Athleticism not only component to being Olympian

Randy Wilber with Team USA explains how to get Olympians to sleep as they travel around the world. Photo/Kathryn Reed

By Kathryn Reed

PARK CITY, Utah – Sleep and nutrition – they can't be overlooked when it comes to athletics. And when the competitor is on the U.S. Olympic team, the importance is ratcheted to a level a weekend warrior might not be able to fully comprehend.

These elite athletes have access to sports psychologists, the latest technology, in addition to strength and conditioning experts. Some have their own entourage, some rely on the national experts, others use a combo.

Olympic officials have taken sports and made it a science.

The U.S. team mines data, analyzing an athlete’s performance against others. When a tenth of a second can make the difference between being on a podium or going home without hardware, every second on the snow or ice can make a difference.

Information is also used in hopes of preventing injury.

Travis Ganong, who lives in Tahoe City and calls Squaw Valley his home resort, is quick to admit that the mental aspect of the sport is what separates this level of athlete from others. While the downhiller doesn’t tap into the team’s psychologist, he knows to work on the mind game himself.

He takes a step back when needed, and says he internally processes what is going on without an external facilitator.

Still, his handlers also know when to manage him, so to speak. In January, at a men’s downhill race in Germany, Ganong was to race right after fellow American Steve Nyman. Nyman crashed, had to be airlifted out and sustained a season-ending injury. Ganong’s people told him Nyman was fine and was able to ski down after the fall.

Ganong admitted on Sept. 27 at the Team USA media summit in Park City that the false information helped him to focus. He went on to win that event.

For Randy Wilber, his expertise is in sports physiology.

“The No. 1 thing we’ve learned in the last five years is a lot about the biology and physiology of sleep – about the quality of sleep,” Wilber said.

U.S. Olympic athletes have a variety of resources at their disposal. From left, Randy Wilber, sports physiology; Susie Parker-Simmons, nutrition; Brandon Sjakel, strength and conditioning; Alex Cohen, psychology; and Scott Riewald, sports technology. Photo/Kathryn Reed

Experts are using it to monitor training and recovery. Coaches-trainers can access the devices to know if the athlete had a good night's sleep. Based on the data, the workout might be changed.

When traveling, athletes are given detailed info about when to sleep, when to get exposure to light, when to eat, when to exercise – all with the intent to get onto the new time zone as fast as possible. As little jetlag as possible is the goal.

These are disciplined individuals so being put on a regimen works – even for sleep.

"A couple challenges this year is that athletes will be competing late at night for TV. They aren't used to that," Wilber said of events scheduled at the 2018 Games in South Korea.

For Susie Parker-Simmons, she is tasked with making sure the athletes have enough nutrients to perform at their peak. The dietician took 10 years to develop a hot recovery drink. It's not something that is available to the masses.

“Recovery foods have a specialized composition,” Parker-Simmons said. “Part of my job is to design foods that are not on the market.”

In PyeongChang, South Korea, she will have two venues set up just for the U.S. team competitors. She wants them in a food bubble, eating things they are used to.

She tries to get the athletes into the kitchen at the U.S. training center so they will develop healthy lifelong habits and be able to feed themselves, and make healthy decisions when she isn’t around.

An Olympian needs on average 30 percent more nutrients than the everyday athlete. Being in a cold venue requires an intake of 18 percent more calories than warm weather sports.

Cross country skiers are the hardest for Parker-Simmons to keep fueled because they need an extra 1,000 calories beyond the normal 3,000. This is because they are working their arms and legs for a sustained period of time. She said it’s that last 1,000 calories that can be difficult because people feel full. That’s why new foods need to be developed.

Parker-Simmons also has to battle the athletes being inundated by social media about the latest diet craze. Two years ago it was gluten free, today it is vegan or plant based diets.

Getting the correct allocation of nutrients is her concern and responsibility. This doesn’t usually jive with what the masses are doing.

Then there are the athletes like snowboarder Jamie Anderson of Meyers who do what they want, which isn’t always conventional at least by Western standards. She is more into holistic remedies and natural foods. She has what she calls a “green drink” with lots of nutrients.