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2 DAYS AGO SPORTS

Motivating Athletes the German Way

Sports psychologists are as indispensable at the Olympics as ice packs. Germany's weightlifters and freestyle wrestlers have gone further, with a system that tailors coaching and motivation to the athlete.

By Scott Cacciola

Matthias Steiner, at right, and coach Frank Mantek celebrate Steiner's weightlifting gold in Beijing in 2008. Getty Images

Sports psychologists have become part of the scenery at the Olympics. You compete, you talk it over. You lose, you have someone to blubber to.

But there are two teams in London this year that aren't sticking to the model.

Germany's weightlifters and freestyle wrestlers have adopted a new system, based on research by an American college professor, that seeks to turn the somewhat fuzzy disciplines of motivation and performance into a precise, color-coded and numbers-centric science.

The teams are big fans of a system called the "Reiss Motivation Profile," which was created by Steven Reiss, emeritus professor of psychology and psychiatry at Ohio State University. The system consists of a standardized 128-question test that assigns individuals a numerical value for each of 16 "basic desires" that Reiss identified—such as curiosity, vengeance or idealism.

A person with a high need for "tranquility" might not perform at his best when he feels pressured. Knowing something like that, the theory goes, can help a coach tailor the way he motivates the athlete.

When weightlifter Matthias Steiner defends his Olympic title Tuesday, the German national coach, Frank Mantek, will find a spot near the stage and do everything in his power to make Steiner feel like the sport's unrivaled

king. While his cheerleading is likely to strike some as extreme, the model suggests that it's the best way to motivate him.

The Reiss system "has radically changed my kind of coaching," Mantek said. "Everybody has his own personality and therefore must be led differently."

In the Reiss system, athletes wear wristbands with personalized messages intended to motivate them during the heat of competition. Only the athletes, their teammates and coaches know what the wristbands say. "Some players write down the names of their kids," said Peter Boltersdorf, a German soccer coach who helped popularize the Reiss system in Europe. "Others have sentences that are directly connected to their personality profiles."

Reiss himself said he never meant for his work to be applied to sports. He created the system to help business executives gain a better understanding of employees and, ultimately, promote productivity. It wasn't until he was approached by Boltersdorf in 2001 that Reiss considered wider applications.

Boltersdorf had seen an advertisement for the Reiss method in a German magazine and came away from his visit with Reiss convinced that coaches could use it.

"My whole life revolves around this thing now," said Boltersdorf, who launched a business in which Reiss provides assessments for athletes. Boltersdorf's clients include several clubs in Germany's elite Bundesliga soccer league and the national men's handball team, which won the world championship in 2007.

Mantek was pleased with the results when he used the Reiss system at the 2008 Beijing Games, where Steiner, a 29-year-old, 320-pound super-heavyweight, won Olympic gold after taking silver at the European championships. At the time fairly new to the system, Mantek brought index cards with him—cheat sheets—that guided his interaction with Steiner.

Mantek said one of his most useful discoveries was that Steiner likes to "feel important in public," which his Reiss profile assesses as a high need for "status." "That's where his ambition comes from," Mantek said. Attempts to reach Steiner for comment were unsuccessful.

In London, the work Reiss and Boltersdorf have done is being applied by Alexander Leipold, coach of the German men's freestyle wrestling team (he was stripped of his 2000 Olympic gold medal for a doping violation and maintains his innocence). "To do it every day with each of your athletes, it is not so easy," Leipold said. It is easier to work with athletes whose psychological profiles are more aligned with his own, he said.

During his own career as a wrestler, Leipold responded to positive reinforcement, which meant he had a high need for what Reiss considers "acceptance." "When a coach would say, 'Alex, that was so good,' I would give 5% or 10% more effort in practice for the next two hours," Leipold said.

As a result, he is inclined to be upbeat when he coaches. But some of his wrestlers don't respond to that type of talk; some need to be challenged. With them, Leipold said he must "learn to speak the right language" based on what he learns from their profiles.

Top-level coaches often understand intuitively how to connect with athletes. David Laman, a psychologist who studied under Reiss, cited former NBA coach Phil Jackson, a believer in "Zen" principles. "He could have Michael Jordan and Dennis Rodman peacefully coexist on the same team," Laman said.

Reiss said he hopes his system eliminates the guesswork. It puts the power of sports psychology into the coach's hands—which is an asset in the heat of competition, he said.

"Relationships between athletes and coaches tend to improve when there's more understanding."

–Rachel Bachman contributed to this article.

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GB now up to 21 gold medals - 2 better than Beijing - and in 3rd place behind China's 34 golds, and US' 30 **http://t.co/looumv8A** #London2012

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Kobe Bryant has more fans on Facebook than any other Olympian. So

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Heard on #BBC "while their ancestors fought for independence, the americans are now fighting for beach volleyball" seriously?!! #London2012

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Jeanne Whalen @JeanneWhalen

One of China's female beach volleyball players is 6'3". Fact. #london2012

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As payback for their overeager desire to see beach volleyball, men have a longer line for the toilet. Classic. #London2012

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Good day for British #equestrian team. First ever gold in dressage. Held off Germany. #london2012