The Role of Chiropractic Doctors in Athletics

Michael H. Norris, DC, ATC
BKP Chiropractic and Rehabilitation
Lancaster, California

The Dallas Cowboys had just finished a grueling practice. As the players returned to the locker room, many of them were headed for the training room to begin the ritual of physical recuperation. The Cowboys athletic training staff uses state-of-the-art sports medical technology to keep their players in top physical condition.

But for some of the Cowboys, a second destination was on the schedule—a visit to the chiropractic office of Dr. Rob Parker. In their quest for the 1995 NFL Championship, a number of players including Emmitt Smith, Troy Aikman, Daryl Johnston, and Deion Sanders decided to utilize Dr. Parker’s services. If the success of the Cowboys is any indication, we will no doubt see more players seeking the benefits of regular chiropractic care.

Chiropractic involvement with athletics has steadily increased in the last two decades. According to Tom Hyde, a chiropractic doctor and executive director of the American Chiropractic Association’s Sports Council, more than 3,000 events will be coordinated by chiropractic doctors, “from aerobic championships to professional rodeo.” As members of the Joint Commission of Sports Medicine and Science, chiropractors are among the 30 professional organizations that interact with athletic trainers, medical doctors, physical therapists, and strength coaches. “We all agreed that caring for sports injuries should be a joint collaboration between many professionals, while the athlete benefits most,” says Dr. Hyde.

Growth of Chiropractic Sports Care

There are several reasons for this growth in chiropractic sports care. As the number of athletes has increased, so have the demands for physicians who treat musculoskeletal injuries. Because they employ manual techniques, chiropractors are beginning to see and treat more athletes; they get very good results. The hands-on, non-drug approach is appealing to many injured athletes.

Once athletes respond to chiropractic care, they tell their fellow athletes. This is what happened with the Dallas Cowboys. Daryl Johnston, a fullback, was referred to Dr. Parker and got good results. He then sent in a steady stream of other players.

Some professionals simply enjoy sports and working with highly motivated athletes. Doug Anderson, a chiropractic doctor, began by volunteering his services at beach volleyball events. “We just set up a banner and a table and started treating a few players,” he said. He now coordinates event coverage for the Pro Beach Volleyball Tour, the Pro Surfing Tour, and a ballet company. Dr. Anderson advocates professional interaction:

“I network with many athletic trainers to provide care at events. Their skills make athletic trainers very valuable. I’ve found that both sides usually learn a lot from each other.”

Andy Paulin, ATC, is an athletic trainer at Mt. San Antonio College and past president of the California Athletic Trainers Association. He coordinates a major 4-day track and field event every April. Paulin says,

“Ten years ago when I worked a track event there was a distinct separation of ATCs and DCs. Now I actively recruit chiropractors to help with our competition. We’re all under the same tent exchanging ideas and techniques.”

© 1996 Human Kinetics
These examples show how cooperative networking can bridge the gap of different philosophical ideologies.

**Preconceived Notions**

Even with the advances of interprofessional exchange, many people have a preconceived idea of what chiropractic is all about. There is much misinformation and a general misunderstanding regarding chiropractic philosophy, especially among medically trained professionals. Prior to landmark legal cases, medical ethics dictated that medical doctors could not refer to or consult with chiropractic doctors. And philosophical differences in the management of patients further separated medical doctors from chiropractic doctors.

These exclusionary practices led to a communication gap between the two groups. Fortunately, these barriers are now dissolving. Multidisciplinary partnerships and affiliations between medical, chiropractic, and other professions are being established every day. Equipment suppliers and seminar promoters are crossing over and actively marketing sources never considered before. This was not the case 20 years ago.

**Gaining Acceptance**

One area in which chiropractic has been behind the times is in research and peer review literature. Financial support from within the profession and research funded by independent organizations has produced significant publications validating the benefits of manipulative therapy.

A 1991 Rand Study evaluation of the scientific literature concluded that spinal manipulation is an effective treatment for low back disorders (Shekelle et al., 1991). The Agency for Health Care Policy and Research (1994) has endorsed conservative care for back pain, including spinal manipulation. The literature clearly supports the benefits of manipulation in treating subluxated joints. Restoring movement, removing soft tissue stress, and improving nerve function are some of the more notable effects of joint manipulative therapy, which chiropractors term “adjusting.”

The role of the chiropractor in sports is quite varied, from serving as a full-fledged team physician to providing occasional care to athletes in private practice. Just as in other fields of health care, the expertise of chiropractors in treating athletic injuries will vary greatly between individual practitioners. The athletic therapist should make sure to question a practitioner’s level of competency in sports medicine.

Many chiropractic colleges provide postgraduate course work in sports injuries. The American Chiropractic Association offers courses leading to a Certified Chiropractic Sports Physician status. Licensed doctors seeking additional educational training can enroll in a 3-year diplomat program in orthopedics, rehabilitiation, radiology, and other specialties to increase their knowledge in these fields.

While these programs provide excellent textbook material, they lack the intense practical experience required for athletic trainer certification. Nevertheless, for chiropractors who want to treat sports injuries or provide coverage at sports events, this is a good place to start.

A well-trained and conscientious chiropractor can be a valuable asset to a sports event staff. According to Dr. Anderson,

“...The right type of DCs are needed to enhance our effectiveness. We look for doctors who will work within the system, providing good quality care. I advocate a conservative approach such as soft tissue techniques, trigger point therapy, stretching, and massage. But if an athlete has a subluxated joint, only manipulation will remove it.”

Individual states regulate the scope of practice for doctors of chiropractic. Procedures they commonly perform include doing physical examinations, taking and interpreting X-rays, ordering special tests such as MRI or CT scans, and diagnosing musculoskeletal disorders. Many states allow for the use of physiotherapy modalities and rehabilitative therapies.

Most chiropractic students begin their training after getting a bachelors degree. They must complete a comprehensive 40-month curriculum that includes 600 hours of internship. Students must pass basic science and technical examinations administered nationally in order to be eligible for state board examinations. In addition, most states require con-