

Chiropractic at the 2004 Summer Olympics

DCS SHARE THEIR EXPERIENCES IN ATHENS

Editorial Staff

In the Sept. 1 issue, we reported on the accomplishments of Drs. Ira Shapiro and Marc Jaffe, a pair of chiropractors from New Jersey who were chosen as just the eighth and ninth chiropractors in history to officially serve on a U.S. Olympic Medical Team, delivering care to competitors at the 2004 Summer Olympics in Athens, Greece.¹ Just as the athletes spent years preparing for their moment at the games, so did Drs. Jaffe and Shapiro. Each chiropractor went through a rigorous selection process that encompassed thousands of hours of education and training, along with attendance at Olympic camps and various national and international sporting events. By the time the Olympics concluded in August, they had treated over 500 of the world's finest athletes, and helped the U.S. team finish as the leading medal winner in the 16-day competition.

Upon their return from Athens, Drs. Shapiro and Jaffe reflected on their experiences at the games, and gave *Dynamic Chiropractic* a personal account of their role on the Olympic medical team.

Dynamic Chiropractic (DC): Describe what an average day was like for you.

Marc Jaffe (MJ): My normal day began at 8 a.m. in the clinic, some mornings earlier, as the games progressed. For athletes either training or competing during early morning times, it was necessary to be available first thing; some mornings I might see 10 athletes before 9 a.m. My primary responsibility was to be available to the athletes in the USA medical clinic inside the Olympic Village. On different occasions, I would be needed to travel to a residence or competition venue to treat athletes. The rowing team, for example, did not live in the village, so they would request that I be sent to their villa overlooking the Aegean Sea. (That wasn't hard to take.) The clinic's busiest hours of the day would be from early evening until closing hours at 11 p.m. All of the medical staff would ramp up their energies preparing themselves for the constant flow of attention the athletes required at the end of the day after training and competition.

Ira Shapiro (IS): It was very busy, that's for sure. I was stationed primarily at the American College of Greece, a state-of-the-art training center rented by the U.S. Olympic Committee so its athletes would have 24-hour access to a training facility. My day began around 8 a.m. when the sports medicine clinic would open. I had athletes meet me first thing in the morning for treatment; others would file in throughout the day. The clinic would remain open until around 8 or 9 p.m. or later, depending on the training schedule of the different teams using the facility.

Working with the USOC was truly a team approach. It was not unusual for me to treat athletes, turn on equipment, and even fold towels during a typical day. We all checked our professional egos at the door and did whatever we had to do to meet the needs of the athletes.

As in any setting, there were busy times and slow times. When it was slow, I grabbed my cell phone -

so I could be called back immediately - and had the opportunity to watch many of the teams and individual athletes practice in the training center. These men and women work so hard and are so good at what they do, and helping them keep their bodies performing at 100 percent throughout the games was a tremendous challenge and honor.

DC: How many patients did you treat? Did you treat athletes from other countries besides the U.S.?

IS: In the beginning of the games, when all of the athletes were in Greece and preparing for their events, we were the busiest we would be. After all, most of the athletes were under some form of chiropractic care prior to their arrival in Greece. As the games progressed and the athletes were finished with their competitions, our workload was reduced, but we did see athletes until the very last days of the Olympics. We treated U.S. athletes only; other countries' delegations had their own medical and chiropractic staffs.

MJ: As part of the medical staff for the USOC, we were only there to support members of the United States Olympic Team exclusively. The United States had 540 athletes, so the staff had considerable responsibility just in managing the needs of our own team. Sometimes medical professionals from the United States (non-USOC) will volunteer their services for other countries, but that is not the case with the USOC. The USOC goes to all lengths to make sure that our athletes have the best care possible, which includes chiropractors, medical physicians, athletic trainers, and sports psychologists and pharmacologists. During the peak weeks of the games I was kept extremely busy with athletes and would typically treat 40 per day.

DC: What types of injuries and conditions did you see most often? How did the care you provided differ from athlete to athlete?

MJ: The unique opportunity of working with such a large and diverse group of athletes presented an array of injuries and conditions with common patterns associated with certain sports. Neck, shoulder and interscapular dysfunctions were typical in volleyball, softball and rowing, whereas hip and lower extremity problems were more commonplace with track and field. Cyclists as a group had a propensity toward hip, thigh and lumbar spine issues. Categories of injuries ran the gamut, from chronic overuse syndromes to acute injury. More than 50 percent of the athlete population I treated uses chiropractic as a regular component of their normal overall musculoskeletal health and function. It was very clear that Olympic athletes understand the connection between what we do and the impact it has on them to perform at a higher level. My typical treatment approach included spinal/extremity adjustments, soft-tissue procedures and muscle energy techniques.

IS: Medals are won and records are broken when athletes push themselves to their physical limits. These athletes have been training for years and very intensely for months to reach this level. As a chiropractor, my role is twofold: to help the athletes maintain peak performance through the removal of subluxation, and to help them address over use injuries. In the latter case, overuse injuries occur when athletes - especially world-class athletes - push themselves at maximum levels for a long period of time. We also saw traumatic injuries that athletes may have sustained during practice or competition. The specific types of injuries also depended on the sport. The wrestlers had more neck and shoulder injuries from the constant pulling and rolling around on the mat. The track and field athletes had more lower extremity problems, and some athletes had no acute injuries but were just subluxated, and knew the benefits of chiropractic care to help them enhance their performance.

DC: What was the general reaction of the medical doctors and other medical staff at the games to your

treating patients? Was there any friction about having chiropractors on the medical staff?

IS: This was the most professional organization I ever worked with. The chiropractors were treated as equal partners in everything. We were consulted and assisted on almost all conditions, and we were encouraged to listen in on situations involving non-chiropractic conditions. We were all part of one great "dream team" - a group of world-class chiropractors, medical doctors, athletic trainers and physical therapists working together to assist the U.S. athletes. It was a great learning experience for everyone, and I believe that when all is said and done, the medical staff had a greater appreciation for the important role of chiropractic in the athletes' care ... especially when athletes came into our clinic and asked specifically for chiropractic care.

MJ: The beneficial role that chiropractic imparts to the athletes was understood and appreciated by the different medical disciplines. It was the norm for all medical staff involved with a particular athlete to discuss his or her case so that medically informed decisions could be made that best suited the needs of that athlete. I was completely involved in that process. My impression of the medical staff was one of team and interactive decision-making and treatment solutions.

DC: How about the athletes? What types of comments did you get from them?

MJ: My overall impression of athlete feedback to our services was extremely positive. They expressed their appreciation and gratitude regularly and made us feel that we made a significant contribution to their performance. Many of the athletes made kind gestures following the games by offering personally signed items, photos, and Olympic souvenirs that will have sentimental meaning for a lifetime. But, the best thanks was a simple phrase of "Thanks, Doc, it feels a lot better."

IS: The athletes were great. Even with all of the pressure of their upcoming performance, they were very friendly and extremely appreciative of our commitment to providing them with first-rate care. On several occasions, athletes went out of their way to come see me to thank me for my help. That really meant a lot to me.

DC: This year's Olympics were held under extremely tight security. How did the security affect your ability to care for the athletes and/or have access at the games?

IS: Security was extremely tight and very visible, both at our training center and at the games in Athens. As a result, while in Greece, at no time did I have any concerns regarding security. The security people - some in uniforms, some undercover - were extremely professional and committed to their work. They were also very courteous, and we all got along very well. At no time did the security measures or individual security people prevent me from treating any of our athletes.

MJ: The security at the games was quite remarkable in both its undertaking and effectiveness. The Greek authorities provided a secure environment for the Olympic Games to go on without incident. Movement in and out of the village was extremely tight, but did not impede our ability to access and care for the athletes. Proper credentials had to be worn and visible at all times which identified someone by photo, country, position (athlete, staff, coach) and venue access. In addition, American athletes and facilities were supported by a second layer of U.S. security, which helped put us all more at ease.

DC: Knowing what you know now about your experiences in Athens, if you had the chance, would you do it again? If you did go again, what improvements would you like to see made? What would you do to

ensure that chiropractic is represented properly at the Olympics?

MJ: My experience in Athens as a USA team chiropractor with the USOC was nothing less than extraordinary. The USOC treated its entire sports medicine staff with equal and complete respect, and fully appreciated the contributions of all disciplines. Chiropractic was well integrated into the USOC system, which recognized its value and importance to the athletes. Based on my experience with the USOC and the Olympic Games, I feel proud of our profession and how it was represented, and would welcome the opportunity to work within the USOC system anytime.

IS: I would jump at the opportunity to do this again - it was a very positive and thrilling experience. It was tremendously rewarding professionally. I enjoyed the opportunity to work with the athletes and with my fellow care providers, and I learned a great deal that will in turn benefit my patients - athletes and non-athletes alike - in my own practice.

I continue to encourage all chiropractors to get involved not just with the USOC, but at regional and local sports tournaments and with local teams. Much has changed in my more than 20 years in chiropractic. From the Olympics to local hospitals, chiropractic is increasingly becoming fully integrated into patient care. Events like the Olympic Games powerfully underline the importance of chiropractic to athletes' care.

Reference

1. Making history in Athens. *Dynamic Chiropractic*, Sept. 1, 2004;22(18).
www.chiroweb.com/archives/22/18/02.html

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