A Day in the Life of . . .

8:40 p.m. Lambeau Field, Green Bay, Wisconsin, October 14, 1996: Todd, my new assistant, confides to me on the field that it is exciting to be on Monday Night Football for his first time. Some 4-1/2 hours later, at 1:05 a.m., we have just lifted off from the runway to begin our 4-hr flight back to San Francisco after blowing a lead in the final minutes of the game and losing in overtime.

We have a planeload of sore, depressed, and disappointed players wrapped in ice bags or other treatment modalities for their new injuries or old aches and pains—along with a disappointed if not angry group of coaches and administrators.

With only 6 days before our next game, we are in the training room early the next morning repacking the trunks and carefully documenting the new injuries into our computer system. An hour later the room is full of players getting treatment on the "players’ day off." Everyone is tired and depressed. Such is the stuff of life in the NFL.

Truths and Myths of the Pro’s

Many an athletic therapist dreams of a career of working exclusively with a single group of athletes year around, with a true off-season, an adequate budget for equipment and supplies, and the excitement of working with competitive and highly skilled athletes.

One place all of these criteria can be met is through employment with a professional sports franchise. But there are some myths about working in this setting, such as: everyone makes a lot of money; the hours of work are less than in other settings; and this is the most desirable setting for employment in the athletic therapy profession.

The truth is, there are advantages and disadvantages within all settings of our profession. While I can depict fairly accurately the life of an NFL athletic therapist, I will admit that in other professional sports the setting may be quite different.

A Typical Day in the NFL

A typical day varies greatly depending on the time of year, perhaps more so than in any other setting in the profession. First comes training camp, then the regular season, then the off-season.

Training Camp

I have already spent more than a year of my life sleeping in the same college dorm room, a 3-hr drive from home, at training camp 5 weeks each summer. The day begins at 6 a.m. and is seldom over before midnight for 6+ days a week.

Because of the large number of players involved and the lengthy contact practice sessions, there is seldom a routine day.

More often than not, there is a crisis or problem of some sort every day, which must be meticulously documented to ensure that any possible future injury grievance dispute can be handled in the fairest way possible for all parties involved. That usually means about an hour of dictation at night after everyone else has either gone to bed or out for a beer.

The Regular Season

A typical day during the regular season varies, depending on the day of the week. Wednesday and Thursday mornings start before 7 a.m. with early taping and treatments prior to the player meetings at 8:20, followed by an hour walk-through practice at 11. Lunch hour (we eat on the run) is mainly for taping and treatments in preparation for a 1:40 p.m. practice time. Player meetings follow practice, and treatments continue until all the players have left for the day around 6:00 p.m.

After more dictation and meeting with the coaches, my day is usually over before 7:00 p.m. I think this is a fairly typical day in the NFL, but I know that for some organizations the hours are even...
longer during the regular season. Tuesdays are usually treatment days, and if we are lucky we can get away by 2:00 or 3:00 p.m. to run errands or get a haircut. Fridays are much like Thursdays, but shorter, with no morning practice. They end with either a plane trip to an away game or, on alternate weeks, a departure for home by 4:00 p.m.

Saturday afternoons are usually free before evening meetings at the hotel prior to the next day’s game. Sunday is a full day. It starts at 7:30 with early taping at the hotel and ends an hour or so after the game if it is a home game; it ends much later if we are out of town and have to fly home.

**Off-Season**

The off-season is not what some people might think. In a word, it is unpredictable, and much busier than in years past. It can be influenced by organizational and coaching staff changes and even by the frequent changes in NFL policies. Although we usually work an 8-hr day, with weekends off, it is interrupted by 4 days at the NFL College Combine physicals each year, the draft weekend, and several weekend mini camps.

The College Combines are usually held in early February in Indianapolis, where the top 350 college seniors are brought in to undergo complete physical and psychological examinations as well as workouts to demonstrate their potential for pro football.

The athletic therapy staffs for all NFL teams work together compiling injury histories, doing isokinetic testing, and recording physician grades during individual orthopedic exams.

During the off-season some work days are slow and others are quite busy. A typical day might find us taking free-agent players for physicals, doing rehabilitation on off-season surgeries, or preparing for the draft by calling college trainers or reviewing the Combine results.

We also try to squeeze in a week or two of vacation during this period because after the 4th of July we will be packing and preparing for training camp again.

**Our Sports Therapy Team**

Although every organization is different, our sports medicine team usually consists of a “traveling squad” of 3 or 4 physicians, a chiropractor, 4 athletic trainers, and our dentist. On the sidelines we always have our team internist, orthopedic surgeon, and a physical medicine (physiatrist) physician, and sometimes an extra orthopedist or physiatrist along for the trip.

The physiatrist in our group takes care of all spine problems and most of the pain blocks, if any, at the discretion of our team orthopedist. Our internist handles...