Gold Medal Roundtable: Athlete Presentations, Audience Questions, and Summary Statements

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Editor's Note: A roundtable with brief presentations by four Olympic gold medal champions was held during the last hour of the symposium. After brief introductions, the athletes addressed their personal approach to athletic training, diet and nutrition and examined their personal preparation for maximum athletic performance. At the conclusion of the athletes' presentations, questions were invited from the audience.

BILLY MILLS

Introduction

Mr. Billy Mills made the Olympic team in two events in 1964: the 10,000-meter race and the marathon. Prior to the 1964 games, no American had ever won the gold medal in the 10,000 meters. His victory is considered one of the greatest upsets in Olympic history, and some have viewed his performance at Tokyo as the greatest 10,000-meter achievement of modern times. In achieving Olympic victory, Mills set an American and Olympic record of 28:24.4, a mark all the more extraordinary because he ran 46 seconds faster than his previous personal best. In 1993 his alma mater, the University of Kansas, awarded Mr. Mills their Citation for Distinguished Service, the highest award given to their alumni. In 1993 he also received the prestigious William G. Anderson Award from the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance. In 1995 Mr. Mills received the Jackie Robinson Humanitarian Award from the United States Sports Academy. Mr. Billy Mills, Olympic champion, is a proponent of youth fitness and an advisor to the President’s Council on Physical Fitness and Sports. He is spokesperson for Running Strong for American Indian Youth, a Christian relief services program.

Presentation

I would like to thank you for the opportunity to be here today and allowing me to share my perspectives on athletic training, issues relating to food and diet as part of my approach to athletic training, and something of my Olympic experience.

I am pleased to share the platform with other distinguished multi-gold medalists. First, I would like to put my gold medal in perspective, and I can do this quickly with a basic story. In 1972, three weeks before the winter Olympic Games, our eldest daughter was taking figure skating lessons and had her own dream of winning an Olympic gold medal. She asked me, “Daddy, may I take your gold medal to school for show and tell?” I agreed, then spoke to her about what she might wish to say when she shared with her teacher and classmates something of the meaning of an Olympic gold medal such as her father had won in the 10,000 meters. She told me, however, that she already knew what she was going to say. I learned later that she went to class and told her teacher and classmates, “I have with me a gold medal from the Olympic Games that only the very, very best in the world win, and this is the kind of gold medal that Peggy Fleming won in figure skating.”

Years ago, my father shared with me a very simple secret that became the essence of my approach to training. The secret was simple: find your desires, know yourself, and succeed. I learned from my father that with desire comes self-motivation, with self-motivation comes work, and with hard work comes success. He showed me the paper on which the words had been written: find your desires, know yourself, and succeed. It was signed at the bottom—anonymous. The paper—my father’s secret—empowered me so much that through the early years of my youth, I thought “Anonymous” was the person who wrote it. In fact, I decided early in life that I truly was going to name my first child Anonymous.

My father had shared the secret words: here is where you will find your desires. He encouraged me to look into the world of the arts, to creative writing, reading, dance and music. He told me, “I hope you will try sports.” I was 12 years old when my Dad gave me his secret words; I was also 12 years old when my Dad died. The simplicity of his words, however, became the essence of my training. I realized that by following a posi-
tive desire, something happens inside of you, that incredible passion is unleashed, and it is passion that is selfmotivating. It is passion that allows you to accept defeat—not failure—because passion allows the pursuit of excellence even when you experience defeat. Running ultimately became my passion; the Olympic games became my dream.

My training consisted of a 10-day cycle, year around. Although intensity varied, the cycle never changed from one 10-day period to the next. I incorporated seven components into my training: 1) endurance activities, 2) speed endurance work, 3) sheer speed training, 4) strength training, 5) recovery and rest, 6) focus, and 7) visualization. From the day that I entered the University of Kansas as a freshman and opened my first physiology book, I learned that the subconscious mind does not differentiate between reality and imagination. The Olympics were my dream, so I began to focus and visualize: I imagined winning a gold medal and participating in the Games. In this manner of training I started to empower myself.

Other issues relating to food and diet became a challenging part of my training and performance. First, I have many food allergies. Second, when I ran my blood sugar levels would rise drastically, then drop—not going below normal—but the consequences of variable blood sugar levels on my athletic performance were dramatic. While at the University of Kansas, during the later stages of a race, I often would tire. The onset would be very rapid and produce drastic effects. I learned only later about the physiological causes of this fatigue. At the time, however, I was told by my trainers and coaches that my inconsistency was the result of low self-esteem. They told me you have low self-esteem because “you are orphaned,” “you were born into poverty,” because “you are a minority.”

I graduated from college and received a commission in the Marine Corps. Once in the Corps, during a physical examination, a Naval doctor gave me a glucose tolerance test. On the basis of my test results, this doctor suggested that I follow a diet higher in protein than my regular dietary pattern. I followed his advice and started taking 75–100 grams of powdered protein supplement daily. At that time I weighed approximately 150 pounds. I believed at the time that I could not get enough protein from my regular diet and that I had to supplement it with powdered protein.

At the time I was taking this high protein supplement, I also followed a very simple, traditional, Lakota (Sioux) four-day dietary cycle. Elders on the reservation had told me: “Billy, why don’t you do this; this is what we did in the old days. We would eat something from the air, the next day something from the water, the next day something on the ground, and the fourth day something from inside the ground.” The Lakota Elders also suggested that I include a color plan with my food pattern that represented earth colors: brown, green, red and yellow foods, they said, would provide me with the best diet. Their advice, of course, meant that I consumed a wide variety of fruits, vegetables, beans, nuts and seeds.

After following this dietary plan, I observed that my physical and mental toughness increased. My ability to focus on athletic goals—the Olympics—became unbelievable, and my spiritual strength and spiritual empowerment increased many times over and provided me with mental toughness. The secret passed to me from my Dad began to take form and live; my passion truly began to breath. My Olympic dream began to have a heartbeat.

I made the Olympic team.

The gun goes off; the race begins; lap after lap, the race is underway.

We are clustered together and pass the three-mile mark in 13:28. I was within one second of my fastest three-mile time ever and was faced with two immediate problems: I was in fourth place, and the race was 6.2 miles long.

I thought, “I’m going to quit.”

But rather than quit while in fourth place, I decided to take the lead, to go one more lap and then quit having held the lead. I took the lead—did not quit—and went one more lap.

When you run a distance race and want to quit, there is a technique runners know. You look into the infield of the track where nobody recognizes you. Then it is easy to quit because no one is there to encourage you.

I looked into the infield. All of the officials were local Japanese from Tokyo. I was a Sioux Indian from South Dakota, and nobody in the infield knew me from Adam. It would be easy to quit.

But when you are running a difficult, hard, distance race you also look into the stadium.

I looked into the stadium. I saw and heard 85,000 people screaming, and their sound became my focus.

I had another focus as well.

My wife, she’s there in the stadium and she’s crying.

She is crying not because she thought I was going to quit, but because she was the only person in the stadium who knew the little secret that my Dad had given me when I was 12, and she knew that I was following his words.

My wife became my support system; she empowered me to continue.

I knew that she, too, followed my Dad’s secret, and that I was her support system and empowered her as well. And it would be this way that day in Tokyo, and throughout the 35 years of our marriage that, together, we would follow my Dad’s secret doing so, collectively, empowering one another.

But on that day in Tokyo there were other reasons why she was crying that helped my focus.

If I were to win, my effort would become the first world record in my family (except for my adopted sister who bore 25 children including nine sets of twins). My wife was crying because she remembered.

She remembered that I could not join a fraternity while at college.

She remembered that they had said to me, “Billy, you are Indian and there is nothing you can contribute.”

She remembered that I couldn’t be roommates with two of my dear friends because I was Native-American, one was African-American, and my other friend was White European-American. “It wouldn’t be appropriate,” I was told.

She remembered that seven times I made All-American in cross country or track while at college, and on three occasions when photographs were taken of the All-American team, on three occasions—I was asked to step out of the photo.

Because of my Dad’s secret, because of my focus, because of visualization, because of changes in my diet, because of my wife’s support, I could not quit and I continued.

One lap to go.

I move into first place along Ron Clarke’s shoulder. He accidentally pushes me into the third lane. Ron still says today it was an accidental shove.

I stumble and nearly fall. Then I close back and run just off his shoulder. Then Clarke accelerates, pulls ahead, and there is a break between us. I wanted to quit, but I didn’t.

I didn’t quit the race, but I did begin to think about accepting third place.

But because of the empowerment training concept, the visualization, the change in diet, because of the secret words my Dad passed to me when I was 12, I couldn’t quit, so I continued.

We are going down the back stretch of the last lap. I am...
close to Clarke and running just off his shoulder. One more try . . . . Then my thoughts change from one more try to . . . I can win, I can win!

We come off the final curve. A tingling sensation creeps down my forearm. My vision comes and goes. My legs wobble to the throbbing beat of my heart. My thoughts change again, I focus and visualize . . . I won, I won, I won.

But I’m still in third place.

I remember screaming, then the tape breaking across my chest.

A Japanese man grabs me and starts to shout over and over again: “Who are you? Who are you? Who are you?”

I am desperate and think . . . “Oh my God, I miscounted the last drive. I have one more lap to go!”

The Japanese man grabs me and he shouts: “Finished. Finished. Olympic champion.”

At that moment, I felt the presence of my Dad. Although he was dead for fourteen years, I felt that my Dad knew that I had become an athlete, that his words had become mine: my passion had become my dream—my dream had become my reality.

BRUCE BAUMGARTNER

Introduction

Mr. Bruce Baumgartner is regarded by many as the greatest heavyweight wrestler in American history and possibly in the history of the Olympic Games. He has won every major national and world wrestling championship, including two Olympic gold medals, one silver Olympic medal, and three World Championship medals. Included in this list is the 1995 World Championship title, won in summer in 1995. Mr. Baumgartner was an Olympic alternate in 1980, and in 1982 he began to utilize the Olympic training center in Colorado Springs. He followed his victory with a silver medal at Seoul in 1988. Four years later in Barcelona he won gold for the second time and became the first American wrestler to medal in three consecutive Olympic Games. Mr. Baumgartner also gives much back to his sport. He has coached wrestling at Edinboro University in Pennsylvania for 12 years; the past six years he has served as head coach of the Fighting Scots. His sporting career, past and present, is astonishing: National Freestyle Champion of the United States for the past 15 consecutive years; Pan-American Games Champion (5 years); Goodwill Games Champion in 1986; two Olympic Gold and one Silver medal; World Champion in 1986, 1993 and 1995; Sullivan Award finalist for four years. In 1996 he won the Sullivan Award, given in recognition to the top amateur athlete in the United States. Bruce Baumgartner, Olympic champion, not only teaches the art and craft of wrestling but believes in the importance of service to his campus and community. (Shortly after delivering his presentation at the American Institute of Nutrition symposium on Nutrition and Physical Performance, Bruce Baumgartner made the 1996 United States Olympic team. In July 1996, at the Atlanta Games, he won a Bronze Medal in heavyweight wrestling. By winning a thirteenth medal in Olympic and world competition, Mr. Baumgartner became the greatest wrestler of all time, a record unlikely to be exceeded.)

Presentation

It is a pleasure to be here this morning to speak to you about my wrestling career and to address nutritional changes that I have seen in wrestling through the years. Wrestling is a unique sport. We wrestlers have more constraints on us than participants in other Olympic sports, especially the weight control factor. Being a heavyweight wrestler, I am frequently asked how I can continue to compete so long. Others ask how to eat properly, and does diet lead to success?

I started wrestling in 1974. At that time, to my knowledge, there was very little specific sport research on wrestling. Coaches still advised that after you made your weight, you should eat protein, steak and eggs in the morning or gave other advice that, according to today’s research, is not sound.

I was an Olympic alternate in 1980, and in 1982 I began to utilize the Olympic training center in Colorado Springs. When I was there, staff members started to teach me something about nutrition education and what I was supposed to eat as an athlete. But even at that time I remember that I did not receive much dietary or nutritional information that I could utilize. I was told to eat more carbohydrates, cut back on protein intake, don’t eat red meat, and eat more chicken and fish.

Nutrition research today in 1996 may or may not support what I have been doing for the last several years. During the 1980s I received most of my nutritional information. Wrestling at that time was not a high publicity or high impact sport, so we wrestlers did not receive information or have access to research studies as did participants in other sports. Since the 1980s, however, our training and our nutritional needs have received more attention, with more scientific studies being conducted.

Throughout the years, especially since 1984 when I won my first gold medal, I have listened to nutrition presentations from different companies who pitched their products, trying to get an Olympic champion. As a result I have heard about a vast variety of different products, ergogenic aids and supplements. My pattern, however, is rather basic and I do not use a wide variety of different products. I use only what I feel works for me and has helped my athletic success.

I do not have a weight problem since I wrestle in the heavyweight classification (>130 kg). Only recently have the American Olympic Committee and other organizations begun to assist wrestlers with providing solid research regarding the issue of weight control. At one time, it was accepted that you simply went into a sauna to lose 5–12, perhaps 18 pounds of water weight, and you did not worry about dieting to reduce body fat. Research today has assisted wrestlers by identifying the ideal body fat percentage at approximately 6%. The technique now is to dehydrate the last 4–5 pounds, not more than 5% of body weight, to safely make one’s weight classification.

When the wrestler steps on the scale, you are really making that weight only for a few minutes. The technique is to dehydrate the night before the weigh-in, then rehydrate with liquids, usually water or a sports beverage, after making the weight. For example, some wrestlers use commercial products such as All Sport® Gatorade® or Powerade®, then go out and eat a good, high quality meal. Most wrestlers I know, however, use dietary supplements in the hope of getting a competitive edge.

My belief is primarily in my training. Currently, I train using a three-day cycle. I will have three hard days, when I practice twice a day. On each of these three days I will include in my training weight lifting and cardiovascular activities, which for me means bicycling or Air Dyne®, rowing, running and stepping machines. In the afternoon I do several varieties of combative wrestling for 30 to 40 minutes.

Regarding my diet, I believe it is very important to eat right, and that is the major focus I project when I coach my athletes at Edinboro University. I believe in the classic food group system, and I eat a wide variety of foods from the different four food groups. Although I take dietary supplements, I
believe it is best to obtain nutrients from the food that I eat. At different times during my athletic career, I didn’t eat high quantities of red meat because I believed at that such foods were bad for me. Now I read reports and know that red meat is not bad for me. In fact, I do enjoy quite a bit of beef and enjoy red meat.

I do take multivitamins. In stressful situations such as competitive wrestling or even during normal workout practices, I dehydrate significantly and can lose up to 13 pounds in two hours. I believe that it is important to replenish not only my fluids and electrolytes but vitamins as well. I take a multivitamin in the morning and also in the evening. I also take what I call a “balanced nutrition product” before practice. I believe it is extremely important to rehydrate after practice with a liquid that has sugar, whether All Sport®, Gatorade® or Powerade®, I do so during my warm-down. The American Olympic Committee has shared research with wrestlers on how to remove lactic acid buildup, so the next workout can be more efficient in the training cycle.

If you talk to most competitive athletes, you discover what is best for your body and what works for you. There is no specific key that fits each athlete in the country, no one specific regimen or specific diet that would work for all. Before retiring I take a balanced nutrition supplement, because I believe it is very difficult to eat enough and to eat properly to obtain all nutrients given the difficulty of working out twice a day. My philosophy is that when I go to sleep, my body is rebuilding and recovering and that the supplement will help nourish me and provide me with the energy and nutrients needed to rebuild.

In conclusion, I have seen my sport change greatly through the years. I would like to encourage you scientists to conduct research on a broad array of sports, not just the more popular events. American wrestling is one of the most successful Olympic sporting events for money spent, versus medals received, for the number of athletes competing. I encourage you to continue your research, and I guarantee that most athletes I know do read the scientific research studies and extract from these reports what is appropriate for their specific sports. Your research will help the Olympic movement, and our young athletes will be better trained and healthier, and will become better and more proficient with their talent.

NICOLE HAISLETT

Introduction

Ms. Nicole Haislett has excelled in swimming at both national and international levels. At the 1992 Summer Olympics in Barcelona, she won three gold medals. In Barcelona she was a member of the world record-setting 4 × 100 meter freestyle relay team, and she also won gold in the 200-meter freestyle and the 4 × 100 meter medley relay. In addition to her Olympic victories, Ms. Haislett is the American and NCAA record-holder in the 200-yard and 200-meter events. She is a thirteen-time United States National Champion, five-time United States Open Champion, and six-time NCAA Champion. At the World Swimming Championships in 1991, Ms. Haislett took the gold in the 100-meter freestyle and two relays. She had a spectacular showing at the Goodwill Games in 1990, where she won the 100-meter freestyle. In 1994 Ms. Haislett swam for the University of Florida at the 1994 NCAA Nationals, where she won both the 200-yard and the 500-yard events. These victories made her only the third woman ever to win the same events four times at the NCAA’s. Nicole Haislett, Olympic champion, retired from competitive swimming in July 1995. Currently, she is assistant swimming coach at the University of Florida, Gainsville.

Presentation

Swimming is a unique sport, much different from track and field and wrestling, even different between male and female swimmers. One often sees men swimmers eating as much as they can in their attempt to keep weight on; in women one often sees eating disorders and other food-related problems. Why should there be this difference? First, women are running around in skimpy bathing suits that barely cover their bodies. Second, as women age and enter college, women struggle with weight-related issues more than do men. So there is a big difference in the approach to eating, training and body perception between men and women.

Nutrition was not a big part of my swimming career. I began competitive swimming at the age of five. When I was five, I went to swim meets, dipped my fingers into Jello® and ate and did all the things you learn later never to do. We didn’t know any better; I didn’t know any better. No one told us about nutrition when we were little. I remember that when I was about nine or ten years old, someone told me that I should eat a Snickers® bar before I swam, because it would give me a great boost of energy. My mother prepared what I know now to have been well-balanced meals. It wasn’t as if I ate junk food all the time. Food was never an issue. I was a skinny girl, didn’t have much muscle, and didn’t think much about food.

Then I became older and entered high school. Towards the end of my high school swimming career, during my junior and senior year, I noticed that I had to reduce my food intake and make food-related choices, especially towards the end of the swimming season. In my sport there are, basically, the summer season, fall and spring seasons, and two big swim meets yearly. You must work very hard to prepare during the competitive season and for the meets, and then you must taper your activities. What we swimmers call tapering is to cut back on one’s energy intensity and rest the body from the previous hard work. During the taper before the big swim meets, one obviously burns fewer calories than before that point, so one has to watch what one eats even more. At such times I would cut back on desserts and try to bring my weight down a bit so I could perform better. Swimming is a sport in which one cannot rely on distance (i.e., actual number of laps completed in the pool) to loose weight. Most people in the general public believe that swimmers do not have any problem with weight or nutrition, because swimmers train hard. It is true that competitive swimmers will train for up to six hours per day, at least four hours “churning” water during the hardest part of the season. People would expect, therefore, that swimmers burn lots of calories, but there is an interesting issue: elite, competitive swimmers become so serious about swimming that their bodies do not respond easily to weight reduction. When I had to lose weight, I had to swim and train even more hours. I regularly spent up to an hour lifting weights after practice. I regularly climbed on a Stair Master®, went running, or did other energy-expending activities.

Now that I am older and have retired from competitive swimming, and now that I am coaching at the University of Florida, I will be working with female members of the team to develop a weight management program. I know that, in contrast with other sports, a considerable amount of nutrition-related research has been conducted on swimmers. Some of this work has been conducted at the International Center for Aquatic Research, which is located at the United States Olympic training center in Colorado Springs. Much of their...
effort has been directed towards understanding the nutritional needs of swimmers, and the scientists there analyze Olympic athletes and U.S. national team members that come to train at Colorado Springs.

This approach to understanding nutrition in swimmers is in sharp contrast to how things were during my early competitive years. I began attending swimming camps when I was 13 or 14, and I received a considerable amount of information from my coaches. But in reality, however, I never really absorbed it or paid attention. Part of the problem was that swimmers spend much of their time worrying about many things. Swimming is such a mental sport that I did not want to bother with food, diet and nutrition, and I believed at the time that nutrition was just one more thing I had to do and worry about. So as an adolescent swimmer, I just put nutrition on the wayside.

So what did I eat as a competitive swimmer? I tried to choose low calorie foods, I did not consume a lot of red meat, and I ate mainly chicken and fish, but in reality, I didn’t concentrate on my diet. In the back of my mind I knew that there were probably systems or diets that I could follow or dietary supplements that I could take that would help my performance. But I just did not worry about these things.

During my collegiate competition years, I trained six days a week, doing double workouts each day. Sunday was my only day for actual recovery. When I competed in college, my coach’s idea of recovery was Wednesday afternoons, when I had long aerobic workout to remove the “kinks.” His idea of a long, aerobic swim was a 5000-yard timed effort; this was not easy. In fact it was hard and awful. So I really had no actual recovery in swimming except for Sunday. As a result my teammates and I were always “broken down,” always experiencing muscle fatigue, soreness and tightness in the legs, and other complaints.

I then began having a problem. I seemed always dehydrated and thirsty, and I increased my water intake dramatically. In May 1991, my coach took me aside and told me that I needed to lose weight. I asked him how. He told me the basics: cut back on fats, increase intake of this and that. He asked me to stop using soft drinks. Since that time I stopped and have not had a soft drink since. At the same time, he told me to increase my water intake. From that day I drank so much water that I became known around campus as the “woman with the water bottle.” It was as if the water bottle had become my best friend.

Students would joke about it all the time: “What really is in there? Is that vodka or some sort of clear liquor?” My coach told me that I could not drink enough water. So this became an important part of my regimen and helped me to lose weight.

Then I participated in the Olympic trials in 1992, and I remember that members of the women’s team at Stanford University followed a program developed by a doctor Sears, in New York City, who lived on the lower East Side, to talk about nutrition. I believe in nutrition and I truly treat my body as a temple. I appreciate what you are doing here at this symposium.

Introduction

Mr. Alfred Oerter is considered by many to be the greatest modern Olympic competitor. He is the only athlete to win four gold medals at four successive Olympics. Mr. Oerter began throwing the discus in 1951 at the age of fifteen; five years later he made the Olympic team and, on his first throw in the Melbourne games, broke the Olympic record. Mr. Oerter also won gold at Rome, Tokyo and Mexico City. He “retired” from track and field after the 1968 Olympic Games. In 1976 he returned to training and between the ages of 43 and 47 he recorded his lifetime personal best results. In May 1980, Mr. Oerter produced his best official throw in competition, 227 feet, 11 inches, a distance more than 15 feet beyond his winning effort at Mexico City. This remarkable achievement, his effort and the distance could have produced a fifth Olympic gold medal in 1980 at the Moscow Games. The world will never know, however, because of the political decision of the United States to boycott the Moscow Olympics. Throughout his athletic and business careers, Mr. Oerter has maintained the positive view that “nothing can be accomplished—unless the attempt is made.” Alfred Oerter, Olympic champion, epitomizes what it takes to be at one’s best over long periods of time. His personal motivation and drive are contagious to those around him, and stem from his belief in setting goals, in establishing a long-term vision, in overcoming barriers that impede progress, and in the importance and value of a healthy work ethic.

Presentation

You take a great risk in inviting somebody that was born in New York City, who lived on the lower East Side, to talk about nutrition. I believe in nutrition and I truly treat my body as a temple. I appreciate what you are doing here at this symposium.

We in the United States, perhaps because we live in the United States, think that we have the best training and coaching systems, that we have the best facilities for training athletes, that we have the kinds of information systems that are necessary to disseminate all that is being discussed today and during these next few days. Quite frankly, we do not.

I recently concluded several training sessions for track and field coaches here in the United States. I asked all of the attendees, perhaps five hundred people, coaches in track and field, if they received any nutrition-related information on individual track and field events within the sport: anything to do with nutrition, any kind of information that the local science teacher—out there—could use and have available to
help students in their class, or their school, to improve or accelerate their track and field program. One person raised her hand. She had attended a track and field seminar organized by our national governing body, the American Athletic Union (AAU).

This is not acceptable.

When I competed, what seems to be about a bazillion years ago, track and field was one of the five or six top sports in the United States and was always the top sport profiled at the Olympic Games. I read a sport article some time ago, a review, that said track and field is now 27th or 28th or whatever.

Why?

The reason for this is that we—we here today, athletes and scientists—are just not getting the information to the high school science teachers that are trying to help student athletes. I don’t know how you in the audience extend information, but somehow you have to assist American track and field and our national governing body. Nutrition is the topic today: how will the information that is being talked about here today in this symposium and at this meeting of scientists get—out there?

I started all this a very long time ago. I was very fortunate to have an eccentric uncle. This man, by most standards, was truly eccentric. When I was 15 years of age he introduced me to things such as brewer’s yeast, desiccated liver and rose hips. I used some of these so-called “natural foods” to supplement whatever diet I had at the time. I have maintained this practice for 45 years. I cannot say absolutely if these “natural foods” had any benefit to me, but I believe that they helped me get through the stress I encountered during 45 years of athletic competition. I grew up without a sense of having to manage certain amounts of protein, carbohydrates or fats. Whatever was in particular favor at that moment, what was described in a continual effort, a four-year effort between Olympiads, and that when we athletes approached our sport by ourselves, this was a problem because I started lifting weights in the period from 1956, when virtually no information existed and would throw and throw. After an hour, perhaps an hour or two.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS AND ROUNDTABLE SYNTHESIS

It is my wish that nutritionists, physiologists, physicians and athletic trainers will encourage athletes to think for themselves. I would go down into the basements of the old tenements in New York, and we would start playing with all that stuff. Our sport was lifting, and it was a strength thing. Lifting was not a complement to another sport. You lifted and you enjoyed it just for what it was.

Then there was another physician who advisable members of the American Olympic team in 1964. He advised me not to compete in the games because I had severely torn my rib cage cartilage. I had been participating in a training session adjacent to the Olympic stadium, and I was throwing with great intensity. When you are in the five- or six-day period before your Olympic competition, you are so well focused that there is nothing on earth that could convince you that you were less than capable, and even though I tore the cartilage off the rib cage, I was still going to try to get out onto the field and compete.

His advice was this: “Go sit in the stands, kid, because you already have won two gold medals.” No one else on earth would have been affected except me. It was not heroics that led me to disregard this advice. It was not working through pain. It was a sense of not cheating yourself. I had worked for four years to be in the Olympics in Tokyo. So by not believing this physician, I participated: I walked onto the field and knew at the time that the best thing for me was for the team physician to provide me with a full box of ammonia capsules so I could break one every time the freight train of pain came through my head. Break another capsule, and another, and another. I used the entire box. But I went through the entire competition not cheating myself, and I walked away with a third gold medal.

What I am really saying is this: there is a certain common sense that must be obeyed. In athletic competition you cannot look at all of the teaching and all of the learning only—it comes down to the athlete. I have thrown the discuss 470,000 times in my life, give or take a few thousand. Not one throw has ever been perfect, and probably 400,000 of those throws were in a meditative state. I would begin a training session and would throw and throw. After an hour, perhaps an hour and a half, there is fatigue and pain. It enters your mind and you wake up in this intense focus environment, only to realize that there may be ten or fifteen people gathered about the area where you have been throwing, and you never realized that they had approached and were watching.

I grew up with Hungarian and Polish foods. To me, these are “soul foods,” and I certainly will not stop eating them, right? I eat these for a basic reason: this is the diet that I grew up with, the diet I started training on, and I could never see altering my diet prior to going to the Olympic trials or changing prior to actual competition in the Olympic games. I do not believe in altering a regimen that brought me to the games. Why change? Are there not all kinds of inherent danger in coming prior to actual competition in the Olympic games. I do an intensely personal activity. Trainers and physicians, nutritionists and physiologists have to teach their athletes to be—true eccentrics. When I was 15 years of age he introduced me to things such as brewer’s yeast, desiccated liver and rose hips. I used some of these so-called “natural foods” to supplement whatever diet I had at the time. I have maintained this practice for 45 years. I cannot say absolutely if these “natural foods” had any benefit to me, but I believe that they helped me get through the stress I encountered during 45 years of athletic competition. I grew up without a sense of having to manage certain amounts of protein, carbohydrates or fats. Whatever was in particular favor at that moment, what was described in a continual effort, a four-year effort between Olympiads, and that when we athletes approached our sport by ourselves, this was a problem because I started lifting weights in the period from 1956, when virtually no information existed and would throw and throw. After an hour, perhaps an hour or two.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS AND ROUNDTABLE SYNTHESIS

It is my wish that nutritionists, physiologists, physicians and athletic trainers will encourage athletes to think for themselves.

I would go down into the basements of the old tenements in New York, and we would start playing with all that stuff. Our sport was lifting, and it was a strength thing. Lifting was not a complement to another sport. You lifted and you enjoyed it just for what it was.

Then there was another physician who advisable members of the American Olympic team in 1964. He advised me not to compete in the games because I had severely torn my rib cage cartilage. I had been participating in a training session adjacent to the Olympic stadium, and I was throwing with great intensity. When you are in the five- or six-day period before your Olympic competition, you are so well focused that there is nothing on earth that could convince you that you were less than capable, and even though I tore the cartilage off the rib cage, I was still going to try to get out onto the field and compete.

His advice was this: “Go sit in the stands, kid, because you already have won two gold medals.” No one else on earth would have been affected except me. It was not heroics that led me to disregard this advice. It was not working through pain. It was a sense of not cheating yourself. I had worked for four years to be in the Olympics in Tokyo. So by not believing this physician, I participated: I walked onto the field and knew at the time that the best thing for me was for the team physician to provide me with a full box of ammonia capsules so I could break one every time the freight train of pain came through my head. Break another capsule, and another, and another. I used the entire box. But I went through the entire competition not cheating myself, and I walked away with a third gold medal.

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I grew up with Hungarian and Polish foods. To me, these are “soul foods,” and I certainly will not stop eating them, right? I eat these for a basic reason: this is the diet that I grew up with, the diet I started training on, and I could never see altering my diet prior to going to the Olympic trials or changing prior to actual competition in the Olympic games. I do not believe in altering a regimen that brought me to the games. Why change? Are there not all kinds of inherent danger in doing so? I chose to continue eating what brought me to the games. And there is another reason for not changing: diet is a continual effort, a four-year effort between Olympiads, and changing is not something one logically would do the last two weeks prior to an Olympic final.

Throughout my life I have not believed very many people.

If I believed one of my coaches in 1956 when I made my first Olympic team, I probably would not have even medaled at Melbourne. I received a letter from this coach that said . . . look . . . I don’t want you discus throwers, you big, heavy guys, going anywhere near a weight room. I don’t want you lifting weights. This was 1956. What the coach was saying was that he didn’t want us to any way diminish the capability that brought us to the games.

This presented a problem because I started lifting weights when I was eight years old in New York City. The weights were interesting and exciting. All the old-line immigrant families brought weights over with them, from the Old Country, things of strength, things to lift, things to play with. My buddies and
lar account of how their athletic success was achieved, one is struck by the similarity of a singular, key element leading to outstanding performances: a highly developed ability to focus on the task at hand. Billy Mills focused on the simple words given to him by his father: “Find your desires, know yourself, and succeed.” This empowered him to overcome discrimination, endure the pain of training and competition, and achieve his goal of winning an Olympic gold medal. Al Oerter described his ability to block out distraction and, in an almost meditative state, focus only on discus throwing technique. Regardless of how each athlete described this mental focus, it is clear that a long-term vision and a high regard for a healthy work ethic have been the main ingredients for making an Olympic champion.

If the role sport nutrition played in the careers of these Olympic champions is examined, three points are clear. First, the athletes developed good eating habits from their families, patterns that they carried through their adolescence and into their adult, competitive years. Second, the information on sport nutrition that each received appeared to constantly change, so they were skeptical of various popular approaches that touted ways to enhance athletic performance. Third, these champions realized that what “worked for them” would not necessarily work for others and, conversely, what “worked for others” would not necessarily work for them. In sum, each athlete stated, one way or another, that there is not a singular approach to sports nutrition.

The athletes learned three additional points from their families: eat a balanced diet, everything in moderation, and be sensible about food choices. Through their careers they also learned not to worry or to be obsessive about diet and not to deprive themselves of foods they wanted to consume. As a result, all the athletes commented that a eating a variety of foods was an important component of their diets.

The athletes are correct when they point to the problem of changing information and recommendations in sport nutrition. One reason for apparent conflicting information is the “rush” for publication with associated publicity, whereby new findings, sometimes in conflict, become instantaneously available to athletes and the general public. With this expansion of knowledge there comes a serious problem: some members of the media do not interpret scientific research findings correctly and, with additional publicity, published findings may be extended far beyond experimental boundaries and blown out of proportion. Athletes, coaches and trainers need to realize that the results from one study with a small sample size must always be viewed with caution and that experiments need to be replicated. Furthermore, lack of scientific information in many areas of sports nutrition has allowed profiteers to develop and promote supplements purported to improve aspects of performance. Although athletes should be cautious of such unfounded nutritional fads, where do they turn for accurate, current information?

The Olympians on the panel were representatives of the community of athletes, and they asked nutritionists and physiologists for guidance on how to navigate the seemingly ever-changing river of information. The venue of scientific information is not readily available to athletes or coaches, and research results, when available, may be misinterpreted. This, however, has begun to change in recent years. Conferences, symposia and outreach clinics designed for recreational as well as elite athletes have been sponsored by companies, among them Mars, Incorporated. These efforts have begun to bridge the gaps in information between scientists and the athletes and their coaches. In addition to sponsoring public and athlete education, companies also have begun to sponsor research projects that could have important implications for understanding nutritional and physiological issues important to athletes. These companies, their scientists and educators, should be commended for their efforts.

The Olympians on this panel emphasized that the most important issue for them was the focus and mental contributions to their training and competition. Each argued that without hard work and a positive mental attitude, even the best diet would not result in improved athletic performance. Although sound nutrition provided the foundation on which to build each Olympic champion, the bricks and mortar were the athlete’s innate talent, hard training and mental focus. Knowing how to put these together produces an Olympic champion.