

## Olympics

# Mental health task force created to provide aid for Canadian athletes during stoppage

COC, CPC among organizations uniting in support of competitors

[Jim Morris](#) · for CBC Sports · Posted: Apr 07, 2020 1:00 AM PDT | Last Updated: April 7, 2020



Canada's Rosie MacLennan poses after winning the trampoline gold medal at the 2016 Olympics in Rio de Janeiro. MacLennan believes the COVID-19 disruption has caused a level of anxiety for many athletes. (Ryan Remiorz/The Canadian Press)

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Not being able to train regularly can not only affect the physical conditioning of high-performance athletes, but also impact their mental health.

Structure and routine were important components for athletes as they prepared for this summer's Olympics in Tokyo. With gyms shuttered, pools closed and training facilities dark due to COVID-19, their normal lives have been turned upside down.

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Not only has training been interrupted, so has social contact with fellow athletes and coaches. Having the Tokyo Games postponed a year added another layer of stress and confusion.

"In terms of motivation, in terms of isolation, in terms of anxiety . . . I think it has been a really challenging time for a lot of athletes, especially if they're not getting access to the support that they need," said Rosie MacLennan, a two-time Olympic gold medallist in trampolining.

"For a lot of us, something that is so significant in our daily life has been taken away. Also, that goal that was four months away is all of a sudden 16 months away. And while there's clarity and a date, there's not much clarity for a lot of athletes on how they'll qualify or when they'll be able to train normally again."

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To answer the questions and concerns of high-performance athletes, a mental health task force has been created involving several of Canada's major Olympic sport groups.

"The group has really been put together to assess the needs and do some strategy and planning around the different things that are required," said Dr. Karen MacNeill, a psychologist who has worked at Olympic Games as the lead mental health counsellor for the Canadian Olympic Committee.

Groups involved in the task force include the COC, Canadian Paralympic Committee, Own the Podium, the various national sports organizations, the Canadian sports institutes spread across the country, and Game Plan, an athlete wellness program designed for national team athletes.

"One of the biggest things is consistency and alignment and communication," MacNeill said.

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The Canadian Olympic swimmer told CBC Sports' Andi Petrillo that she feels even more appreciation for the sport now that she's physically not able to swim.

Frank van den Berg, a mental performance consultant with the Canadian Sport Institute Calgary, said there are mental repercussions from not being able to train regularly.

"Through exercise, endorphins are released into the bloodstream," van den Berg said. "It helps us feel better. It may also kind of ward off some anxious thoughts.

"It may have some positive effect on how we look at ourselves, our self-esteem or how we think about ourselves."

## **'Getting those endorphins going again'**

Swimmer Brent Hayden retired after winning a bronze medal in the 100-metre freestyle at the 2012 London Games. He remembers the withdrawal he felt from a lack of training.

"My wife would tell you that my mood changed and I was not a pleasant person to be around for a while," said Hayden, who has come out of retirement and hopes to compete in Tokyo next year.

"How I combatted that was getting back into the gym on a regular schedule and just getting those endorphins going again, so my brain chemistry was back to what it used to be."

- [Canadian swimmers look to maintain training intensity amid COVID-19 closures](#)

Athletes dealing with closed facilities and social distancing must reset their expectations and goals, van den Berg said.

"It's like when an athlete is injured and is not able to do what (they're) normally doing," he said.

"The emphasis needs to be on maintenance of fitness and taking care of your body in good ways. The emphasis and focus should not be on getting stronger or peaking for competitions, because they're not there. Everyone needs to kind of tone it down but stay active and take care of their body in different ways."

## **Mental fitness**

MacNeill said one of the messages being impressed on athletes is "controlling the controllables."

"Of course, you're feeling down," she said. "Of course, you're feeling sluggish. That's part of it."

Athletes are being urged to train the best they can at home. They can find social contact by doing virtual workouts online with teammates.

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MacNeill even encourages athletes to treat the current situation as training for coping with problems they might face in competitions.

"There's no better training ground right now because there's uncertainty, because there's unpredictability, because there's stress, to build your resilience and mental fitness," she said.

MacLennan said the program has been valuable.

"They're continually expanding what they have to offer. A lot of athletes are making use of the program and I think it's hugely critical."

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