

World Cup Soccer and Chiropractic Team Up

George Billauer, DC, CCSP

In July of 1993, I took my first trip out of the country with the US National Soccer Team. Although I had been to numerous soccer games, including our passionate upset of England at the US Cup in Boston in June, this was my first opportunity to experience soccer in a country where the game is treated like a religion. The event was the championship game of the Copa America, an international soccer tournament involving the US and Mexico in Mexico City.

From the moment we arrived, our delegation was swamped by the local media and fans trying to catch a glimpse of our players, and especially our coach, Bora Mulitonovic. Bora, as he is called all over the world, coached Mexico in the 1986 World Cup and took them to a surprise sixth place finish, forever endearing himself to the soccer-mad people of Mexico. Everywhere we went, Bora would be approached by people wanting to touch him or have their picture taken with him.

The game between the US and Mexico was played at the cavernous Azteca Stadium. As we were transported by bus to the stadium (two hours prior to kick off), we passed thousands of fans walking or driving to the game. An unbelievable number of these fans were carrying and waving the Mexican flag, and singing their way to the game. When we arrived at Azteca, we made our way through the bowels of the stadium to walk out on the field and inspect the conditions. We were greeted by an awesome sight: 120,000 fans waving what looked like a sea of flags, dancing, and chanting in anticipation of the upcoming event.

The game itself proved to be quite a lesson to our players. As if the crowd and the effects of the altitude were not enough, the Mexican team proceeded to play an extraordinary brand of soccer, and beat us convincingly 4-0, a lopsided score in soccer. Although our team was obviously distressed by the outcome, it did give them the exposure they needed to play world-class soccer teams under the most adverse of conditions.

The US team's medical staff is composed of a broad spectrum of health care providers, lead by Dr. Bert Mandelbaum, an orthopedic surgeon in Los Angeles. When I was first introduced to Dr. Mandelbaum, I expected the usual medical bias and was ready to defend myself and my profession accordingly. Was I surprised when Dr. Mandelbaum interrupted my first sentence by welcoming me to the health care team, and recognizing the role and importance of chiropractic care in professional sports. He has continued to be supportive of what I bring to the team's well-being as he has been of all the medical team's members. Our staff includes an athletic trainer who oversees the team's day-to-day needs; an assistant trainer who also serves as a massage therapist; a podiatrist; a sports psychologist; a strength coach; and a flexibility coach.

In January of 1993, the team was assembled to live and train in Mission Viejo, California. It was to be the first time that the US National Soccer program would have the luxury of a year-round training facility for its team as they prepared for the World Cup. One of the first orders of business was to perform pre-participation physicals on all team members. Dr. Mandelbaum's office was divided into numerous stations, with players passing from one health care provider to the next. The evaluations included: orthopedic examination of all extremities; chiropractic examination of the spine; podiatric examination of the feet, including x-rays, blood pressure and pulse determinations

by an internist; and even MRIs of the brain to be used in future study relating to heading in soccer and brain injuries.

These evaluations served numerous purposes. Players were afforded the opportunity to meet all members of the medical staff, thus becoming aware of their presence for possible future need. It gave the medical staff a baseline of information in the event of future injury or change in a player's condition. It also identified any present complaints that a player might be reporting to camp with, allowing us a chance to initiate the necessary rehabilitation program.

In October of 1993, our team traveled to Washington, D.C., to once again take on the national team of Mexico. This game was not part of any tournament, but merely an exhibition match played at RFK Stadium. The contest attracted a crowd of 30,000, many of whom were of hispanic origin. As in the case in most of the games we play, even in our own country, the fans are often cheering the opposition as they come out to see the national teams of their former homelands.

On this occasion, the US team performed at a much higher level. The contest ended in a 1-1 tie, with the US convincingly dominating large portions of the game, including most of the second half. With altitude not a factor this time, and the many months of training together, the US team had a fitness level that kept the players strong throughout the game's 90 minutes. The tie was a noticeable improvement and was a boost to the players confidence and psychological well-being.

The US Soccer Federation made a major commitment to its national team to assist it in its preparation for the world's most viewed sporting event, the World Cup. A combined audience of over 30 billion will watch the 52 games of the tournament, with over two billion watching the final at the Rose Bowl on July 17. To aid the players' desire to raise their level of fitness, the team was sent to the renowned Cooper Clinic in Dallas for fitness evaluations. The clinic is the work of Dr. Ken Cooper of aerobics fame. Dr. Cooper had worked with the Brazilian national team during the 1970 World Cup and they went on to become champions.

The team members were put through rigorous evaluations including treadmill tests, percentage of body fat evaluations, vertical jump testing, VO2 and flexibility determination. In addition, a 12 minute run was performed. Dr. Cooper has performed this battery of tests on many teams over the years and compared our players performance to some of those he had tested previously. Some of the US team's results:

- VO2 was 59.5. The best that had been previously measured was 66.6, accomplished by the English National Soccer Team in 1975, the Germans in 1980, and the Italians in 1988.
- In the 12 minute run, our team averaged 3,227 meters. The Brazilian championship team of the 1970 World Cup had covered an average distance of 3,540 meters.
- Average vertical jump was 23 inches, compared to 26 inches for our 1985 US National Soccer Team.
- Percentage of body fat was 8.9 on average. The Hong Kong National Team in 1992 registered an average of 7.3.

With these results, Dr. Cooper's staff produced individualized recommendations for each of our team members. These were incorporated into our training regime to maximize players' fitness

levels.

On June 4th of this year, our World Cup Team played their final exhibition match before commencing the World Cup. The opponent was again Mexico, this time before a crowd of 91,000 at the Rose Bowl in Pasadena, California, the venue where eight of the World Cup matches will be played, including two of our opening round games. (The other, our first, will be played in Detroit, indoors at the Pontiac Silverdome against Switzerland). The fans in attendance were once again mostly rooting for our opponents, but we had been through this many times before. On this occasion, we withstood the early pressure of the Mexican team, and battled through a scoreless first half. Approximately 15 minutes into the second half, we scored what proved to be the only goal of the match. The fans were dismayed, but we had scored a victory at a key moment for our team. Not only did we gain a measure of revenge for our humiliation in Mexico City, but we boosted our team's confidence to its highest level.

Now it's on to the only games that count: the opening round of the World Cup. The US team hopes that finally crowds in American stadiums will be on their side and cheer us on to new heights in front of the eyes of the world.

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Editor's Note: As we went to press, the World Cup had progressed to the quarterfinal round. The US team reached the round of 16 before being eliminated by Brazil. The World Cup photos were courtesy of the sports agency, ALLSPORT.

Dr. George Billauer of Marina del Rey, California served as the team chiropractic of the U.S. World Cup Soccer Team. Over the past two years, and during this year's World Cup, he has traveled extensively with the team and provided ongoing care.

Dr. Billauer's work in professional soccer began in 1979 when he was appointed team chiropractor for the San Diego Sockers (North American Soccer League), a position he held for eight seasons. He subsequently served in the same capacity for the L.A. Lazers (MISL), and the L.A. United (Continental Indoor Soccer League).

He has been involved in numerous other sports-related endeavors including: volunteer physician in the US Olympic Committee's program in Colorado Springs; official chiropractor to the Olympic Sports Festival in Houston, 1986; team chiropractor to the L.A. Strings of World Team Tennis; team chiropractor to the L.A. Blades (Roller Hockey International League); and chiropractor to Team Cup Volleyball at the Forum in Los Angeles.

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