Typical Day for a Team GB Player

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Matthew Syed talks about a day in the life of a GB athlete

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The build-up to any Olympic Games is qualitatively different to any other tournament. Partly, this is because the event has a history like no other, stretching back to ancient Greece, and commands a status that transcends sport. But there is another reason: the Olympics take place once every four years, which means that you might never get another chance.

This, of course, is the defining terror of the Games; the idea that it is a once-in-a-career opportunity to ascend the podium and write one's name into the glittering iconography. For many athletes, this is so daunting a proposition that they never produce their best on the Olympic stage, but for others it is an opportunity to grab with both hands.

For all athletes, the months leading up the Games are among the most intense of their career. It is not just about honing body, building technique, working like you have never worked before; it is also about avoiding the niggling injuries that are so easy to afflict anybody who is training to the max and beyond. And a single injury, lasting only a few weeks, can derail the best-lain plans.

For the table tennis players, the build-up a few months out will be about high quality, high intensity training on the table. This is typically done in bursts of 30-45 minutes with short breaks of 5 minutes in between. Lunch and a shower is generally followed by a nap of 45 minutes, before some more on-table training in the afternoon. Physical conditioning (consisting of weights every other day, sprints and endurance) are also part of the daily routine.

It is not easy. One of the consolations of ending one's sporting career is that you no longer have to push you body to its limitations. Life is more relaxed, less intense. For top sportsmen, there is no time or opportunity to ease up – except for occasional days of rest to allow the body to recover. It is a relentless quest to hone body and mind in pursuit of peak performance when the big day arrives.

The typical day begins to alter as the Games approach. In the days leading up to the competition are less onerous, more focussed on the finer points of technique and tactics. Once the draw has been announced, training exercises will take place with sparring partners whose styles match that of one's upcoming opponent. Each session becomes more cerebral, smarter, additionally focused on specifics rather than generalities.

Once the athlete moves into the athlete's village within the Olympic park, the preparation is almost over and the butterflies begin to circle in one's stomach. One can take comfort from the fact that one has prepared as efficiently and thoroughly as possible, and that can help a lot. But no amount of preparation can fully prepare you for the bright lights and pomp of walking out into the venue for the moment of truth.

It is just you on your own, with the opportunity of a lifetime.

By Matthew Syed

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