Unfolding events at the Beijing Olympics 2008–public diary of a gymnastics coach

Paul Hall and Clive Palmer
(Huntingdon Olympic Gymnastics Club)
(School of Sport, Tourism and the Outdoors, University of Central Lancashire)

* The Olympic daily report from Paul Hall in Beijing (blog) is reprinted here with kind permission from BBC Radio Cambridgeshire.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper will be to discuss some diary-like reflections from a highly accomplished gymnastics coach, Paul Hall, written in Beijing during his International duties representing Great Britain at the recent Olympic Games. The account is presented to the reader as an ethnographic diary of events; personal observations of behind the scenes goings-on that the casual observer from UK would not have been privy to through the popular media of television. Paul provides an interpretation of daily events from an expert’s point of view at the scene, importantly perhaps, using dialogue that has not been filtered through a TV presenter’s script to ensure easy mass consumption from an entertainment hungry public. Thus, the account provides the reader with glimpses of sport’s culture that would not normally be revealed to us as researchers and students interested in this area. The chronological and personalised account might then be seen as diary-like data in order to promote discussion about the Olympic event itself, aspects of high performance coaching and the subtleties of coach pedagogy at elite levels. Consequently, productive thought might be stimulated relating to the nature of qualitative data in terms of its collection, presentation and analysis within sport’s research.

The fact that this account was not written as part of a research project may not preclude it from being counted as useful, valid and informative data. If anything it may strengthen its case as premeditated missions to collect data within the bounds and time-frame of a research project may fall foul of what Silverman (2007) called “manufactured data” (see also Kawycz, 2007: 95-97). That is, manufactured data produced from scenarios that are staged in order to collect data may belie the truths to be found of the everyday world. Consequently, Silverman (2007) urges that interviews, questionnaires and focus groups, which may be regarded as second order interpretations of past events, should only be used as a last resort or when a quick fix solution may be required, for example, to offer tentative claims from a project within a deadline. Paul Hall’s account (first-order observations) of life at the 2008 Olympics may therefore be regarded as a genuine log of naturally occurring events as he experienced them. Fur-
ther, this might be the closest view of reality we can get access to, in what is now a very high security operation at the Olympic events and the Olympic Village in particular.

Many researchers from the areas of Ethnography, Grounded Theory and Education have advocated the use of diaries and personal journals as a strategy to collect data about everyday life events (e.g. Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Silverman, 2001; Moon, 2000; Bolton, 2005). The concept of a diary-as-a-record has taken many different forms in numerous research applications with great effect, usually written by the subject and providing valuable insights to their world and behaviours over a period of time. Such a diary would ultimately provide in many cases a vehicle for self-reflection and perhaps, re-appraisal of behaviour. Diaries might range from for example, food diaries in health research, to learning logs in education, to performance diaries in sports coaching or stress diaries in psychology research.

An interesting feature of diaries per se seems to be that they are written by the subject and the information is personal and private to them, in the form of perhaps, “dear-diary confidences”. However, diaries generated within a research project are normally compiled by the subject with the general intention that they become data for analysis at a later point, usually with a third party – the researcher. In ethnographic research some diaries are compiled by the subject and passed on to a researcher for their scrutiny and evaluation, or conversely, the subject may be the researcher, the diary becoming a basis for critical self-reflection. In each case the type and sensitivity of information recorded may vary according to whom it may be disclosed, and how it may be interpreted; that is, how it might be judged by others. These ideas may be helpful in guiding our evaluation of Paul Hall’s diary-like account, which was a form of public writing intended for a specific audience. Paul’s account appeared as a “blog” on an internet website (BBC, 2008) which recorded events as they progressed in Beijing. (The term blog is a contraction of the term “web-log” which is typically a diary-like chronicle of entries). The blog in this context seemingly conflicts with the traditional diary concept as a means to record personal and private information. The central dilemma being about what to record and what to divulge to the public as ultimately the author will bear the responsibility for it. For the blog to be received positively writing style is seemingly very important. Paul seems to find a good balance of providing a personal account for public consumption. That is, it is diary-like, which is not formal but accessible, it is not short-hand or code but structured for us to enjoy. Consequently, Paul provides a personal account of his insider-experiences which we would never have access to. It is usefully way-marked by the mainstream features and events seen simultaneously on television providing us reference points to follow the story below, for example, Nicole Cooke getting her Gold medal, the opening ceremony etcetera.
The blog as an unfolding story or narrative

The blog presented below is in its entirety and provides the reader with an overview of events which at the time of writing on a daily basis were not known; Paul not having a crystal ball to look into the future, the pace of delivery of the narrative being restricted by the natural progress of time. Following the blog at the time of writing in August 2008, provided an exciting record of unfolding events from day to day; readers who followed avidly would not know what fortunes lay ahead for Paul and his team of gymnasts. The plots for them were as yet unwritten, yet to be discovered, yet to be experienced – for real. This may have been what made this account of the Games so engaging to follow unlike reading a story or article reporting after the event, because such an article may be fictionalised, edited and proofed “as a whole” or even made more persuasive because the end is known at the time of writing. For these reasons the blog below is presented in reverse order to that which it is to be found on the website currently (BBC, 2008). The intention here is to allow the reader to follow the blog/story in the same order as they were experienced in August 2008. This may replicate what the readers of the blog (and indeed the gymnasts in Beijing) experienced during those weeks and to some degree shared e.g. see the message board. NB. Unless you are the kind of person that needs to know the ending of a book before you read it, don’t go there just yet as it may spoil the sense of discovery that you may gain from this presentation of the same story.

The blog idea appears to lend itself to personal story telling which importantly Paul seems to have the writing skills for and seems quite adept at. As the story develops events are experienced, not constructed beforehand, not fictionalised, they are relatively unplanned and can’t be altered retrospectively for approval from the audience. Consequently, in this context the blog becomes a form of reportage, a term for an eye-witness genre of journalism which Carey (1987) considers as an “individual journalist’s report of news”, especially when witnessed firsthand and distributed through the media. Carey (1987) continues to point out that this style of reporting is often characterized by travel and careful observation which seems to fit the journey of experiences by Paul and his team of gymnasts. In this manner Paul’s writing allows us to feel we have an insider’s glimpse of aspects of Olympic life that we would not otherwise have been able to share.

In exploring the various ways that qualitative data might be presented, the blog/diary concept offers a further variation related to narrative construction. In the first instance may be the decision to include data at all in the writing up phase of research as there may be ethical implications to consider. This said many qualitative research papers do not seem to include examples of their [raw] data which might otherwise help with context for the reader to gain more from their offerings (e.g. Cote, Salmela, Baira and Russell, 1993; Cote, Salmela, Trudel, Baria and Russell, 1995; Cote, Salmela
and Russell, 1995a, 1995b; Cote and Salmela, 1996). Having chosen to present data in the text [in JQRSS articles] the next decision is seemingly one of ordering; to present data sequentially or non-sequentially in the writing up phase of research activity. This can determine the structure and focus of the resulting narrative. For example, excerpts of data might be used out of sequence to that from which it was gathered to help emphasize key points or major themes emerging from the research such as trends in coach behaviour. For example see Lear and Palmer (2007) and Liebmann and Rookwood (2007) as examples of non-sequential data presentation within the narrative. Alternatively excerpts of data might be presented in the sequence that it was gathered to provide the reader with a track record or context for how and when key points might have emerged during the research. For example, see Openshaw and Palmer (2007) and McCabe and Palmer (2007) as examples of sequential data presentation in the narrative. In either case the data might be said to lead or even direct the research activity; research findings are grounded in the data which perhaps should be an overriding feature of qualitative research. The choices of data excerpts and data arrangement in the text seemingly allows the researcher to demonstrate and perhaps emphasize major themes emerging from their research activity and to perhaps, protect the identity of sources if this is important. However this may also be dependent upon the author's personal writing skills to communicate the points clearly in accessible language. Consequently, the tactic in this paper is to present the data alone, uninterrupted by narrative building. The data may be seen to build its own story which is now left to the reader to discover, and perhaps interpret for themselves.

Paul Hall’s Olympic report from Beijing 2008,
BLOG (BBC, 2008),
...the story begins...

Once again, a powerful team from Huntingdon Olympic Gymnastics Club is representing Team GB at a major event. And this time it’s the biggest of all time - the Olympic Games in China.

Team GB’s delegation from the Huntingdon club are (from left to right): Monica Boru and Paul Hall (coaches), Daniel Keatings, Louis Smith, Kayleigh Cooke and Marissa King.
Tuesday 29th July, 2008, Olympic Village, Beijing

Ni Hao!

Louis, Dan and me arrived safely in Beijing yesterday (Monday) following a 10 hour overnight flight. We’ve yet to see the sky and it’s very hot and humid but there seems to be turbo-charged air conditioning everywhere we go. The Olympics are all over the city and our journey to the village saw buildings, lamp posts, and buses festooned with the 5 rings, and it was great to drive past the Birds Nest and National Stadium where all the action will happen in less than 2 weeks time.

We’re amongst the first teams to enter the village so it’s a little quiet at the moment, but every hour the world’s greatest athletes are pouring in and making little nations of their apartment complexes. It’s an amazing centre with 3 room apartments furnished to a high standard with every facility to hand.

Little Britain! - Team GB shipped in its own red telephone box and have done a fantastic job in making this place feel like a home from home.

Dan and Louis are in gaming heaven having found the video arcade with the latest machines all free of charge. The Food Hall is the size of 4 football pitches and boasts cuisine from all around the world, served 24 hours a day. Discipline is key as what is probably the world’s only free McDonalds tempts everybody from a corner of the centre- so far the guys have stuck with steaks and salad.

There are a massive amount of volunteers who are at pains to help everybody get orientated and enjoy the experience. Each has been taught a few valuable sentences in English but are a little lost if you stray too far from their specialised subject. I especially enjoyed the, “…thank you for cooperating with me”, from the burly security guard who frisked me at Village check in - as if I would do otherwise!

We had a good training session this morning (Tuesday), considering it was 2am British time, and Dan and Louis are fit and well and ready for action. We are training with the Italian and Spanish teams in a superbly equipped facility. London already has a hard act to follow!

Hi to everyone back home, especially all at Huntingdon Gym, working hard for 2012, I hope!

Bye for now,
Paul
Thursday 31st July, 2008, Olympic Village, Beijing

Ni Hao from Beijing,

We’ve been here 4 days now and we’re all settling in to the sights and sounds of Village life. Louis and Dan are training well and have done all elements and combinations ready for next week. Dan is currently leading on the basketball video game challenge but I’m pleased to say that I’m just ahead of the two Olympians on the daily brain training quiz that entertains us on the transfer bus to the gym.

The heavens opened this afternoon but fortunately Louis and I were well prepared with our Team GB umbrellas. Daniel got soaked!

The facilities are absolutely incredible; even the warm-up gyms have a full podium set up, and I’m enjoying the friendly chats with the legions of volunteers, eager to help. I especially liked the sign above the medical fridge in gym 2 today, “The medical ice piece forbids edible”, or don’t eat the physio’s ice, if you need a translation.

Team GB female gymnasts have just arrived from Macau and I’m happy to report that all seems well. Colin is full of stories and photos of the Cirque De Soleil, Chelsea FC and great training in a fantastic Camp - Macau sounds wonderful!

Thanks to all of you who have sent messages, they are very special and much appreciated.

Bye for now,
Paul

Sunday 3rd August, 2008, Olympic Village, Beijing

‘Ni Hao from Beijing!

Day 6 and I’ve found the marmite. Breakfast is now a perfect mix of muesli, fruit, coffee and toast with the spread from home. One of the problems with a food hall so vast is that you need a week to work out the best route for all your favourite fayre, but I’m there now.

Walked through the Olympic Park yesterday evening, past the Bird’s Nest and a full-on dress rehearsal for Friday’s opening. The streets were overflowing with legions of participants in fancy dress and with various props, and the evening finished with an awesome firework display, still only a miniature version of what is to come. The atmosphere, lighting, and visual spectacle is just incredible - be sure to watch!

Team GB are beginning to populate the village, with the cyclists arriving this morning and the main bulk over the next few days. Even the weather seems a part of the
meticulous organisation with gorgeous blue skies appearing with just 5 days to go. The guys want to say a few words.

A few words from our Huntingdon gymnasts...

**Hi everyone back home! Marissa here!**

China is amazing... the village is huge and training preparations are going really well towards the Games. When we arrived the weather wasn't so great as it was rather smoggy and one time it chucked it down with rain and we all got drenched! Now the weather's beautiful and sunny with clear blue skies. The village was quite quiet when we arrived but is quickly filling up by the day with so many different athletes from all over the world. Hopefully things will continue to run smoothly up towards our competition and we'll do our country proud!"

**Yo, Louis here!**

Me and Dan are fine and soaking up the sun and enjoying the scenery. Not really - we're training every day and getting loads of rest before the big day on Saturday. The village is awesome and I'm enjoying the food. Hi to all back home, especially my Peterborough friends and all at the gym. Mardi, have you caught that Kovacs yet? And how's the suntan Luke? We have podium training on Wednesday so I'm looking forward to the final stages. Catch you later x.

**Dan:**

Hi everybody, especially family and friends in Corby. Don't be cross mum - I'm sharing in a small room with Louis and it's all his mess, honest. Please can you call me at 7 each morning to make sure I get up (midnight your time). Am loving the village lifestyle and enjoying the sights. The Olympic Venue is amazing and training is going good. Hope you are all working hard back at the gym - keep out of my locker! Dan K.

Cheers for now,
Paul

**Wednesday 6th August, 2008, Olympic Village, Beijing**

‘Ni Hao from Beijing,

Just two days to go and things are hotting up. There's a palpable excitement in the Village as it stretches to near-capacity with athletes from all over the planet. Queues are quick to die down but also a great leveller - I enjoyed the laundry line a few days ago as I found myself ahead of Sir Clive Woodward patiently clutching his two bags
of whites and coloureds.

The flag-raising ceremony was our first (and definitely not last) opportunity to hear the National Anthem in front of a host of media as well as the Village mayor who greeted us, along with the angelic voices of a Chinese school choir. We followed this with afternoon tea in a traditional Chinese Tea House, complete with choreographed pouring by a graceful hostess and some wonderful dancing from a balletic group on the front stage. A very pleasant afternoon and a great taste of the best of China.

The gymnasts are fine and putting the finishing touches to a lifetime of work in the hope that it will all come good this weekend. Louis and Dan completed podium training this morning, a safe job but keeping their best for Saturday, I’m sure.

The arena is vast - 18,000 seats that seem to disappear into the heavens and cameras covering every corner of the arena.

We trained with USA, Italy, Spain and a few individuals and had a good look at how everybody was doing. Marissa and the girls have podium tomorrow, then the opening ceremony on Friday and straight in to competition at the weekend.

Apparently, a guy called Nadal strayed in to the food hall for a meal yesterday; he’s a tennis player or something...

That’s all for now.

Can’t wait for the Opening Ceremony!

Bye for now

Paul

Friday 8th/Saturday 9th August 2008, Beijing - 12.45am (Beijing time)

Ni Hao from Beijing!

Well, the day has finally arrived and in less than 24 hours Louis and Daniel will have competed in the qualification event at the National Indoor Stadium. Today we drove past a clock that has been counting down the minutes over the last 4 years and it was showing just 8 hours left - the excitement is building!

Training was great this morning with all gymnasts focused on tomorrow’s job and working with a soldier’s discipline. Louis and Dan are in good form and, despite the early training slots, are still managing to smile and enjoy the experience. Marissa and the rest of the Team seemed to have had a good, safe podium and are having lighter training today before their big day on Sunday.
We have our orders for tonight’s opening ceremony and have to gather well in advance as the logistics of moving 10,000 athletes into a capacity stadium must be immense. It’s just a 20 minute walk from the village but quite tough in this heat.

Been playing guess the sport and am now pretty adept at recognising the cauliflower ears of wrestlers, strange tans of the cyclists and the gazelle-like elegance of some of the female track athletes. I’m sharing with three other coaches and the apartment is now looking (and smelling) like students’ accommodation. Did the ironing last night but please don’t tell Kim.

Thanks for all your kind words - we all feel so well supported out here and very keen to do the job.

See you on the other side...
Paul

Saturday 9th August, 2008, Beijing

Ni Hao from Beijing!

Well, I won’t forget the past 24 hours for a long time. I witnessed the most incredible opening ceremony and then watched Louis and Daniel perform superbly in Subdivision One of the Men’s Artistic Qualifications at the Beijing Olympics.

Louis has created a bit of history by becoming the first British gymnast to make a final at this event since the Second World War, and Daniel, still a junior, has qualified for the all around final amongst 24 of the best exponents on the planet.

The guys were extremely focused and performed great routines across six apparatus but I can tell you that playing the waiting game for eight hours whilst watching other gymnasts trying to take your finals place is far more stressful than being in the competition arena.

It went right to the wire, with a Korean gymnast pushing Dan into first reserve on pommel horse with an equal score but placed higher due to less execution deductions relative to difficulty.

My favourite moment at the opening ceremony was just two minutes before the official start. Two and a half thousand people moved into the central arena, each pushing a metre square drum. They stood in perfect formation for over 20 minutes without a flicker of movement and, as the clock ate the seconds, a hush descended on the stadium creating the most incredible tension and expectation.

I held my breath and waited for the roar of this army as they moved in perfect syn-
chronicity while the drums beat out the heartbeat we all felt so keenly. The power of crowds and the ingenuity of man were on display and, at times, I could not believe what I was seeing— an incredible evening.

Louis and Dan look forward to their first day off tomorrow and will go back to the gym to cheer on the girls in their quest to make a Team Final. Then we start again ready for next week.

Five years ago to this day a dear friend of mine, Terry Sharpington, left me with the task of continuing his life’s work at the gym at Huntingdon. I sat with him the night before he died and we laughed about the wonderful moments that the sport had given us both.

After sharing some of the many anecdotes about Louis Smith, Terry got serious and fixed me with a piercing stare, “…Louis is the one, Paul. Remember what I say- he will be your champion”.

Terry, right again mate.
Paul

**Sunday 10th August, 2008, Beijing**

Ni Hao from Beijing!

I just had the most incredible experience. There I was sitting in my apartment with Nigel the trampoline coach celebrating the fact that Beth Tweddle had just qualified for the bars final, when my ears picked up the familiar sound of a bottle being placed carefully on the ground outside the room.

I opened the door and there, with the biggest grin ever witnessed, was Nicole Cooke with an OLYMPIC GOLD MEDAL dangling from her neck. How cool is that? Britain’s first medal of the Games and it’s in the apartment next door to ours.

Nicole cycled 78 miles in the pouring rain and sprinted like her life depended on it for first place. She was ecstatic to say the least and it was magical to share her elation and get up close to that bit of metal for which we all crave.

The girls performed well today but finished in ninth place, painfully close to a team final, but not quite enough, they needed eighth position. Marissa performed four clean routines to score over 56 all around - she can be very proud. Becky Downie is in the all around final with Imogen as reserve, and now Beth has a chance for glory - we all wish her well.

Louis and Dan had a rest day today and are a little hoarse after supporting the girls
from the stands. A day full of emotion, some highs, some lows, but I’ll never forget
that medal winning smile - top job Nicole!

Bye for now,
Paul

**Wednesday 13th August, 2008, Beijing**

Ni Hao from Beijing!

“Better to be a tiger for one day, than a sheep for a lifetime”. So goes the Chinese
proverb and I’ve really enjoyed seeing so many heroic performances over the past
few days.

From Nicole Cooke sprinting to gold in a thunderstorm after three hours of punish-
ing cycling, to Emms and Robertson coming from behind to beat the Chinese at
Badminton. Team GB are doing ok and our medal tally so far looks a whole lot better
than the Eurovision results from a few months ago.

There’s great support in the village for all our athletes and we can visit HQ daily to
snap up tickets to other events. Me and the guys will try to see some athletics next
week and I hope to catch the diving once our gym duties are over.

This morning at the gym we watched the Chinese women beat USA in a thrill-
ing competition that saw the roof nearly lift off the stadium with 15000 spectators
screaming their support.

One of the best competitions I have ever witnessed - nip and tuck between the two
great nations all the way until Sacramone of USA succumbed to the intense pressure
and made some errors that saw the dreams of victory disappear behind a near perfect
Chinese Team. Marissa and Kayleigh watched from the stands and were inspired by
some marvellous work in an incredible, emotional atmosphere.

Louis and Dan have been training for the past three days and are busy preparing for
their finest hours. Dan has been coping with the mornings and is really looking for-
w ard to his Olympic All Around Final debut.

Still a junior, he will enjoy the pleasure of competing alongside the greatest names in
our sport, all fighting for the Olympic Title. Louis forgot his accreditation today and
missed the first bus but it gave me a great excuse to nip back to the food hall for two
more pieces of pizza so I didn’t mind too much.

Today we practiced sitting for 15 minutes doing nothing and then performing a pommels routine — similar conditions to the big event on Sunday. Be sure to watch the
Beeb at lunchtime!

The guys say hi to all their friends and family at home and can’t wait to get back and catch up once the job is done. Marissa misses Cambridge but not the drive up the A14 to Huntingdon six times a week. Kayleigh says “hi” to everyone at the Club and be sure to be there on the last week of August to say “goodbye”, as she leaves for Australia on the 2nd September.

Thanks for all your messages - great support!

See you soon,
Paul

Thursday 14th August, 2008, Beijing

Ni Hao from Beijing!

It’s Thursday afternoon and Dan has just competed in his first Olympic Individual All Around Final. He improved on both his score and his ranking from the qualifications, finishing 20th overall with a score of 89.000. For Dan it was a marvellous achievement to come to these Games still as a junior and to compete against the 24 best Olympians [seniors], despite being the youngest gymnast in the field.

Dan enjoys the weather!

A 15.7 on pommels showed just how good he is on this piece and it was great to see him in third overall after the first rotation. A few wobbles but a solid performance and looking very comfortable at the highest level of his sport. The event was won by Yang Wei of China with Uchimura of Japan in Silver and Caranobe of France taking a surprise third place.

We got caught in the mother of all thunderstorms on the way back but fortunately, Dan, the only one without a jacket, made good use of his black bin liner as a make-shift waterproof.

Louis is training this afternoon and, in just three days, he will fight for a medal in the Pommel Final.

Bye for now
Paul
Monday 18th August, 2008, Bronze Medal in Beijing!

Ni Hao from Beijing!

It’s 4am and I just got in from the competition. Two hours of doping control and five hours of press. Last night Louis fulfilled a dream that saw a British gymnast on the podium in an apparatus final for the first time in 100 years.

Louis with his medal in Beijing

The pressure was enormous, many gymnasts tasting the medal a little too early and falling in their needed hour. I always said that he just needed to go through his routine and that was indeed the case. We can forgive his small form breaks in that cauldron of an arena that saw so many favourites unseated from the apparatus.

It was a tough time for Dan yesterday - so near to a final and very frustrating to watch from the stands knowing that you have a medal-winning performance inside you. He is a great gymnast and will blossom in 2012, I’m sure.

Louis is tired but most of all relieved that it’s all over and he stayed on. I asked him what he was thinking of immediately before his qualifications routine and his answer kind of sums him up, “…my Nan got up at 4am to watch me perform, I couldn’t let her down”.

His phone crashed after the event under the weight of texts from so many of his friends, their support has definitely helped him keep going. He and Dan can now relax and enjoy the second week without the pressure of having to perform.

On Saturday I came into the warm-up gym ready to begin the session and could see no sign of Dan and Louis. I looked amongst the gymnasts already stretching out but they were missing and I feared the worst.

As I leant against the raised staging a hand shot out through the curtain from underneath the podium and grabbed my leg, sending me leaping a few feet in the air, much to the entire gym’s amusement. The dynamic duo were under the floor area laughing their socks off...

Well done guys, you’ve done your Club and Country proud - enjoy the moment!’

Paul
Wednesday 20th August, 2008 - a well-deserved rest and a bit of sight-seeing...

Ni Hao from Beijing!

It’s a wonderful feeling to be the other side of a good result and especially good to finish competing and still have a few days to relax, enjoy the Games and see some of the delights of China.

Now that’s a Great Wall, Paul Hall!

The guys are celebrating, chilling, and enjoying the unique atmosphere and the jubilation of a successful Team GB Camp, and the girls are cutting hair, painting nails, shopping and soaking up the sun.

Today I had my first excursion, visiting The Great Wall. You can read about it, watch it on TV but, like any other Wonder of the World, nothing prepares you for the sight of this incredible structure marching across the top of mountains for as far as the eye can see. We took a cable car up, had plenty of photos on the top, and then a hair-raising toboggan ride down at breakneck speed.

I rather enjoyed telling Monica, our nervous choreographer, that “brake” was pushing the lever forward and “speed up” was pull it back. She discovered my ploy about half a kilometre down having nearly broken the sound barrier on a hairpin bend - I’ll pay for a new hairdo, I promise.

Had a Chinese meal today and a difficult choice from the traditional menu: spicy edible fungus, deep fried termite mush, or bee chrysalis. I opted for the steak.

It was great to see Beth (Tweddle) perform the most difficult bars routine of the competition, but a little disappointing to see her in fourth by less than a tenth. It was an amazing performance, full of originality, and worthy of a place on the podium. We can be very proud of all our gymnasts’ performances in Beijing, and Beth has been an inspiration to all.

Finally got into the cube and watched some diving, and tomorrow we hope to catch some athletics after a bit of haggling down at the silk market.

Louis and Dan slept in this morning and are relishing their first good rest from gymnastics this year. Enjoy it while it lasts!

See you soon,
Paul
Last update: Thursday 21st August, 2008 - crispy scorpions, anyone?

Ni Hao from Beijing!

Last night I ate a scorpion. I didn’t fancy the termite mush and they’d run out of frog jelly so had little choice really. Dan tried one too but stopped short of the tail. Best way is down in one and think about crispy bacon - they’re really not too bad and the entrepreneur in me is considering a little line in bar snacks back home.

Mmmm... yummy!

Had a great evening last night at the restaurant with families, friends, and colleagues from gymnastics all celebrating the fantastic achievements over the last week. The gymnasts are all looking forward to a few days of rest and sightseeing before the Closing Ceremony on Sunday. The mood in the Team GB Camp is amazing with our most successful games for a hundred years, inspiring everybody to work to the max. I hope to see some athletics tonight and maybe some boxing tomorrow.

Louis, Dan, Marissa and Kayleigh all say hi and thanks for the hundreds of messages of support and congratulations that have been flooding in. They are all looking forward to coming home and meeting up.

See you soon!
Paul

Conclusion

In conclusion and in striving to provide a balanced view about qualitative data collection, it may be worth bearing in mind some potential issues about diary-based data which a researcher might take account of in their study. The data of the like presented above and that which may be derived from diaries in general may suffer from anecdotal focus, that being, one person’s view of events where they may have been many views, accounts and interpretations sharing that experience. From a qualitative standpoint this is not making a case for searching for “reliability” through x-number of reported instances to establish a consensus of opinion and therefore “the truth”. Rather, it is that there may have been many other interpretations which could have added to the richness of the reported experience which might have been gleaned from the situation. Another consideration may be that diary entries are relatively unverified; for example, what might stop someone just fabricating entries to satisfy a researcher? In the blog above events could be verified by people at the scene if needed but this may not be the case for diary entries in other investigations. Paul’s blog ac-
count also tallies with major events as reported in the media during the Olympics which may point to its validity, at least its genuineness. However, in other forms of research where diaries may be considered for data collection this might be a weakness if relied upon solely for data collection and may need backing up in some way with an alternative strategy.

The reporting of true feelings or even actual occurrences in the blog may also be constrained by the pressure from, and accountability to a public audience “looking in” and making their own judgements of the proceedings. Consequently, the blog reporting may have become tactical to satisfy the needs of writing for public consumption and may be curtailed for appropriateness as it was not known how the products would be judged. In this manner each member of the public logging on to review the blog may, as far as the writer was concerned, have assumed the role of ‘researcher’ with the considerable added vagueness for Paul that he did not know who the ‘researchers’ were or how he was being judged. This may highlight the concept that diary-based data could suffer similar weaknesses to that of staged interviews in research; the idea of offering the researcher what they want, for whatever reasons, would risk skewing the data from an honest account of their lived experience.

A further feature which may limit the blog as ethnographic data, and possibly limit diary entries depending upon how they are set up, may be that the reporting is not structured at the outset as normal ethnographic field notes might be (e.g. Schatzman and Strauss, 1973; Spradley, 1979; Kirk and Miller, 1986; Hughes, 1994). Thus the reports, blog/diary entries may fail to take account of the impact/presence of the observer upon the situation to make those observations. For example, an observer in an ethnographic study might structure their field notes to record “descriptive notes” (what went on), “theoretical notes” (what inferences can be made) and “methodological notes” (influence of the researcher on the situation). If the blog was structured in this way it could cease to be a blog and would probably cease to be of interest to its intended audience. Equally however, structured field notes by virtue of their structure, may miss out on the richness of narrative description which seems possible in the free-writing of a diary/blog form.

In closing, Paul’s account of events at the Olympics offers a glimpse of ‘real-life’ during those weeks in August 2008 which are not normally afforded to the majority of people and may therefore be of interest to us not only as coaches but as investigators of sport. Further, Paul’s account was not influenced by a researcher’s agenda to observe in a certain way or to look at certain things which might otherwise have hampered his experiences. The blog was one person’s reported view of their lived experience and it is left untouched by analytical thematic breakdown for readers to enjoy, appreciate and interpret in their own way.
References


