

International Sports Science and Chiropractic's Role

Dynamic Chiropractic Staff

In Part I of this exclusive interview, Leroy Perry, DC, talks about the impact of sports science on chiropractic practice.

Sports Science has been described as the practical application of physics, movement, and biomechanics in the treatment of patients. For the athletes of the Eastern Bloc countries, the administrations of the sport scientists have long been regarded as often the difference between athletes winning and losing. This component of care fits nicely into chiropractic care. It allows DCs to be more effective in treating athletes and performers, or anyone who demands more from their body on a daily basis than the average individual.

Dr. Leroy Perry has long been known for treating athletes and entertainers. What isn't known is how he acquired the understanding of sports science and how the medical establishment paved the way for him to bring this knowledge back to the chiropractic profession.

"DC": We understand that the medical establishment tried to stop you from treating U.S. Olympic athletes?

Dr. Perry: I was the team doctor for the Antigua Olympic Team in 1976, and some of the United States athletes had arranged for me to treat them as well. Of course in those years the AMA had gone on record to state they would rather see the U.S. athletes lose than have a chiropractor on their team.

The U.S. medical staff coerced the U.S. athletes away from getting chiropractic care, telling them it would be bad press for them. They threatened that anyone caught going to see a chiropractor would automatically lose their U.S. Olympic health insurance coverage.

The athletes called a team meeting and in front of the U.S. medical staff and administration tore up their insurance cards and all left the room. The rest is now history. I treated them literally around the clock, day and night. In addition, I treated athletes from 21 countries, including many Eastern Bloc athletes. Now, 17 years later, not only am I still treating Olympic athletes, but as of 1984, the U.S. Olympic team has had a team chiropractor.

"DC": Where did you first encounter the concept of an international sports science and how were you involved?"

Dr. Perry: It was during the 1976 Olympic Games in Montreal, Canada. The Eastern Bloc countries had been very successful in their training and caring for their athletes. Their sports scientists had developed treatments and techniques that are still largely unknown in this country.

I got involved when an East German pentathletes was injured. Jane Fredricks, an American

champion pentathlete and one of my patients, asked if I could help.

You must remember in 1976 the United States and East Germany were antagonists in the cold war. The East German doctors, like every one else at those Olympics, knew of the U.S. medical conflict against chiropractic, as the AMA had been so willing to try to discredit us and create anti-chiropractic publicity.

As a chiropractor I personally believe that my responsibility is to my patient. I have never let color, religion, race, politics or anything else stand in the way of helping athletes if they need chiropractic.

Of course the Eastern Bloc political machine weighed their wins, Gold, Silver and Bronze medals, as part of their campaign to show the world the accomplishments of their system and athletes. Gold medals were rewarded, not just the athlete, but the doctors, coaches, and even the trainers.

The East Germans were very interested in having their pentathlete compete to her highest level of performance, but her bad back condition left little hope. She was antalgic, a positive minor sign, positive straight leg raising at 30 degree: obviously a swollen disc.

I treated her daily -- under armed guard. Security was particularly tight as a consequence of the terrorist murders of the Israeli Olympians at the 1972 Munich Olympics. The East Germans were not about to take any chances. I started with stretching techniques to decompress the disc, manipulation, posture training and phonophoresis and more decompression exercises. I worked literally around the clock on her, getting their doctors and therapists to help with cryotherapy and to follow up on the stretching exercises while I was busy with my other patients.

The result of the decompression treatments allowed her to compete. She won a bronze medal. This success created a bond between the East Germans and myself. It was a great opportunity for me to learn from them whenever they were in the U.S., or when I was working abroad. My relationship with the Eastern Bloc athletes, coaches and doctors has continued throughout my career.

"DC": How would you define a sports scientist?

Dr. Perry: That might best be defined by describing the attributes of the East German Olympic doctors. I found them to be an elite group of specialists who always put the athlete before themselves. Their emphasis was on patient education, understanding biomechanics, endurance, advancing rehabilitation techniques and trying to figure out ways to improve human performance, all the things we wanted to know. They did not tolerate those who wasted time, resources, or anything else. To be a sports scientist was the greatest achievement and honor that could be bestowed on a doctor.

In 1985 I was invited to participate in the first Congress of Applied Sciences in Havana, Cuba. My invitation came through the office of Fidel Castro and approval was given by the U.S. State Department. No other U.S. citizen had been invited.

The invitation was the direct result of having treated middle-distance runner Alberto Juantorena during the 1979 Pan American Games, and in recognition for helping the Cuban team internationally. Juantorena was Cuba's national hero, having won Gold Medals in the 400 and 800 meters at the 1976 Olympics, an unprecedented accomplishment.

I was one of 12 asked to individually present a scientific paper. My presentation was, "How to Enhance Human Performance through Proper Biomechanics." This paper included many of the concepts that I had learned working internationally with Olympic athletes together with applying

chiropractic principles.

Four hundred Eastern Bloc sports scientists were invited to attend. It was here that I first introduced the Eastern Bloc's academic and scientific communities to my spinal distraction device. As a result of the presentation of this paper and the contribution to prevention, rehabilitation, and the enhancement of performance and biomechanics of my work, I was given the title "Sports Scientist."

"DC": What did the sports scientists from the Eastern Bloc think of chiropractic?

Dr. Perry: They were very aware of the AMA anti-chiropractic position, an attitude that they always thought was ridiculous. The Soviets wanted to reduce the cost of health care, therefore they were open and interested in whatever worked. All they knew was whatever I did to help their athletes worked.

They didn't care if I was a witch doctor, a mystic or a chiropractor, they just wanted the knowledge. In exchange, they introduced me to all the principles and techniques that have made them legendary in sports science and health care. I believe them to be the greatest sports scientist on earth.

"DC": We know you've received numerous honors from working with foreign athletes. What honors stand out?

Dr. Perry: In 1991 I represented the Soviet Union during the World Championships in Japan and was chosen to carry their flag. This was the last time the Soviet flag was ever carried in a public arena. This was the time period in history when the Soviet Union disbanded to become the Commonwealth.

They asked me to carry their flag as a tribute to unity and in appreciation for my years of help and support. Later that year I was inducted to their Gold Medal Hall of Tribute in what was then Leningrad.

"DC": At the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona, what was your official title or professional position?

I officially represented the Unified team. My title was spine care specialist. This title became synonymous with doctor of chiropractic. I marched in their uniform, under their flag. It was an experience that culminated over 20 years of work and study.

"DC": Can you relate any memorable treatment from the 1992 Games?

Dr. Perry: One of the most exciting experiences of those Olympics was when the Unified team asked me to treat their entry in the men's tennis singles, Andre Cherkasov. As the Unified team's spine care specialist, my responsibility was to take care of any and all spinal problems of any team member. Andre had hurt his back in Austria ten days before the Olympics in a professional tournament. When he arrived in Barcelona he was antalgic. His coach discussed with their Olympic head administrator that he would have to withdraw Andre from competition. The coach discussed this with me. We had a couple of days before a formal withdrawal would have to be submitted, so I began treatment.

His primary therapy was spinal decompression and inverted manipulation by using what's called an Invertabod. When we started he could barely bend over the thigh pad. By the end of the first day, this care in combination with high levels of vitamin C, calcium, magnesium, traumeel (a homeopathic remedy) and contrast therapy he could reach his hands to the second pegs; within 48

hours we had him totally inverted.

After another 24 hours, he was doing inverted abdominal curls and I was manipulating him while he was in the inverted posture. Each day he continued to improve his range of motion, gradually increased to normal ROM, and was no longer antalgic. So we decided to go over his biomechanics on the court.

We took the Invertabod with us, hanging, decompressing him before, during and after his workouts. In the beginning he was a little afraid to push it, but as his coach gained confidence, so did Andre.

Now it was a race against time. We all worked hard on and off the court. We started each morning at 7 a.m. and worked till 11 p.m., with rest periods for Andre. I went to cover track and field, swimming, basketball, boxing and other sports as I was needed. But I never missed our daily on court work-outs.

The long hours paid off. Not only did Andre Cherkasov participate in the Olympics, he won the bronze medal.

The entire Soviet team called it a miracle. They couldn't believe he could walk upright, let alone win a medal.

"DC": How have these experiences changed or improved your day to day practice?

Dr. Perry: Being able to learn from many of the best international sports scientists and athletes gave me a different point of view. I learned to look at the body with a greater emphasis on biomechanics and the application of physics. I also learned that studying high performance athletes during competition gave me information I could not obtain in the office or during their routine workouts. High performance athletes must be evaluated during times of high stress, load, and exertion. I learned how to apply these concepts to rehabilitation.

We have been very successful, for example, with patients with bulging and or herniated discs, through the use of inverted distraction, hydrokinetic spinal distraction and decompression exercises. All of this was learned through working with high performance athletes and combining sports science and chiropractic principles.

As you know, posture starts from your feet up. It is, however, how you learn to utilize or control biomechanical compensation or decompensatory stress that makes the difference between pain, suffering, performance, or enhancement of performance. The trick, as the East Germans or Russians would say, is knowing how to deprogram and then reprogram the athlete or patient to success.

Part II of this exclusive interview will discuss how the approach of sports science to all aspects of chiropractic practice can prepare DCs for the coming changes in national health care.

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