

Do Olympic-Level Achievements Make People Happy?

August 04, 2021

The appeal of the Olympics is that they decide who can claim the title of best in the world. They also, less gloriously, decide who can claim the title of second best in the world.

Despite beating out every competitor on Earth but one, silver medalists can feel a special type of disappointment. In [a study that analyzed footage from the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona](#), they were consistently judged to look less happy than bronze medalists, both right after competition and atop the medal podium.

The explanation, the researchers theorized, was that the athletes were dwelling differently on what might have been: The silver medalists were wondering how great winning gold might have felt, while the bronze medalists were contemplating the letdown of not medaling at all.

The Olympics may have more pageantry, nationalism, and breathless TV commentators than daily life does, but the Games hold lessons about how achievement and its pursuit affect our happiness—even those of us who aren't competing to be the world's best at anything. What the Olympics teach us is that although the promise of achievement can propel us forward, it comes with pitfalls that can undermine the satisfaction of actually achieving.

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