handle the distractions. In particular, two
decathletes talked at length about the importance of being able to see and feel themselves perform well the day of their most memorable performance. One of these athletes had a major injury, and his ability to utilize visualization helped him deal with that pain and even “put it aside” when he was ready to perform. The athletes also discussed handling fear of fouling and a fear of having to run a fast 1500 meters via imaging/visualization. For example, they would image themselves using the proper form or handling the pressure of the 1500 meters.

In describing their experience, all seven of the decathletes indicated that they were aware of using various cues to handle distractions. Once these athletes knew they were being “too technical” or thinking about too many things, they were able to narrow their focus to a few specific cues. Orlick (1986) notes that competition is not the time to focus too much on technical information; it is the time to trust your body, to focus ahead, and go. The six field events that included the long jump, shot put, high jump on the first day, and the discus, pole vault, javelin on the second, were described by these participants as being very technical events. For this reason, they reported having to constantly struggle with narrowing their focus to a few specific cues. They also indicated that in field events of the decathlon, it is important that an athlete maintain good technique to perform well. This can be accomplished, however, without being “too technical” and “connecting the dots” of the various parts of the skill.

Two coping strategies were used for specific distractions in two instances. Five of the decathletes discussed the importance of competing against themselves rather than other competitors. When they began to compare themselves to the other competitors, they would remind themselves to focus on their own performance. Seven of the decathletes reported using reminders of how well they had trained when they began to doubt their preparation or ability to do well in a particular event. As with Gould, Eklund et al. (1993), these findings reveal links between a particular distraction and a coping strategy used to handle that distraction.

When discussing the desire to be consistent, all seven decathletes indicated that it was essential for success in their most memorable decathlon. They continually described the decathlon as a unique track and field competition, because they did not have to win each event in order to win the overall competition. One athlete described it as being “steady Eddie.” He just wanted to perform consistently well without major mistakes. Granted, as mentioned earlier, all of the athletes had bad events. But they were not catastrophic, and that was significant in making this a memorable performance.

The last coping strategy the athletes in this study described was camaraderie. Camaraderie was experienced as a “two-edged sword” by these athletes. At times it was a distraction because it was difficult for them to separate friendship from competition, whereas at other times, it was a positive experience because it allowed them to relax together between events and even ask each other for advice regarding various aspects of their performance.

Camaraderie as described by these athletes mirrors the experience of the decathlete in Dale (1994) and correlates nicely with what Folkman and Lazarus (1985) call social support. Folkman and Lazarus indicate that a person’s social support, “can be viewed as a coping resource to be cultivated, maintained, used or not used in many different ways, and can provide information and advice” (p. 161). Other researchers in the sport psychology literature have found social support to be an important coping strategy as well (Crocker and Graham, 1995; Gould, Finch et al., 1993).
Camaraderie with other competitors was described as a "refuge" from the pressure of the competition. Several decathletes indicated that it would have been mentally exhausting for them to concentrate on the decathlon from the time it began until it was over at the end of the second day. Even though it was difficult, these athletes were able to maintain a balance between various aspects of camaraderie; that is, they were able to relax and enjoy the company of their competitors while still being able to focus attention on an event when it came time to compete.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the general thematic structure of this set of dialogues revealed similarities among athletes. Their descriptions were not ones where everything went as planned nor were they competitions in which the athlete was able to accumulate his best score. The competitions discussed as memorable were filled with significant distractions. Yet, these athletes were able to perform in what they described as memorable because they were aware of the distractions that occurred and had specific strategies to overcome them and focus on the task at hand.

Similar to the athletes Orlick (1990) described when he discussed the elements of excellence, the athletes in this study were well practiced in overcoming distractions. They had the ability to focus on each task when it was time, were able to image themselves performing in a positive manner, and had put in the quality training needed to give themselves confidence. The competition these athletes described was a special time in their careers, and they were triumphant in their own minds despite the fact that it was not their best-ever performance.

It is suggested that researchers in the field of sport psychology might consider two matters in future research. First, they might utilize alternative interview methodologies such as the phenomenological interview as a means of learning more about the experience of athletes. Such qualitative methodologies offer the possibility of gaining real insight into the experience of those being interviewed. Furthermore, this allows researchers to disseminate useful information to sport psychologists, coaches, and athletes. As Hanson and Newburg (1992, p. 48) ask, "What better way for athletes or coaches to learn about success in their respective sport than through detailed, descriptive accounts of the lives of others who were in similar situations and have reached a high level of performance?"

Second, researchers might consider investigating most memorable performances of athletes competing in a variety of sports. The current study investigated the experience of a relatively small group of elite decathletes. It would be interesting to learn if athletes from different sports note similar experiences of successfully overcoming distractions or other barriers when describing their most memorable performances. The information we learn from descriptions of most memorable performances may also help to enhance performance because they provide insight into the experience of performing well in difficult situations. And last, but perhaps most notably, these performances should be investigated because they are of such great personal importance to the athlete.

**References**


*Manuscript submitted: September 1, 1998*

*Revision received: September 15, 1999*