

BRAZILIAN OLYMPIC GYMNASTS' PERSPECTIVES ON THEIR PARTICIPATION IN THE OLYMPIC GAMES

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the perspectives of Brazilian gymnasts on the experience of participating in the Olympic Games (OG) in the Women's Artistic Gymnastics (WAG) competition (1980-2004), using oral history in a qualitative research approach, and cross-sectional thematic analysis. The author interviewed ten Brazilian WAG gymnasts (100% of the sample) who participated in OG until 2004. The gymnasts' testimonials indicated that, as the Brazilian WAG team improved their performance in international competitions, gymnasts' expectations have changed over time, although the dream to participate in the OG was shared by all of them. From the generation of the pioneering gymnasts (1984-1988-1992) to the transitional generation (1996-2000), it is possible to observe several differences related to the pressure to perform well in the competition. While the pioneering gymnasts were not concerned about their ranking in the OG, the transitional gymnasts were reminded of the responsibility to represent their country. For the new generation gymnasts (2004), the participation in the OG carried the burden of needing to accomplish something, to be among the best gymnasts in the world, with actual chances of going to the finals and getting medals in the apparatus finals. Testimonials show their confidence in the work developed by the experienced Ukrainian coaches who led the Brazilian team in the OG in Athens. Gymnasts describe their experience in the OG as having accomplished a mission, feeling at the same time relief, disappointment, desire to return to other editions and some even report the sensation of being lost after returning to Brazil.

Key words: *Women artistic gymnastics, history, Olympic Games.*

INTRODUCTION

Pressure, anxiety, excitement and fascination are some common feelings experienced by high-level athletes. Responses to external stimuli are so diverse and can impact the athlete's performance in so many ways (Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2002; Gould et al., 2002) that the period between the qualification for the Olympic Games and the return home has attracted interest

from researchers (Kristiansen, 2015; Delaš Kalinski, 2017).

Studies have pointed out that Olympic-level athletes show great stress before competing (Pensgaard, 1997; Pensgaard, Roberts & Ursin, 1999), which can result in physical and psychological changes that impair performance (Wegner, 2000). Orlick and Partington's study (1988), involving interviews with

Canadian athletes of various modalities who participated in the 1984 Olympic Games (OG), describes how mental readiness was an important factor that influenced the performance of these athletes. In this investigation, the athletes reported that their total commitment to pursue excellence, quality of training and quality of mental preparation for the championship contributed to success. In contrast, the same athletes reported that among the three major factors that hindered their performances are increased training load before the OG, the fact that they were selected for the Olympic team weeks before the championship and that they were overwhelmed by the number of distractions such as the exuberance of the ceremonies and events in the Olympic Games.

Similarly, the authors' investigation of United States Olympic athletes (Greenleaf, Gould & Dieffenbach, 2001), found that the main factors that positively influenced performance include psychological preparation, attitudes towards the Olympics, services and facilitation of support, multifaceted preparation, physical preparation and training. On the other hand, the factors that negatively influenced performance were media distractions, problems with the coach, overtraining and injuries.

According to Williams and Krane (2001), most athletes and coaches recognize that 40% to 90% of success is due to mental factors. In this sense, concerned with these factors, some countries (Canada, Great Britain etc.) have offered mentoring programs (Macneill, 2007), and/or intentionally produced pressure situations during training.

We recognize that mental factors play a crucial role in athletic success and we also believe that deep analyses of athletes' experiences at major championships will enable them to better prepare for the competition. However, there is a lack of publications that portray and acknowledge

the perception of the athletes themselves on the subject (Schiavon, 2009).

While exploring the process that contributes to the optimal preparation and performance of the Olympic athlete, it is important to give voice to the athletes themselves, what makes the researcher a spokesperson who enables the detailed study of issues related to these life experiences (Meihy, 2005). Thus, so that this scenario can be investigated, this study analyzes the perspectives of Brazilian gymnasts' experience in their participation in the Olympic Games in Women's Artistic Gymnastics (WAG) from 1980 to 2004. However, we intend not only to register these histories of participation, but to deepen the aspects that the gymnasts themselves consider relevant in the experience of representing their country in the championship that culturally is considered the pinnacle of the athletes' career in high performance sport.

The Brazilian international results in Women's Artistic Gymnastics (WAG) have improved mainly in the last 15-20 years. According to Schiavon et al. (2013), the first participation of a Brazilian woman in a World WAG Championship was in 1966, with the ranking of Marion Faedrich Dullius in 148th place at the individual all-around. In 2007, after 41 years, the best individual all-around classification happens with a bronze medal from the gymnast Jade Barbosa. We still had, in the Floor Final, Daniele Hypólito with a silver medal in 2001 and, the gymnast Daiane dos Santos with a gold medal in 2003.

In Olympic Games, the Brazilian's rankings in Women's All-around and Women's Apparatus Finals are also improving. The first classification of a Brazilian gymnast to the Olympic Games happened in 1980 (31st All-around Final), with an individual qualification that took place in all Olympic Games until 2000, when Brazil was able to qualify two athletes, followed by the qualification of a team from 2004 up to the last Olympic Games in 2016. In this competition, in

WAG, Brazil secured spots in Apparatus Finals – Floor with the gymnast Daiane dos Santos (2004 and 2008), in Balance Beam with Flávia Saraiva (2016) and the best Brazilian result in All-around Final with Jade Barbosa (2008), in 10th place. Despite the progressive results, Brazilian WAG has not been able to win any Olympic medals yet, having recently won four Olympic medals at Men's Apparatus Finals (one gold/Rings¹, two silvers/ Rings² and Floor³ and one bronze/Floor⁴).

This context is due to several factors, among them, the improvement in infrastructure and sports organization in Artistic Gymnastics in Brazil in the early 1990's (Schiavon & Paes, 2012). This improvement is boosted again at the late 1990's with the beginning of the hiring of Ukrainian coaches, forming a permanent national team⁵ and investment in infrastructure/gymnasium facilities aiming at Athens (2004) and Beijing (2008) Olympic Games (Schiavon & Paes, 2012). Oliveira and Bortoleto (2009) reported that this transformation is directly related to the rise in financial support from the federal government through the Law 10264 from 2001⁶, which transfers part of the earnings from the federal lottery to sports and, also, from Law 11438 from 2006, known as Sport Incentive Law, which allows deduction from income tax of natural persons (up to 6%) and legal persons (up to 1%) intended to institutions which have

sports' project approved to captation of resources from this Law.

Even with this positive transformation in the last 40 years, Schiavon and Paes (2012) highlight that Brazilian gymnasts who participated in Olympic Games and began their training in the 1980's and 1990's, in many moments of their sport history, they went through trainings with non-adequate equipment and gymnasium facilities to high performance training, including non-official apparatus. These differences will be noted during the exposition of the current research by the difference in gymnasts expectations about the participation in Olympic Games in different times from Brazilian Artistic Gymnastics.

METHODS

For the development of this qualitative research, we used the Oral History method (Meihy, 2005; Simson, 1988; Thompson, 1992), based on the possibility to collect the life stories of ten female gymnasts all of who competed in the OG for Brazil between the years of 1980 and 2004.

According to Queiroz (1988), Oral History is an ample term that covers an amount of accounts around facts not registered by other types of documentation or which one seeks to complete. Collected through various forms of interviews, it registers the experiences of a single or several individuals from a single collectivity. In this case, a convergence of accounts around a single event or a period is sought (p.19). (Translated by the authors).

This method was chosen mainly due to the lack of available records around the sports development of these gymnasts in documents. In addition, it allows for the collection of detailed information regarding the events experienced in the sports career of each of the gymnasts that might otherwise have gone unnoticed. Laville and Dionne (1999) corroborate this claim.

A known and proven manner of obtaining information, specifically to the

¹ the gymnast Arthur Zanetti (2012)

² the gymnast Arthur Zanetti (2016)

³ the gymnast Diego Hypólito (2016)

⁴ the gymnast Arthur Mariano (2016)

⁵ From 2002 to 2008, the Brazilian National Federation (CBG) selected gymnasts for the Brazilian WAG team to start a formation process for the Olympic Games (2004 and 2008), called "permanent team", where the Brazilian team trained only in the National Federation

⁶ Between 2001 to 2015, the Law 10264 guaranteed that 2% of the gross collection of Federal lotteries in the country, discounted the prizes, were destined in favor of the Brazilian Olympic Committee (85%) and the Brazilian Paralympic Committee (15%). In addition, this Law also determined that, out of the total collected by these institutions, 10% should be invested for grassroot levels and 5% in university sports (National Sports Association, 2018).

human sciences, consists of collecting testimony from people who have this information. Recourse to these testimonies allows for the exploration of people's knowledge, but also of their representations, beliefs, values, opinions, feelings, hopes, projects, etc. (p.183). (Translated by the authors).

In oral testimony, the researcher proposes a theme around which to organize the life account of those to be studied (Laville & Dionne, 1999). The research, in a wider sense, is focused on a particular theme, the "history of sports life" of these gymnasts (Schiavon, 2009), and, more specifically in this article, the theme developed, based on the testimonies, as "participation in the Olympic games".

Participants

This research was conducted with the participation of ten gymnasts, introduced below in chronological order starting with the first participation in the Olympic Games: Cláudia Magalhães (1980), Tatiana Figueiredo (1984), Luisa Parente (1988 and 1992), Soraya Carvalho (1996), Daniele Hypólito (2000 and 2004), Camila Comin (2000 and 2004), Ana Paula Rodrigues (2004), Caroline Molinari (2004), Daiane dos Santos (2004) and Laís Souza (2004).⁷ The criterion established to determine the subjects was: Brazilian gymnasts participating (or classified) in the summer Olympic Games in WAG up to 2004 (the best Brazilian team ranking at an Olympic Games).

Procedure

Data were collected from a series of semi-structured interviews with the gymnasts that varied in length; the longest lasting 3 hours and the shortest 1 hour. The younger gymnasts gave some of the shorter interviews, could be describe as shy and as having less time due to the demands of

practice. Alternatively, some of the older gymnasts were more confident, willing to go into more detail about their lives and gave longer interviews. The first part in the interview is conducted in a free form, starting with a broad theme, which, in this study, was the sports history of each gymnast (Schiavon, 2009). In a second part, the researcher brings up generating themes, directing the conversation towards relevant issues of the participant's sports history, with the intention of delving deeper into certain subjects. A previously elaborated script focusing on prominent moments of the gymnasts' sports history is utilized in this moment of the interview, and, in the case of this article, the generating theme was "participation in the Olympic games".

Additionally, it is worth noting that access to the gymnasts was difficult meaning that each gymnast was only interviewed once. Contact with them was limited due to their practice commitments and locating them geographically. For example, some gymnasts were living far from the primary interviewer in Brazil, Laurita Schiavon, and one was living in the USA. We acknowledge that access restrictions pose some limitations to the research; however, the thematic oral history method allowed us to make focused use of this time. Additionally, contact with the gymnasts was maintained as much as possible via telephone and email addressed by both gymnasts and researcher. Again, this access varied but the researcher sought to maintain similar levels of contact with each of the gymnasts.

All data were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and each interview informed the ones that followed in terms of issues that emerged.

The present study was approved by the research Ethical Committee of the Campinas State University Medical School on March 27, 2007, number: 136/2007.

Cross-analysis of data

Of all available forms of interpretation and analysis that oral

⁷ The participation in OGs analyzed in the methodological procedures include only the Olympic Games on which the study was focused (1980 to 2004). However, it is important to note that some of these gymnasts participated in other Olympic events, such as Daniele Hypólito (2008, 2012 and 2016), Daiane dos Santos (2008 and 2012) and Laís Souza (2008).

history can be constructed, we decided to use re-constructive cross-analysis (Thompson, 2000) in order to critically explore personal and social constructions, as told through narrative articulations, to produce a multidimensional account of these gymnasts' lives. Thus, the analysis of the results was conducted from the data collected in the field research, in the testimony of the collaborators by themes, in which the units of analysis were represented by the generating theme. Afterwards, each gymnast's data were crossed to allow the relations between them to be established and, from this point, confronted, highlighting and reflecting on the differences and, mainly, the similarities in relation to the participation in the Olympic games of the gymnasts who participated in this research.

Following that, a comparative analysis and a discussion around the data from the

testimonies were undertaken, using the basis of information gathered in the literature studied, disagreeing, confirming or even offering collaborations with new approaches. This is the main contribution of Oral History, to bring information that is not to be found in official records or even to disagree with existing records, as new evidence, which might indicate paths for a new interpretations (Thompson, 1992).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

For the comparison of participants in this study, we chose to group the testimonies of gymnasts according to similarities in their histories as a whole, an inherent characteristic of oral history as a way of evaluating the coherence of the testimonies. Thus, gymnasts were divided into three groups as follows:

Table 1

Division of gymnasts according to their characteristics.

Group	Description of group characteristics
Pioneer gymnasts	The first gymnasts who represented Brazil in the OG, mainly in the decade of 1980. These gymnasts, in relation to the later generations, experienced situations with less support to the training system as far as it concerns the financial, material and human resource conditions. There was lack of support in these aspects, both in their clubs and in the Brazilian national team. At that time, the Brazilian Gymnastics Confederation had not been adequately structured. These gymnasts aimed at a good performance in the OG, nevertheless they did not have real chances of winning medals, not even of going to an Olympic final. Three gymnasts were in this group: Cláudia Magalhães, Tatiana Figueiredo and Luisa Parente.
Transition gymnasts	This group experienced a stage without support and structure at the beginning, similar to what the pioneer gymnasts had experienced. However, they subsequently had the opportunity to have greater support. The gymnasts of this group even participated in the first important Brazilian achievements in international competitions. Four gymnasts were in this group: Soraya Carvalho, Daniele Hypólito, Camila Comin and Daiane dos Santos.
New generation gymnasts	In this group are the gymnasts who, since they started in the Brazilian team, already found conditions of excellence for an adequate preparator in the sport, in the mold of world powers that compete for medals in World Championships and the OGs. Three gymnasts were in this group: Caroline Molinari, Laís Souza and Ana Paula Rodrigues.

Although all of them shared the dream of participating in the OG, the testimonies show divergence in the expectations of gymnasts from different generations. The generation of pioneer gymnasts felt motivation, emotion, happiness and lack of ambition to fight for a medal concerning their participation. The main purpose of these gymnasts (the pioneers) was to qualify for the OG and, if possible, to improve their final result:

We went to the Olympics, my coach and I, and João Luis⁸ with his coach. It was really cool, I also managed to compete well, despite being there alone, without a team. Olympics, it was heavier, and I didn't even care, I just wanted to train, train and do my best. It's funny because I didn't commit any mistake and I managed to qualify for the all-around finals. [...] I qualified in the top 36, think I was placed 33rd, but I have to see...it's been so many years that I don't know, I think in the finals I was ranked 30th ⁹. [...] It was awesome, in the first time! Finals, first time too. [...] I didn't get stressed out, it was just happiness (laughs), and our mood in Gama Filho¹⁰ was pure motivation, joy, great love, the coach was so kind, he was our daddy, he was very funny, he was tough but very playful (Cláudia Magalhães).

At the Olympics it was very cool. Because it was my dream come true. What I'd been looking for, that I'd been looking for my whole life. Despite all the difficulties, it was very nice. It's a shame that at that time we didn't have good conditions. Brazilian Olympic Committee didn't have many resources. So they just wanted to send the athletes who had a medal chance. I even had to go through an evaluation before the Olympics. Berenice Arruda did it, I got (a score of) 9.50 and they sent me, but they didn't send my coach. Only one coach, female or male, could go. So the male gymnast's coach, Mário Pardini, went with us. Then, Brazilian Gymnastics Federation (CBG¹¹) extra-officially hired Lílian Carrascoza (coach) and she had to stay out of the village. [...] I did well, but I did better in the all-around finals. [...] I was ranked 27th. The goal was to get to the final, to be among the top 36 gymnasts (Tatiana Figueiredo).

And there in Seoul, our goal was to be among the 36 finalists. And then I qualified in 34th. So I'd hit the target and then I fell one position on the days of the finals, to 35th. But it was very good and it was one of the most exciting moments because I was there, waiting for the score, the names were been displayed, the finalists' names. [...] So, in Seoul - 1988, looking at the scoreboard, in the last call, 'cause they were showing from eight to eight, then in the last frame they showed my name there. So I went on to the third day of competition. [...] The target I had was to be among the 36 finalists and it was 35th, so it's great (Luisa Parente).

In Barcelona, the expectation was the same. We didn't know our reality. In the Olympics there was still no way to get a medal, to fight for a medal, but we could improve the ranking. So the goal would be to get among the top twenty, maybe. Then, technically, I'd grown up a little more than I expected, I was already nineteen, but I was great. An athlete, strong and everything. And my compulsory¹² routines were very good, which created this expectation of achieving it. But then, in the food hall, I fell in love with Magnum (laughs), the Ice Cream.

[...] In fact, I was training in Madrid, 'cause we would spend a month in an exchange program before the Olympics. And then, there I was, I was ok, ideal weight. And on the day of the Olympics, when the competition started, I was two kilos over my weight in Madrid.

In the competition, the first exercise was Balance Beam, first entrance, compulsory routine, press to handstand. Then I went up, but I came back and fell. Everybody was: oh! And I: ah! And now what? That fraction of seconds: "This is past, this is already gone, it's past; now all you have to do is the best you can do in your life, you have to compete like you never did anything in your whole life." I kept on trying to do this in the next steps, still a bit tense! But I managed to finish the beam routine. Then I went on, Floor, Vault and Bars, and it was the highest score of my life:

9,812. Compulsory routines. So, it shows how to overcome a totally adverse circumstance. First, the Olympics were like this, the last Olympics, probably... and you fall! So, I overcame it very well and went on to the optional routines, and they were good. Now, in the final ranking, I was placed [...] 40th. So

⁸ Male Brazilian gymnast competing in the Moscow OG (1980).

⁹ In fact, she was ranked 31st.

¹⁰ Gama Filho was the name of the university where this gymnast used to train.

¹¹ CBG is the acronym in Portuguese

¹² Until the OG of 1996, the gymnasts had to perform compulsory exercises in the preliminaries to show a minimum technical level. Therefore, the compulsories were performed on the first day of the team competition. Nowadays, this type of competition is no longer in the international program of WAG.

I almost got in the group of 36 finalists. But that's occupational hazard. (Luisa Parente)

In the transition generation, there was a frustrating event that involved Soraya Carvalho, who unfortunately could not give her testimony about her competition, since she could not compete due to a stress fracture injury in her leg, diagnosed on the eve of the WAG competition in the OG. Obviously, Soraya holds a lot of resentment and sorrow about this event, her frustration and the process she had experienced while preparing for the OG, culminating in this injury that took her out of the competition. Therefore, it was possible to report only the process of diagnosis of her injury and her treatment, which she tried on the eve of the competition:

This story's very exhausting. When I got there at the Olympics, I talked to the CBG President and said: "I'm so tired", then I was really worried. Because I'd competed with an injury so many times... and you go. You know how it is. But this time I was really worried because I would not be able to go like that. The pain was very sharp. When I arrived, I went straight to the doctor, they took an x-ray. Then they did several other tests and so, and they said: "apparently, if she rests her foot for two days, if it is possible for her training, maybe she can compete. Let's try!". All this with intensive care. I had the delegation's physiotherapist inside my room in the village, every hour and a half he would put ice on my foot. He was on duty the whole night, a treatment to see if it would get better. And, in the meantime, in the training schedule I would go to the uneven bars, to do part of the physical training. Without touching on the ground, I was on a crutch, already.

After the second day, my calf had great swelling reduction. But then, it was a deep bruise. Then the doctor said: "let's do an MRI". So they saw that I had a stress fracture and was bleeding in the growth areas, I'd almost had ligament rupture, and the tendon [...]. So it was very serious, a very, very serious injury. And that's when the medical chief said: "look, she's a young athlete. It's very serious. The fracture is large and maybe, depending on the way she falls during some exercise she may have a compound fracture, and then need surgery, so, let's spare her and maybe she can attend the upcoming Olympics." And so it was over. (Soraya Carvalho).

As for the other two gymnasts from the same generation, it is possible to observe the difference between the expectations to participate for the first time in Seoul and for the second time in Athens. In Seoul, their main concern was still to participate and improve their result. On the other hand, in Athens this situation was changed by the pressure to represent the country well: "In Sydney I competed well! Like... I was still very young, I was not used to such a large audience [...]" (Daniele Hypólito).

There in Athens I competed very well. So I was very happy with my competition. We felt the pressure, we tried to talk to Dai (Daiane dos Santos), and everything, so that she didn't feel so pressured and in the end we shared some of that pressure to try to relieve her. But it didn't work. Because, I think, after she was a world champion, the TV was on her. So it was pressure from everywhere. And then it turned out that the rest of the group, actually, felt no pressure because we had a team to do our part. To represent our country well and to show that Brazil's gymnastics was there to stay. It had come to keep on as a team for many years, having a team qualified for the Olympics.

In Athens it was different, we had other coaches. Iryna went to Sydney and to Athens, but then she was with Oleg, it was a different structure, we had a team, our concentration was totally different from what we'd had in Sydney because I was older, I already knew what I wanted, I was no longer that (sigh) fascinated because I'd already been to one (Daniele Hypólito).

After qualifying for Sydney – for me, in my head, the Olympic Games were that dream, the dream of a perfect competition, a calm competition, because I competed giving my best, my goal was doing well. And in Athens the goal was the qualification (team and individual all-around), so there was more pressure, as in the finals, I had it myself, and the country too, because Brazil wanted the qualification, not only Daniele Hypólito... they wanted us to stay, the goal was another one, it was not only to participate¹³, the goal was to compete. So [...] now we wouldn't enjoy the championship, we would compete, then the six days of competition

¹³ When the gymnasts say "participate" they mean just being part of the Olympics, knowing that there is no real chance of winning a medal.

When they say "compete", they mean participating and fighting for a medal or for a good result.

were six days of stress, so it completely changed my concept of competition, of Olympics. It was in Athens that I saw that competition was not a joke, that competing was not what I had imagined, that war was not simply for the medal, it was a war that only who could stand it won, it was a full overcoming. It is the limit of the limit of the limit. If you are there, it's not for money, money doesn't buy it, it's simply talent and overcoming. So, for me these Olympics (in Athens) were very important because we were there, the six of us, and the six girls wanted to be there, but at the same time we didn't know that, to get there, we would need so much. So much effort, to go through so many barriers, because nobody says this. The dream is there, but for you to get there, you don't know that the way is very difficult. Nowadays I appreciate people who were athletes because it's not easy, only who's an athlete knows it (Camila Comin).

There in Athens, in the first Olympics really competing, I think it was really cool because we had a team. It was a strong team. The group was strong. We were among the best in the world. The twelve best in the world. And we ranked 8th! We were the 8th best team in the world, so we had to show something. We were supposed to show more good things. Not to mention that I went to Athens with this team and I still could be Olympic champion on the Floor. All that! So I guess it was something that happened too fast. That we said: "Everything happened so fast!". I guess. At least for me, I think. If you count, I have a background of twelve years of Gymnastics. [...] Thirteen years of Gymnastics. [...] The evolution was nice because I got it from the beginning, when we had nothing in Gymnastics. Nothing. And now we just have about everything. We have sponsorship, we have a good training place, we have a real preparation with good conditions.

It was pretty cool in Athens, but it was very intense. It was a stage in my life like... very tense. Because there was that expectation, an expectation of millions of people at the same time. So that was a very stressful thing. My focus was all over there. In Athens, on the Floor mainly, as it was my strongest apparatus. Not that I trained more for the Floor exercises, but the main focus was on the Floor. But it was hard. I think I lacked maturity! That the fact that I grew up in Gymnastics, it's the maturity you have. [...] It's hard to know how to deal with pressure, it's hard to cope with it, all there in your hands. Because at that moment I had everything in my hand. It was that thing: if you don't make a mistake, you're going to be the Olympic champion. [...] And it was one extra step that spoiled it. It was not even lack of power, it was the power that was too much! So I guess

you are gradually gaining maturity. But only that doesn't help! You get it when you win competitions. Only when you compete once there you'll you keep gaining it. (Daiane dos Santos).

In the new generation of gymnasts, their beginning in OG already suffered great pressure to conquer something and to be among the best, unlike the previous generation, who were in the process of transition from the context of participation of individual Brazilian gymnasts in OG without medal chances, to a team with real chances of qualifying and fighting for a medal in individual finals.

There in Athens I got a stress fracture in the shank, so I was really bad, I could barely step on the floor. I had physiotherapy, took medicine, calcium capsules to try to recover, but I felt a lot of pain. Nobody knows this, people never see this side, and you start to get overloaded: "it's coming", and you're in pain and you start to get desperate. But I had to train the same way, I had to stand the pain. The competition there was not very good for me, because I competed on the beam only. It was terrible, I didn't like it. I used to do 10 routines without any falls or balances problems every day to get to the competition and do that?! [...] That crap! I fell two or three times from the beam, because I was extremely nervous, terrified, I had nervous ties at the time of the competition and it was an inexplicable thing, because I used to do

10 routines without any extra movement in the training, all perfect. Even with my injured leg I used to do it. But it happens... just like Daiane dos Santos, who failed on the floor right at the end of her routine, everyone's subject to it! Later we got really upset because we'd trained so much, so much and we missed it for very little, just 0.10¹⁴. (Caroline Molinari).

I think I could have done better there, but, like, it was the first time, and I, as always, was the youngest in the team, so it was ok for me. I really liked it. I don't get nervous to compete. Sometimes I can look tense, but I'm calm, I can control myself, even at the moment I was going to mount the beam, or like the uneven bars. But to watch Daiane I wasn't nervous. When you're out of the competition, it's a big stress, my gosh! I almost died! (Laís Souza).

¹⁴ Due to a difference of 0.10 points, Brazil did not rank among the eight best teams to compete in the team final, it was ranked in 9th place.

My competition was much better than the training, because in the training there is a lot of pressure, and everyone there is looking at you. It makes you nervous. It's different. It was difficult at first, but then we got used to it. We talked about all this pressure, because it's hard for you to be there, you have to train well, because there's always a judge watching you, a coach watching you. And you can't cry, you can't complain. It was more difficult. Are you gonna cry? [...] We knew we couldn't. I wasn't as nervous as I thought I'd be. [...] So I always started to compete in the group, because I was the most calm and I did it like this, calmly. I didn't have that much trouble. So we started on the beam. I was the first one. Then I was very nervous because that gym was huge, there were so many people watching us. It makes anyone nervous, but I did very well. I competed. I didn't fall. On the Beam, I only had one connection that I missed, but I didn't make any mistake. On the Floor it went well, on the Bars, my best apparatus, I performed a flawless routine, let's say. I didn't make any mistake and did everything I had to. And as it was my best apparatus, it was very good for the team. And Vault was also good, I didn't make any mistake. So since it was our first Olympics, and our team was very strong like this, well prepared, I think we gave our best. There was no serious fault. So they (the coaches) were ok. They told us that we competed very well, and since the other teams were stronger, we couldn't go to the finals. It wasn't our time (Ana Paula Rodrigues).

The pressure to be part of one of the best teams in the world triggers a feeling of anxiety that is often uncontrolled, as Caroline Molinari said, which ended up getting out of control just at the time of competition. Ana Paula Rodrigues also mentions the fact that they were observed by other teams, by the judges, as they had become important gymnasts, prominent in the competition. Another situation that all the gymnasts who participated in the Athens OG mention is the pressure on Daiane dos Santos, a gymnast that was fighting for a medal in the Floor competition, something that no Brazilian gymnast had done before in OG. This context was totally different from Cláudia Magalhães's, who mentions her calmness and fun in the competition, while still fulfilling her role, but with smaller responsibility for the WAG level of her country at that moment.

From the generation of pioneers and the transition to the new generation, there is a great difference concerning the pressure to have a good competition, mainly because of the possibility of better results for the new generation. The pioneer gymnasts showed disregard for the final qualification, so that Cláudia Magalhães herself does not remember exactly her qualification in the OG – a fact that is unimaginable for a gymnast of the new generation, who knows where she wants and where she needs to reach, because there is already a higher responsibility with her country, since it expects results. Tatiana Figueiredo reports that, after her qualification for the OG, she returned to Brazil to get prepared during the last year because the trainings in the USA were very strong, which can demonstrate that the main and more difficult task was the qualification itself. After she qualified, the goal was to represent her country, but without any prospects, only to participate (not to fight for a very good result). Similarly, while addressing the issue of the weight gained in the Olympic village, Luisa Parente shows disregard for a possible negative result in her performance, as she was not so motivated, which emphasizes the idea that the participation itself was the greatest achievement until that moment.

Some testimonials explain details about the training in the OG or during the preparation for them, such as Cláudia Magalhães in the OG of Moscow: "The training was not strong, it was ok, it was light, just for testing the apparatus, the distances to run and to measure where the vault run starts and where the mounting begins" (p.15). Other gymnasts also approach the subject:

In the OG (1988), I confess that... my mother remembers I'd told her that, if there would be one more day of competition, I wouldn't have stood it. So maybe I was like that, actually, either at the peak, or maybe already in a descendant phase of my physical condition, but then it was like that, and I think it was the right thing. My mother even thinks it was too much for me. The best thing would be being at the peak all the time, and not

being already in that... (tiredness expression). But it's too hard. Especially for a coach who didn't have that experience. I think Brazil didn't have a school and everything, so I think the goal was achieved, for sure (Luisa Parente).

The trainings there were all scheduled. We arrived there and they'd already made all the training schedules, with the local where we would train. We trained in the mornings and in the afternoons. In the morning in a gym, in the afternoon, in the other gym. It was hard training. On the first and second days, it's always to get used to the apparatus. We don't perform a complete routine, but if the person arrives and already gets adapted to the apparatus, they can perform routines already. But it was shorter than here, because, as there were several teams, several countries, there wasn't so much time for us to stay in the gym. The trainings were shorter (Ana Paula Rodrigues).

As soon as we got in Athens, the trainings were not as hard as they used to be, because the day before the competition you can't, then there are the schedules and everything to train, but we had all the tasks that, if they weren't fulfilled, we had to do the next day. They'd made it for us and we had to follow that training plan. [...] And we got it not because we were lucky, nothing was in vain, we'd trained very hard. Only we who train, we know what we go through. Each one of us always remembers how difficult it was, really training a lot. A lot of training, exhausting, I would get to the end of the day completely exhausted, I was not even in the mood to go up the house stairs, it was really exhausting, but it was worth it, it worked out (Caroline Molinari).

The training there at the Olympics (2004) was tough. The same thing! It was very hard because it was hot, very hot, and the gym was usually very bright. So much light came in that it even hurt the eye. And I think the most difficult part of Athens was to get used to the apparatus, 'cause they were JF (Janssen Fritsen), if I'm not mistaken. The beam was ok, and the bars, people on the third day were more or less sort of getting used to it, everybody. Vault had a very hard board, and the floor was more or less ok also, but it was kind of soft (Lais Souza).

It should be noted that the Brazilian media started to pay more attention to WAG from the Seoul OG, with Luisa Parente, who mentions that the media in Brazil was interested in information and in broadcasting images of this sport from that time on:

In the competition in Seoul, crowded gym, everyone was watching and valuing all the athletes who were there. And the press, I remember the Brazilian press was also trying to follow every moment. I still remember now. The videos, you see some comments – still unprepared, a lot of ignorance. There wasn't this specific commentator thing that we have today. Because it's really a lot of information for each sport. But the Brazilian journalists already recognized this sport. It really stirs the emotion, because the Brazilian people especially love to follow it and cheer. So, that was wonderful.

Another important issue of this study concerns the statements that show some fascination with the OG. This fact was reported in different generations:

It was a party, the most beautiful things in the world, it was all rosy in Moscow. I'd never seen so many flowers in my life, everything was decorated with that summer of flowers, the people seemed not to suffer at all: always smiling, beautiful, happy, waving to everyone, I was in paradise. Then I started to have my few hours of free time to stroll in the Olympic village and buy things and those "Misha" animals (the Moscow Olympic Games mascot – a bear). [...] I had to concentrate because, at the time of training, I only trained, trained, and had some fun too (Cláudia Magalhães).

In Barcelona, as I'd already participated in Seoul. I also think that, because it's a city of Spain, the environment, the climate was more like summer. It wasn't cold. In front of the beach, wonderful weather! Beautiful city to host the Games. Everything was very nice, very festive. So it was a very, very nice environment too. It already had a high level of structure, also. That gave you a status like, really: My gosh! Athlete! This importance (Luisa Parente).

We were under the same pressure together. When it was decided that I would go, I didn't believe, I didn't believe it was me who was going. The trip to Sidney, from boarding time till the moment I had to compete, for me it was a dream, everything for me was beautiful, everything for me was a sea of roses. The Olympic Village for me was an unforgettable place, the athletes who passed by me, and I was drooling, do you know that child who gets the first toy?, for me, everything I had gone through, everything that was bad, the fact that I'd cried in the training because of pain had gone, it was erased, it was kind of, like an eraser. [...] Competing there was a relief. Because I finished, I can start all over again, as I have already achieved what I

wanted, which was my peak, it was the Sydney Olympic Games (Camila Comin).

In my first Olympic Games, everything was new, It's something I remember more of the first Olympics than of Athens itself, I think because it was the first Olympic Games, I was known as the mascot of Brazil, so I ended up getting to know a lot of people because of this, cause everyone wanted to know who the mascot was, I was very small, I had turned... better gift than this was to turn 16 during the Olympics. [...] Athens was as remarkable as Sydney was, because it was my second Olympics. But I think it was not that remarkable and I was not as dazzled as I was in Sydney (Daniele Hypólito).

Ah... I think the Olympics is a competition that everyone expects to happen. And when we got there... Wow! Everything is different there. It's very beautiful. [...] We arrived and stayed in one single apartment: the Brazilian Gymnastics team: the girls, the coach and the coordinator in a bedroom. It's one cafeteria for everyone and then we see all countries, all the sports, it's a very different thing. Pictures all the time! Camera in hand! There's a shopping mall there, small shops, it's really cool (Ana Paula Rodrigues).

Three gymnasts did not report this fascination as the previous ones: Soraya Carvalho, because of the injury mentioned previously; Caroline Molinari, possibly because she did not have the performance she wanted in the apparatus she could compete because she had a stress fracture in her leg; and Laís Souza, who says that the gymnasts who had already participated in the previous OG had anticipated so many things that she felt higher expectations: "Actually, we arrived there in Athens and it was not that big deal: Wow! It was normal for me".

The fact that most of the gymnasts in this research mention more details about the place, the entertainment of the Olympic Village than about the competition itself or their performance as athletes emphasizes the fascination with the OG, result of the dream of participating in this competition that is so valued by society. Medina and Sánchez (2003), quoted by Bortoleto (2004, p. 378), emphasize this value: "It is an indispensable condition to begin a long road to the accomplishment of the sport's myth of victory, of fame, of becoming an

idol and, as a consequence, becoming eternal."

This fascination may be an inevitable factor for different countries, with different athletes and sports, but possibly, for a country that does not rank significantly in the count of medals, it has a symbolism of something that is unattainable, heroic, powerful, more than it does for other countries, as they can see the OGs as something more possible, perhaps more common, with real chances of winning medals. What may increase this fascination is the fact that an athlete from a country considered a world sports power is prepared with all the right conditions to get a medal. On the other hand, a Brazilian athlete's conditions in the whole process of sporting training were probably not the most ideal to reach the OG, and yet he or she managed and got qualified anyway. This situation of being among the best in sports may contribute to this fascination of athletes in general, which can generate a loss of competitive focus.

The English Institute of Sport (2008) develops a psychological work with potential Olympic athletes, called "elite learners", preparing them for the pressure of such an important international championship, aiming at a psychological preparation for the OG, mainly for the London Games (2012), when English athletes competed in their own country with greater pressure than in any other Olympics. This institute develops courses with coaches and athletes, suggesting the implementation of pressure situations during the training itself.

This type of training, given by the Ukrainian coaches, was mentioned by some gymnasts in the present research. It consists of performing routines sometimes without warm up to be evaluated, or on some days when the coaches are colder and more demanding, like in a theater play, so that gymnasts feel greater pressure and the coach can notice how they react in these situations. Camila Comin comments on this preparation in her testimonial:

Then, four years with them (the Ukrainian coaches) seem to be eight. Training is very different, the training pace, the training goal, the cold way they work with us. This coldness also changed in four years. If you ask me if I have changed, from when I was a kid to today, I have totally changed, I am no longer the same person, nor the posture, the discipline, the responsibility, how to act when close to people, the concept of life, of person, of work, of how you put a person on the edge. Of stressing the person until the person says: enough! Don't go any further! I know what my limit is, I know I'm here, but I can go just as far as here, since I know I can go beyond my physical knowledge. I think I can stand that much! No! I can stand a little more, but this more... this distance between a double and a half (jump with twist on the longitudinal axis) for a triple, it's half twist, but that half twist... it's half twist. It's this limit that I've learned to see, not only in my personal aspects, but in my study, at work, in the people, at home (Camila Comin).

The English Institute of Sport (2008) has a program called PRIDE (Personal Responsibility in Developing Excellence), in which athletes who have already finished their sports careers, who have already experienced these pressure situations in other OGs and have been able to deal with them, try to pass on their experiences to the athletes in training for the OGs in order to prepare them for different situations experienced in these environments in a process called mentoring, as counseling. This preparation is developed by the performance psychologist of the English Institute of Sport, Pete Linsay. The same mentoring work was developed with Canadian Olympic medalists in preparation for the Winter Olympics and it was considered by athletes to be of great assistance to concentration, the focus on the competition (Macneill, 2007).

In a way, Laís Souza's lack of fascination may be the result of the counseling process of the gymnasts who had already participated in the Sydney Olympic Games and who, perhaps without this purpose, but in a spontaneous way, may have developed this counseling process, anticipating what she would find in the OG. Thus, it is possible to perceive the seriousness and certitude of the work

developed with the Brazilian team in Athens, in which there was an orientation and a certain goal carried out with the experience of those who have already lived several periodizations for the OGs. Camila Comin emphasizes the difference in her participation in the OGs of Sydney and Athens, saying that in 2004 the objective was no longer to participate, but to fight for a good result, a difference also observed in the generations prior to Sydney, for whom the objective was only to take part.

And after the OG, what was the feeling left in these gymnasts? For some of them, accomplishment, relief, others feel disappointment and others want to come back in other editions. They are different feelings, from the experiences of the days the athletes had in the OG: "After the Olympic Games, I wanted to go to the Olympics again. After we go to the Olympics, we can't stop, it's much, much pleasure, the most wonderful thing in the world. And I said, 'I'm going again! This thing is too good.'" (Cláudia Magalhães).

So it was very exhausting because I had this result and this result for me was very ambiguous. Just as it was very sad, for me it was a relief, like: "Oh, thanks, God. I won't need to make any more effort. I won't need to train any more. That's enough." (Soraya Carvalho).

When I came back, the plug fell. I already did it, and now? What am I going to do, where am I going to go? I got where I wanted. What do I do now? It ended like this, when you accomplish a goal and that's it. There was nothing forward. I'd never thought of myself. For me, my life would end there, as if the world ended in the year 2000 (Camila Comin).

We got upset, but at the same time that you get upset, you're happy because it's over. You get upset, but you feel that happiness: thank God! I'm not gonna practice like crazy! It's over, you know? You feel this relief, it doesn't matter the outcome, you really feel relieved. But we couldn't ease it because we still had Dai (Daiane dos Santos), she was in the Floor final. So, until the last day we were with her, eating less and everything, you know (Caroline Molinari).

Soraya Carvalho and Caroline Molinari's feeling of relief may demonstrate that their goal of participating in the OG, the responsibility of representing their country, was perhaps greater than the pleasure of being there. On the other hand, the researchers observe positive feelings of appreciation for the OG in Camila Comin and Cláudia Magalhães, including the fact that Camila Comin was so anxiously waiting for the moment of her participation in the OG, as the main goal of her life that, when it was over, she felt lost, a feeling that occurs also in many gymnasts when they finish their sporting careers. In turn, for Cláudia Magalhães, it was such a pleasurable experience that she came back strongly willing to participate in the next OG, but, in fact, it did not happen.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the fact that the objective of this article was to analyze the perspectives of the Brazilian gymnasts on their participation in the OG from 1980 to 2004, the contribution of this study is to present and analyze data that did not exist hitherto, since there is little appreciation of the gymnasts' voices, their feelings, their perceptions on the sports preparation system in general. Furthermore, there is no record in literature of previous publications on the subject of Brazilian gymnasts with such detail, as it is required for the type of research and method chosen. On the other hand, it is important to emphasize that these registers show some gymnasts' view on the context they lived in, therefore the study presents only the specific perspectives of a select group of Brazil's best gymnasts between 1980-2004.

In the analysis of these three generations, it is important to highlight that they were decisive for later generations, who have already enjoyed a better sporting structure for Artistic Gymnastics, with better training conditions and preparation for international championships. We still lack structure in several AG gymnasiums in our country,

besides the lack of professional training for coaches in a broader range (Lima et al., 2016; Carvalho & Schiavon,

2017). However, at least for gymnasts of the Brazilian team, since the 2004 national team, Brazil already offers financing for an international level of preparation in AG.

As we analyze the progression of the ten Brazilian gymnasts who participated in OG from 1980 to 2004, it is possible to notice the increase of the pressure for results, consequently followed by greater monitoring from the media and a greater dissemination of the sport in Brazil after the 1990s, and its apex was Daiane dos Santos' Olympic final on Floor exercise in 2004. The increase of the media interest about WAG, besides the positive aspect of the publicity for the sport in Brazil, also triggered greater pressure in the athletes, which was something new for the gymnasts in 2004, who were not used to the exaggerated approach of the media.

This study has some limitations: first, because this article presents the perspectives of the gymnasts, without considering other subjects who lived in the same context. Besides, the data portray the conditions of the most prominent gymnasts in Brazil from 1980 to 2004, which may not represent the Brazilian reality as a whole, and therefore cannot be generalized. Nevertheless, it enlightens sports professionals and managers, and the directions to take so that AG becomes a sport of excellence not only in Brazil, but also in emerging countries considering this sport, or even for countries that are already developed in this field, but whose gymnasts we have not heard for a scientific analysis yet.

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