


# Effective Debrief Matters

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by Frank Dick

## ABSTRACT

*In the context of an Olympic Games or major sports campaign, excellence is achieving or surpassing the intended performance "on the day." At best, this may mean a gold medal or a championship. At least, it must mean the best performance of the season. The debrief after the event focuses on why excellence was or was not achieved. It is the key to the review process and dictates the quality of lessons learned and consequently the changes to what is done and how it is done - redefining and taking ownership of excellence, designing the plan and then delivering objectives through effective action. For high-performance athletics programmes, the debriefing and the four-year review and planning process should take place soon after the Olympic Games. The cheers that marked the athletes' last step on to the podium in London 2012 also marked the first step towards the podium in Rio 2016. The author, an experienced athletics head coach, provides a framework for debriefing and planning throughout the preparation cycle. Included are key questions for the short-, medium- and long-term reviews that can be used as guides for the process.*

## AUTHOR

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## Introduction

**T**here is a cycle of progress in the never-ending story that is the pursuit of excellence in sport. It applies to the individual, the team, the club or the nation. We Own - Plan - Execute - Review, then Align vision and values in order to own the next cycle - and start again.

In the context of an Olympic Games or major sports campaign, excellence is achieving or surpassing the intended performance "on the day." At best, this may mean a gold medal or a championship. At least, it must mean the best performance of the season.

The debriefing after the Games or campaign is a part of the cyclical review process. It focuses on why excellence was or was not achieved as the basis for learning those lessons necessary to execute excellence next time. The quality of the debriefing dictates the quality of lessons learned and consequently the changes to what we do and how we do it in

redefining and taking ownership of excellence, designing the plan and delivering objectives through effective action.

In business, what is learned through the debriefing and review process is not only relevant to overall strategy and the development and preparation of people, it has an impact on what and how marketing is planned and executed. Input into the discussion of what has been learned comes from everyone involved in, or associated with, the enterprise. It is the same in sport.

As the preparation work takes place, careful monitoring and continuous checks are critical reviews in their own right with reference to training units and microcycles, through mesocycles, annual cycles and the four-year cycles. This process can be broken down into three elements: short-term reviews, medium-term reviews and long-term reviews. Each builds on each so that the four-year cycle of an Olympiad or, for example, the World Cup in such sports as football and rugby, is in fact a cumulative review.

It is essential, then that the overall review process, starting with the debriefing, is intelligently planned for and meticulously executed. Each review, from training unit to post-competition to four-year cycle, must not be considered an afterthought that is compromised by understandably inaccurate recall or cosmetic make-believe. The machinery must be put in place in advance. In other words, we must be prepared for learning and be prepared to learn.

### **Short-Term Reviews**

The debriefing, or short-term review, covers the daily, weekly and microcycle reviews compiled from reading the competition or game during play, or programmes as athlete, team member or coach. These are the basic building blocks of the entire review process. They make up the essential mosaic of learning through experience that is the backdrop

to future continuous excellence. They also ensure that what is working now is turned to even greater advantage and what is not working is swiftly corrected.

The broad areas covered in a debriefing reflect the immediate performance priorities. The intelligence obtained must be readily translated into action that produces better performance in very tight timescales. The detail is, naturally, very specific, but the following is a simple, easily adapted and relatively quick to execute process for team or individual sports.

#### **Team Debrief**

1. Were we on target in terms of result?
2. What helped performance?
3. What did not help performance?
4. What can we use to our advantage from 2 and 3?
5. What worked this time and can we build on that?
6. What did not work this time and can we correct that or eliminate it?
7. What will we do differently and better?
8. What different things will we do?
9. What will we stop doing?

Next, over four- to six-week training cycles there is focus on the individual. This again is readily adapted to meet the specifics of a given role.

#### **Individual Debrief**

1. What is the performance target?
2. What tasks are required to achieve the performance?
3. What actions are carried out to complete the task?
4. What is the current performance?
5. If it exceeds the target, recognise, appreciate and improve farther.
6. If it is below target, diagnose problems and correct.
7. What is the revised performance target?

## Medium-Term Reviews

The medium-term reviews in sport are from intra-season through to annual. They variously apply to a launching pad for the next mesocycle or macrocycle; realignment with the annual plan, the four-year or longer term strategy; to help shape a preview for “this time next year/season”; and possibly more so than shorter and longer term reviews, to create opportunity to celebrate achievement, to support endeavour or to challenge underperformance.

They build on the cumulative short-term reviews. The larger slice of time provides a bigger picture of programme progress and its components relative to the macrocycle objectives, annual goals and Olympic/four-year cycle; improvements against our own previous performance at this time of the year or in general; of where we are compared with opposition at this point; etc. Importantly they do so in a timescale that affords opportunity to make adjustments, corrections and improvements to get back on track where that is needed, and quickly.

Because delivering better personal performance is the critical focus for all in the endeavour, whether athlete, player, coach, manager or other role, each person should be reviewed as follows:

1. What are the performance components relative to the person's role? (Key Performance Determinants – KPD's).
2. What are the agreed standards for those components relative to the person's performance target?
3. What are the delivered/present standards in these components relative to the person's current performance?
4. When these match or are better than those agreed, recognize, appreciate and improve.
5. What are the revised performance component standards?

There is value in exchanging randomly, but at least twice per year, a “Performance Alignment Check” (see Figure 1). This is where the

athlete/player, and anyone on the performance team, can contact the coach (as the leader of the team) to carry out the following procedure:

1. The team member self assesses their own current performance and performance progress relative to the goals/objectives agreed at the annual performance review.
2. The coach also assesses the team member.
3. They exchange their completed assessments.
4. When there is agreement on things being on track or ahead of schedule, then that is appreciated and progress continues.
5. When there is disagreement or where there is agreement on problems, a meeting is called. Problems are discussed and addressed, and a plan agreed on how to get things back on course.

This review should also be carried out within national performance structure, lead by the Chief Coach/Performance Director (see Figure next page).

## Long-Term Reviews

Long-term reviews are major reviews of the four-year Olympic or World Cup cycles. They are comprehensive and in-depth examination of the campaign outcome and the four years leading into it. They build on the cumulative short- and medium-term reviews.

It is beyond the scope of this article to elaborate in detail at every level of each review. So what is set out here are the broad areas that that should be embraced by a four-year debrief. It is for those conducting the review to drill down to relevant detail.

That said, it is essential that the review is seen in the context that the outcome of performance and result in the Olympic arena or those other major international arenas that are the focus of multi-year campaigns, represents a consequence of what has caused them. By that, I mean that performance and result are

Figure 1

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<b>TEAM:</b>	<b>PERFORMANCE ALIGNMENT CHECK</b>	
<b>Informal Performance Review</b> <b>Period of Review:</b> _____	<b>Overall role performance rating</b> <b>(10 max – 1 min)</b>	
Name _____	Role: _____	
Prepared by: _____	Date: _____	
Significant changes influencing role during the period under review	Effect on performing role	
Prioritised objectives set at commencement of year under review	Evaluation of objective achievement	Rating Notes
Prioritised agreed main tasks to meet objectives	Main task performance analysis	Rating Notes
Strengths/Developments	Suggested action required for improvement	

about more than the immediate influences we readily identify as relevant. There are factors from political decisions at government level to where the performance and coaching programme fits with a federation's overall strategy. All of these have shaped and are shaped by attitudes, behaviours and culture.

A responsible approach must go beyond analysis of performance and results. Again, these are consequences of what has been done and how it has been done 1) over four years, 2) over the final year (because the first three have been debriefed annually), 3) over the final preparation period, and (4) through the competition itself. These four periods should constitute a framework within which the following are reviewed.

In planning to design and deliver the review process, then, it is important to address this bigger picture. So, for example:

### **Government**

- Sport Policy in relation to Health and Education Policy (school sport; participation and performance etc)
- Economics ring-fencing for sport to address immediate and long term objectives
- All party commitment to agreed sports development and performance strategies

### **Federations**

Robust strategy for the sport to include:

- Developing people for roles and responsibilities
- Increasing participation; attracting and retaining athletes, coaches, club officials etc
- Improving performance – whatever the roles and responsibilities, but particularly the performance/coaching program
- Ensuring provision from governance to competitions
- Energising promotion to keep the sport attractive to all from athletes to sponsors

- Manage partnerships from national to local government, athletes entourage, school/club and press/media

So it would be entirely appropriate to suggest that all who are part of the bigger picture are involved in the debrief process.

The essential review headings in sport are:

- Results – intended and actual.
- Performance under pressure of athletes and teams.
- Professional competence of all staff – coaching, management, administration and performance support.
- Effectiveness of athlete and team staff in preparation planning.
- Effectiveness of overall campaign strategy/current year plan/applied game plan.
- Leverage of high performance intelligence and resources, e.g. systems and technology.
- Quality of chief coach decision-making and judgment calls.

The priority in addressing these points will depend on timescales involved. All points are relevant for review in preparation for a one- to four-year strategy. However, in my opinion there are six fundamental points in this.

1. Extrapolated numbers for winning results, performance and components of future performance.
2. Perceived successful technical training and tactical trends.
3. Effectiveness in preparation and in the arena.
4. Strengths and vulnerabilities.
5. What could be done differently and what different things can be done to perform better and gain competitive advantage next time.
6. Identify the people who will grow a winning dynasty.

Figure 2

**As an Aide Memoire:**

**EVALUATE**

- The Outcome  
Aspiration v actual
- The People  
Who? What? How ? When ? Where ?  
Technical and behavioural
- The Plan  
What worked?  
What did not work?  
What was adequate but can be improved?  
What should be changed?
- The Decision Maker/Coach  
What bits of the decision making process were positive and can be learned from to improve?  
What mistakes occurred and can be learned from to avoid repetition?  
How can decision making skills be improved?
- The Intelligence  
Was all relevant intelligence available and accessed?  
Was it made available in a usable form?  
Was it of value in the decision and to the outcome?

**1) Individual athlete/player:**

- Techniques(s)
- Training and physical competencies
- Tactics and reading of competitive environment
- Attitude/behaviour in competition, preparation, lifestyle
- Performance

**2) Team: (where appropriate, eg, team sports)**

- Techniques
- Training
- Tactics and reading of competitive environment
- Cohesion and interdependence
- Performance

**3) Coach/es: \***

- Technical competencies/knowledge
- Coaching competencies
- Synthesis of information
- Leadership/management skills
- Decision making
- CPD

**4) Science/Medicine support: #**

- Technical competencies/knowledge
- Professional effectiveness
- Process harmony and cohesion
- Performance influence
- CPD

**5) Manager:**

- Technical competencies/knowledge
- Leadership
- Teamship
- Big picture
- CPD

**6) Support Team (general):**

- Technical competencies/knowledge
- Complementary function
- Supplementary function
- Partnership/teamship
- CPD

**7) Critical Partner/s**

- Technical competencies/knowledge
- Partnership/facilitation
- Complementary function
- Supplementary function
- CPD

\* *Separate for personal coach/es; national discipline coach; coaching director/head coach.*

# *Separate for high performance director; individual specialists.*

**Notes:**

1. The review is 360 ° so, for example, athletes and coaches feed in to review of manager, coaching director etc.
2. The reviews (continuous throughout the year and four-year cycle) and debrief are all part of an agreed comprehensive program.
3. The process throughout is about learning rather than judgment.
4. A cumulative resource should be established on a dedicated website to post both good and bad practice as part of that learning.
5. Clearly each sport will interpret the above in terms of its own specifics.
6. Drill as deep as is necessary.

In terms of timescale, in the case of athletics this should be completed with listed observation and recommendation by mid-October after the Olympic Games and a strategy document should be completed by mid-December at latest (i.e.: debrief and report completion within 10 weeks of a Games/Campaign; strategy completion within 16 weeks).

There is, then, an urgency to add to the importance of the debrief.

The cheers that marked the athletes' last step on to the podium in London 2012 also marked the first step towards the podium in Rio 2016.

The clock is running.

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