

# Good as Gold

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When turning on their TVs to watch the 2006 Olympic Games in Turino, Italy this month, people all over the world will witness the same events. They will be thrilled by the same luge races and awed by the same figure skaters, and they will join in universal bafflement that there is actually an Olympic sport called skeleton. However, new research published in this month's *Psychological Science* shows that the explanations people will give for their heroes' achievements will vary drastically from culture to culture.

American Jim Shea is on his way to a gold medal in the men's skeleton at the 2002 Winter Olympics on Wednesday, Feb. 20, 2002.

A Japanese and American team led by Hazel Markus (Stanford University) found that Americans view performance as a function of personal characteristics and features of the competition, whereas Japanese viewers are more likely to consider a holistic view of the athlete's life. In Japanese contexts, an athlete's performance is seen as a product of personal attributes and background as well as social and emotional experiences.

In an initial study, researchers coded Japanese and American TV and newspaper coverage of athletes from the 2000 and 2002 Olympics. While personal athletic characteristics were the primary subject of commentary in both countries' media, they were even more predominant in American coverage. Japanese coverage included more information about nonathletic personality attributes, overall health during the games, past experiences, and future plans.

The 2000 American coverage was also less likely than that year's Japanese coverage to include information about advice athletes received from others, such as coaches, teammates, and family members. However, the 2002 coverage was just as likely to include information about help from others. The authors speculate that this could be because the 2002 games were held in the United States after 9/11, and Americans at that point were much more likely to refer to community values.

In a second study, researchers asked students in both countries to pick the most important information from a list of possible media statements about a fictional female runner from their country. The Americans were more likely to choose statements focusing on personal attributes and uniqueness, while the Japanese were more likely to pick statements about the athlete's Good as Gold coach and team, their motivations, their emotions, and their doubts. Also, Americans were more likely to pick positive statements, while Japanese subjects were more balanced in their selection of positive and negative reports.

According to the authors, these findings reveal different Japanese and American "models of agency," or "descriptive and normative understandings of how and why people act." Americans are more likely to

emphasize individual competitive achievement, whereas Japanese see a gold medal as a product of a wider range of factors. The media play a role in both reflecting and shaping these different cultures' ideas and ideals about going for the gold.

To learn more about this research, see “Going for the Gold: Models of Agency in Japanese and American Contexts,” in the February 2006 issue of *Psychological Science*.