

## The Life of an Olympic Athlete

As we get closer and closer to the newest exciting installment of the Olympic Games, the athletes themselves are also preparing for the biggest event of their lives. While cities, fans, and organizers are preparing to host, attend, or enjoy the Olympic Games, the athletes are doing preparation of their own to attempt to be recognized as among the world's best athletes. Before we watch the athletes take center stage in the Beijing Olympics, let's take a look at what Olympic athletes go through to get themselves in position to be the best in the world.

Olympic athletes have different lives depending on what kind of sport they participate in. Gymnasts, for example, begin their training at a very young age, many times as toddlers. After they show the aptitude and interest in gymnastics, their training is more and more serious as they spend much of their time perfecting their techniques and getting ready for competitions. Gymnasts must be very hard-working and dedicated, as they train full-time while attending classes or working with tutors to acquire their education.

For an Olympic gymnast, the Olympic Games are the summit of a lifetime of training and competition. Most gymnasts reach the prime of their careers in their teens, so it is especially important for them to capitalize on their limited chances to succeed on the Olympic stage. Keep that in mind as you watch gymnasts compete in the 2008 Beijing Olympics- they are under a lot of pressure! Gymnasts, like many Olympic athletes, are particularly impressive because their sport requires so much mental toughness and maturity, along with athletic talent.

Some Olympic athletes, such as basketball players, are already professional athletes as well. This doesn't necessarily make life easier for them, however. Professional basketball players must participate in the Olympics after already competing in a grueling season for their professional teams. This shows the dedication of basketball players who choose to represent their respective countries. After all, they have already succeeded at a high level, so other than representing their country in international competition, they have no reason to give up their off-season to compete in the Olympic Games.

Athletes that are a part of team sports, such as football (or "soccer" if you're from the United States) have a slightly different regimen than athletes in individual sports, such as wrestling. In an individual sport, you train with others, hoping to hone your skills to the point that you can qualify to participate in the Olympic Games. In a team sport, you are generally selected to participate on the team far in advance of the Olympic Games. From then on,

your time is spent practicing with the team (in addition to working with any other team that you may already play for) so that your team will have the best possible chance to succeed in the Olympic Games. At the Beijing Olympics, you are likely to see many polished teams who play well together as a unit, and the practice and hard work that has been put in is the main reason.

Amateur athletes have a very special lifestyle that can be very difficult. If athletes don't have sponsors or other financial assistance to help with training, they must go to school or work just like the rest of us, while trying to train at a world class level at the same time. Training is expensive, as coaches need to be paid, trainers must be compensated, and equipment or facility fees also have to be taken care of. Sometimes, the stress of the lifestyle that Olympic athletes must live is greater than the stress involved in training itself!

Although Olympic athletes live much different lives than us, it's important to remember they are also people, just like the rest of us. They are only able to reach the level they compete at because of dedication and hard work. Keep that in mind when you're cheering on your favorite athletes this summer at the Beijing Olympics!

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