

Please Don't Take a Seat on the Couch - May 2004

Some interesting people will be walking out with the Australian Olympic Team at the Opening Ceremony on August 15th. Look closely and strolling around the track with Thorpie, Jana and co and you will see motoring ace Peter Brock and Wallaby legend John Eales.. No, Rugby Union is not back as an Olympic sport, its last appearance was in 1924 when the Yanks won gold. These two Australian Sporting icons are just two of several former champions who are the new age Sports Psychologists appointed under the term 'Athlete Liaison Officer' by the Australian Olympic Committee. Call them a Sports Psyche and they will probably bite your head off, but don't let them fool you, that's basically what they are and why they are there. A good thing too I must add. In Sydney four years ago America's Cup hero John Bertrand was an ALO and I used him extensively. His personal insight into how the crew of Australia II overcame the adversities they faced no doubt helped me win a medal in 2000. Honestly though, I would not have walked across the road to talk to a team appointed University Graduate Sports Psychologist. What's the difference? Lots!

The AOC woke up to the fact several Olympics ago that the days of the Sports Psyche as we once knew them were numbered. Previously a number of Psychologists were appointed to be 'team' Psyches. By definition they would not be appointed to any specific sport, but would be available at team headquarters in the Olympic Village for any athlete to talk to when they came down with any symptom from pre games nerves to home sickness. Problem was that many of the athletes had no real contact with these people prior to the games and it is a fact that elite athletes have trouble opening up to anyone they don't really know. Hence the birth of the ALO. The advantage that the ALO's have is that they are generally household names in Australian sport. They have 'been there and done that' and that counts tonnes the night before the Olympics when you are looking for advice. The problem that many athletes were facing with the Sports Psychologists that were being thrust upon them is that nobody really believed what they were being told by them. They had no credibility even though they were saying exactly the same things that Brocky or Ealesy were telling you. And that's it in a nutshell. When the message is delivered from a guy that has a master's degree and a late model Range Rover it doesn't carry the same weight as when told from someone who drove an SLR 5000 Torana on two wheels and has nine King of Mount Panorama titles.

There are some exceptions. Swimming Australia has had a long-term relationship with its Sport Psychologist, Clark Perry. Perry has been with the team for well over a decade and has built up an enormous amount of faith and trust. It is a little ironic therefore that one of his former 'patients', Nicole Livingstone, is herself an ALO in Athens. So is Steve Moneghetti and former Australian Women's Basketball captain Robyn Maher. For the uninitiated you could easily cry 'jobs for the boys'. Far from it. These are the most important members of the team, mostly working 18-hour days, they don't get paid and most significantly of all they don't even have a couch for you to come and lay on.