

Olympic Dreams

DC inspired by courage of Paralympic athletes.

By Caitlin Lukacs

Many young children dream of going to the Olympics, but very few actually make it there. James Kurtz, DC, DACRB, CCSP, is one of the few, though he attended as a member of the medical staff, not an athlete. As one of the pre-eminent sports chiropractors in the United States, Dr. Kurtz currently works on the sports medicine staff of the PGA TOUR and is a consultant to Seattle's new Major League Soccer team, the Sounders. He has been a member of the chiropractic staff at many events, including the USA Track and Field Championships, U.S. Olympic Trials, the Ironman Triathlon World Championships, the U.S. Figure Skating Championships, the 2002 Winter Olympic Games, the U.S. Masters Swim Championships and the 2008 Paralympic Games.

How did you become interested in sports chiropractic and rehabilitation?

I was a high school cross-country runner when I tore my Achilles tendon, ending my running career for several years. When I later sustained a back injury, I visited a chiropractor, went through physical therapy for both my back and my Achilles tendon, and discovered that I enjoyed both fields. I ended up becoming a chiropractor, but I always wanted to integrate physical therapy-type treatments into my practice, so I sought out further training in rehab techniques and soft-tissue care.

What are the benefits of a multidisciplinary practice, particularly in sports?

The more training you have, the more services you can offer, and the more conditions you can effectively treat. I quickly realized that if I wanted to treat athletes, I would need to integrate additional techniques into my practice. In addition to chiropractic adjustments, I use Active Release Technique, Graston® Technique and Kinesiotaping, to name a few.

Does being an athlete yourself help you care for athletes?

Definitely. I think athletes relate to people who truly get what they're about. I have a passion for sports, and that's something you can't fake.

Do you have a favorite sport or event to work?

When I was in chiropractic college, the United States Olympic Committee (USOC) selected Jan Corwin to be Team USA's chiropractor for the Summer Olympic Games in Seoul, Korea. I read about this and said, "I am going to be one of those DCs some day." In 2004, I was accepted into the USOC's Sports Medicine Volunteer Program, which led to my selection in 2007 as the first DC to go to the ParaPan American Games. I'd always thought I wanted to go to the Olympics, but as soon as I worked with the Paralympic athletes, I knew I'd found what I was meant to do. In 2008 I was given the honor of becoming Team USA's chiropractor for the Paralympic Games in Beijing.

Many of these athletes have overcome birth defects, loss of limbs or paralysis, and they are still achieving their sports goals. Many wheelchair athletes have Harrington rods in their backs

to stabilize their spines, and this can lead to instabilities above and below the fixation devices. Prosthetic limbs create unique muscle imbalances and joint dysfunctions. It was a clinically challenging and personally rewarding experience. I was so inspired by their courage, determination and positive attitudes—they literally changed my life.

How did you become involved with the Olympics?

The starting point for any doctor of chiropractic who wants to get into the Olympics or Paralympics is the U.S. Olympic Training Center's volunteer medical staff program. The application process is lengthy—you need to have worked in the sports medicine arena for a certain number of years and to meet certain educational requirements—and there are tons more applicants than available spaces.

Once you're selected to this program, you get a brief orientation with the USOC's full-time medical staff and then you're thrown right into the sports medicine center and you're treating athletes and parathletes from every sport, alongside practitioners from other disciplines. The medical staff for all USOC-sponsored competitions is chosen from this group of volunteers, based on evaluations from the medical staff, as well as the athletes.

Any advice for DCs who want to treat athletes?

Learn as much as you possibly can from the people who have gone before you. Take advantage of the numerous educational programs such as the sports and rehab diplomate training and join ACA, the Sports or Rehab Councils and attend their symposia. I can't say enough about simply interacting with your colleagues who are doing, or have done, the job that you want. Get to know them and let them get to know you, so that your name comes to mind when opportunities arise. ■



James Kurtz, DC, DACRB, CCSP
ACA member since 1995

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