

## Courtside Chiropractic

AN INTERVIEW WITH NEIL LIEBMAN, DC, CCST

Editorial Staff

Dr. Liebman is the team chiropractor for the NBA's Philadelphia 76ers.

When the 76ers are in town, Dr. Liebman can adjust players in the First Union Center's exercise facility.

On Nov. 1, the National Basketball Association (NBA) officially began its 2005-2006 season. As players, coaches and staff prepare for seven-plus months of on-the-court battles, near-continuous travel, and season- or career-threatening injuries that can strike at any time, Dr. Neil Liebman prepares to do what he has done for the Philadelphia 76ers since 1990: provide chiropractic care.

In this exclusive interview, Dr. Liebman discusses his involvement with the 76ers and how he keeps NBA-level players in peak condition over a grueling 82-game regular-season schedule.

*Dynamic Chiropractic (DC):* We ran a feature article about you more than 14 years ago. Give our readers a little background on how you became the chiropractor for the 76ers, way back in 1990.

Dr. Neil Liebman (NL): When I first started with the 76ers, it was in 1990, after the owner of the team, Harold Katz, had a frozen shoulder which did not heal with conventional medical care. He was referred to me by my mother-in-law, who also had great results with chiropractic care. After Mr. Katz' shoulder got better, he referred Ron Anderson [a former 76er], who was having back problems. Ron Anderson also had excellent results with my treatment. After that, I was given the title of "Team Chiropractor."

It has been an interesting 15 years with the team. There have been many changes that have made it just as challenging to remain the chiropractor as initially getting the job. Since joining the team, there have been four trainer changes, approximately eight coaching changes, and a change in ownership. When Harold Katz sold the team in 1999 to Comcast and Pat Croce, I thought at that time that [the transfer in ownership] would end my relationship with the team. I was extremely happy when I got a call from Pat Croce - [he said] he loved the work I was doing with the team and asked if I would stay on as the team chiropractor.

*DC:* Have your treatment protocols evolved over the years? Compare your current responsibilities as team chiropractor with what you did 15 years ago.

NL: Fifteen years ago, when I joined the team, the trainer at that time was not in favor of a chiropractor being on the medical staff. I received no referrals from him as a trainer, and any of the players that I treated were from referrals of other players. At the time, in 1990, the team played in the CoreStates Spectrum. The Spectrum training room was very small and there was no room for me to set up a table. Any of the treatment that I did with the players was either at my office or at their training facility at St. Joe's University.

At this time, we play in the new First Union Center, which has plenty of room in the exercise area for my chiropractic table. I also treat players at my office and at practice at the [Philadelphia]

College of Osteopathic Medicine. I attend all home games and I am at the games by halftime. It is common to work on players that are on the injured list while the game is in progress and work on players after the game. The time commitment involved in working with the team is huge.

*DC:* What are the primary conditions you see and treat?

*NL:* Much like the patients I see in my regular practice, some of the players are interested in immediate pain relief, and some players are interested in staying well and understand the full benefits of chiropractic care. I never push my services on any of the players. I sit and talk to them and educate them, but it is always up to them if they want to be treated or not.

From a musculoskeletal standpoint, it is common to work on all of the joints through the body, but more important is their understanding that chiropractic is not only for immediate relief of pain, but a way for them to improve their ability as an athlete and to help prevent injuries.

*DC:* What protocol do you follow when a player is injured? Does the team trainer always examine the player first, and then refer to you as needed?

*NL:* As with most professional sports teams, the trainer is the first person on the scene of any injured player. With the 76ers, we have a whole team of doctors that are at every game. This includes two orthopedic surgeons, an X-ray technologist, a cardiologist, a podiatrist, a massage therapist, a strength training coach, a physical therapist, a dentist, the trainer, and myself. With all of these doctors, it is important to work as a team. With injuries that seem more on the severe side, the player is seen initially by the trainer and sent to the orthopedist for evaluation. At that time, an MRI is usually ordered, before any of the other specialists work on the player. If the injury seems to be not as severe, the trainer decides who or which doctors would be the most beneficial for treatments. All of the doctors are looked upon equally, and we all have different abilities to help in different ways. One of my good friends, Dr. Nicholas Dinubile, who is one of the orthopedists for the 76ers, recently wrote an excellent book... on page 190, Dr. Dinubile wrote the following on chiropractic:

"Many of my orthopedic colleagues still cringe when I say the word 'chiropractor,' but this bias comes from years of misinformation and turf battles, something we need to move beyond if we are going to put the patient first. Many individuals do indeed benefit from chiropractic care. I was first introduced to the benefits of chiropractic by professional dancers, an appreciation later reinforced by working with high level athletes, who sometimes bring their chiropractors with them on the road. Our 76ers chiropractor, Dr. Neil Liebman, has hands of gold, and is probably the hardest working member of our medical staff during game-time."

This is a prime example of how all the doctors work together and give what they feel the best care is for the athletes.

*DC:* Do you treat players during games, or just before and/or after?

*NL:* As I stated earlier, most of the treatment that I do for players is either during halftime, after game or at practice. Occasionally, if the games work out on weekends or days that I do not have office hours, I will come early, but most times, most treatment is at practice and after games. One of my greatest thrills in being with the team was in 2000, having a chance to travel to the NBA Semifinals in Milwaukee, and then the Finals in Los Angeles. Unfortunately, we did not win the championship, but I had a great time staying a week at the Beverly Hills Wilshire Hotel, eating all meals with the team, watching the players during practice and experiencing the NBA from inside the locker room during a championship series.

DC: What about during the off-season - do players visit you regularly (or do you visit them)?

NL: Most of the time during the off-season, the players go back to their homes. A few of the players do stay, as they regularly live in the city, and will come in for regular periodic maintenance care. On the whole, most players are not in the area and hopefully treat with their chiropractors at home.

DC: According to our original article, you were one of the first official chiropractors for an NBA team. As of 2005, does every NBA team have a DC on staff?

NL: As of last year, it appears that approximately half of the teams in the NBA do have chiropractors. Some of the chiropractors are at all of the games, and others are on an as-needed basis at their offices. It is nice to see that chiropractic has flourished in the NBA and in professional sports.

DC: Does the NBA have an official policy regarding the provision of chiropractic care for players, or is it a team-by-team basis?

That is an interesting question, because this year I was just mailed a letter from the Head of Basketball Operations, who is a physical therapist, which stated, "Any player that is treated by any doctor on the team that is not with the 76ers must have a written letter by the trainer on the opposite team." If an old player of mine who is with another team asks if I will please adjust them, I would have to have written permission from the other team's trainer. I was told this is NBA team policy.

DC: What advice would you give chiropractors interested in becoming involved with professional sports teams, particularly in the NBA?

NL: When I started with the 76ers 15 years ago, I felt honored that they were allowing me to be a member of their medical staff. As time has progressed and I have evolved as a doctor, I now feel they are lucky to have me as a member of their staff. There [are] many occasions when the trainer [calls] upon me during games to check out a player who is having severe spasms to see what I can do to get players back in the game. It is very rewarding when you work on a player that you know if you were not there would not be able to go back into the game. I feel it is important that you are unique as a doctor, and provide a service that is separate from what other people on your medical staff are doing, and also other chiropractors who commonly try to convince the trainers that they would be better than you for the job.

I would urge anyone who is interested in sports injuries, working with athletes and knowing the positive effects you can have in working with athletes by not only decreasing their pain, but [also by] changing the entire way their body works, to continue to pursue getting in with sports teams. It is not always the easiest thing to get to the trainers and to the players, but persistence and having the medical staff understand that you are not trying to take their job, but are trying to make their job easier, is a must.

*Editor's note:* Our original article on Dr. Liebman appeared in the June 19, 1992 issue. Please see "Philadelphia 76ers Have Team Chiropractor" online at [www.chiroweb.com/archives/10/13/04.html](http://www.chiroweb.com/archives/10/13/04.html).

NOVEMBER 2005