Helping prepare athletes for the Olympics can be a joyful, memorable experience, according to several therapists who did just that.
Imagine being in a stadium witnessing the world’s finest Olympic athletes in their final moments of competition. Intense. Focused. Squeezing out every last ounce of energy to edge past a rival. Will it be triumph or agonizing defeat? A mere nanosecond defines everything.

As a volunteer massage therapist, you can be part of an athlete’s Olympic journey. For example, therapist Sara Delano watched from the bench as the U.S. Women’s Hockey Team battled their way to a second-place victory at the 2002 Winter Games in Salt Lake City. The silver medal was a bittersweet win for these young women, who had their hearts set on the gold, as all competitors do.

“What a thrill to be there when that wonderful group of women received their medals,” says Delano. “I got to walk into the stadium during the closing ceremony with 50,000 people cheering. Amazing. I’ll never forget it.”

And what a party! The post-event celebration at those Winter Olympics featured Bon Jovi, Christina Aguilera, rock band KISS and figure skater Katarina Witt—all set under the backdrop of the jagged Rocky Mountains.

But Delano wasn’t just a lucky spectator. In December 2001, she became the first staff massage therapist for the Olympic Training Center (OTC) in Colorado Springs, Colorado, the headquarters for the U.S. Olympic Committee (USOC) administration and the Olympic Training Center programs.

“Two weeks after I got hired, I got shipped off with the women’s hockey team,” says Delano. “We hit five cities, and I spent about four weeks with them in Salt Lake. They were my main concern in Salt Lake, but I also worked with other athletes in the village.”

With hundreds of athletes coming through the training center, Delano’s job can be a daunting one. That’s why she seeks out...
Volunteers in general are extremely important to the U.S. Olympics Committee. The volunteer program began in 1977 with athletic trainers, physicians and chiropractors. At especially busy times of the year, additional help is needed to cover all of the sports and activities at the three U.S. Olympic Training Centers (Colorado Springs, Colorado; Chula Vista, California; and Lake Placid, New York). Volunteers enable the Sports Medicine Division to provide services that would otherwise cost the athletes money, such as vision, dental and physician care.

Until now, massage therapists were not part of the volunteer program. But times change, as signaled by the hiring of Delano as the first-ever staff massage therapist at the Olympic Training Center (OTC). The program is a real boon to sports massage therapists as they can gain intensive, hands-on experience with elite athletes, in cooperation with athletic trainers and other medical personnel.

If this sounds like a great opportunity; it is. But like anything else in life that’s worthwhile, you must seize the opportunity, pay a few dues and work hard. It’s a multi-tier process to be invited to the Olympic Games. And you’ve got to work your way up to get there.

The first step in the program is a two-week period spent at one of the training centers. Each center has a slightly different focus, but all three offer athletes the opportunity to live and train at the facility, either as resident athletes, or in short-term training camps offered through the sport’s governing body. Volunteer massage therapists must commit 14 days (first and last days for travel) to the program. They work on athletes at the sports medicine clinic, and the workload varies from light to very busy. Volunteers work daily including weekends.

After the two-week program, approved massage therapists are invited to volunteer at smaller competitions and may eventually work their way up to such prestigious events as the Pan American Games.
American Games, the World University Games and, ultimately, the Olympic Games—all expenses paid.

**IS IT RIGHT FOR YOU?**

Who should apply for the volunteer internships? According to Delano, massage therapists who are actively involved in the sporting community and want to continue working in an athletic environment should apply for the USOC Volunteer Massage Therapist Program. But make no mistake, this is not an entry-level training program.

“Minimum requirements are set to assure that the volunteer massage therapist has adequate training,” says Delano, “and has the experience to provide safe and effective massages to elite athletes.”

Jerry Scott, a long-time AMTA member from Lafayette, Indiana, spent two weeks in summer 2003, as a massage volunteer at the OTC in Colorado Springs. Scott has been a massage therapist for more than 20 years, and has worked with collegiate- and Olympic-level athletes since 1990, including paid positions with the swim teams of the University of Georgia, University of Tennessee and Purdue University.

“It’s not a training program,” emphasizes Scott. “You have fairly free rein to do what you do every day in your practice. The program is more of a test to see if you fit in and can work as part of a team. They want to know if you’re compatible, adaptable and able to work within guidelines,” he says. If you pass the muster, you’ll likely be invited to competitions.

Requirements include 750 hours of education (this can include continuing education), and five years experience (within those five years, an adequate amount of work as a massage therapist in a sporting environment must be proven). This can include work with high school, college or amateur/professional teams, but must be in a structured environment under a coach, or team ATC (certified athletic trainer). Note that work with one individual who competes on occasion does not constitute five years of experience as a sports massage therapist. You’ll also need a letter of reference from an athletic director, coach, or National Governing Body (NGB) administrator and you must be a U.S. citizen. For complete details go to [www.usolympistram.com/sportsmed/apps.html].

Bill Langford, a seasoned sports massage therapist from Seattle, volunteered at the Chula Vista OTC in California. “I used to teach at a massage school, and half the people in the room would raise their hands and say they wanted to work with top athletes,” he says. “I volunteered for four years before I got paid for sports massage. In this business, you have to work your way up.”

But don’t let the heavy credential and experience requirements overwhelm you. Sure, you’ve got to have some experience, but it can be more of a test to see if you fit in and can work as part of a team. “Volunteer your time at cycling events, marathons and triathlons,” he recommends, “document everything you do along the way, including what you did to the athletes and what the outcome was.”

Is all this worth it to just volunteer at the OTC? “It’s for the love of sport,” says Langford, who went to Helsinki, Finland, for the World Junior Hockey Championship. “I was in the box with the team and athletic trainer, and I helped during the game. The team earned their first gold at that event. It was great being a part of that.”

Langford was also on the ice when the gold medals were doled out to the athletes, coaches and support staff. Langford admitted that he got teary-eyed standing on the ice listening to

**ONE THERAPIST’S STORY**

Sara Delano is living her dream. As the staff massage therapist at the Olympic Training Center (OTC) in Colorado Springs, Colorado, she provides massage therapy for current and future Olympic athletes.

Delano graduated with honors from the Boulder College of Massage Therapy in March 2001, with a focus on sports massage. Her internships while in school included supervised placements in the training rooms at Colorado Christian College, Colorado University, Boulder; and with the Colorado Rapids, a professional soccer team. After graduation, she began a private practice in Lakewood, Colorado, and joined the AMTA-Colorado Sports Massage Team. One of her long-term goals was to work with Olympic athletes. One slow day, she called the Olympic Training Center to inquire if there were any opportunities for a newly graduated massage therapist. As luck would have it, they were in the market for one.

“After sending in my resume, I was invited for a short interview with Ed Ryan, director of sports medicine,” says Delano. “I was invited back for an all-day interview with everyone involved with sports medicine, including the head athletic trainers, staff athletic trainers, nutritionist and department directors. I was also asked to perform a one-hour demonstration massage on an athlete of their choice.”

Delano says she remembers performing a demonstration massage at the OTC. “I was working closely with the swim team,” Delano says. “I received a call a few weeks before the Olympics, and continued working with them during the games. Among her most memorable moments was the closing ceremony, where she marched into the stadium with ‘her’ athletes.”

After the Olympics, she settled into her daily clinical duties in Colorado Springs, which include massage therapy for resident and national team athletes, promoting and supervising the USOC Volunteer Massage Therapist program and massage therapy education for the athletic trainers. Delano’s workload is determined by how many teams are in training, and how many athletes are traveling to various competitions. Typically, she averages five hours of hands-on work per day. Each session lasts 30 minutes, and generally focuses on one area such as legs or back. The rest of the day is spent in her office, designing education classes for the athletic trainers and working on the volunteer program.

Excellence, dedication, teamwork and love of sport isn’t just for athletes. It’s a team effort all the way around, according to Delano, who adds that USOC volunteer massage therapists enable athletic trainers to use massage as another tool for rehabilitation and recovery.

“The desire to see the athletes succeed drives everyone here to do the best we can,” Delano says. “Working with the athletes is just incredible, and they really bring out the passion in my work.”

As an amateur athlete herself, Delano carves out some time for adventure races and ultra-distance mountain bike races. Her favorite activities include rock and ice climbing, skiing, kayaking and hiking.

—Bob McAtee and JoAnn Milivojevic

Kelly Ray uses effleurage and stretches on Jason Han after an afternoon of taekwondo practice.
As if that wasn’t enough, Langford was also handed a gold medal for playing a part in the team’s victory. It’s certainly not an experience Langford would bypass. Neither would other OTC massage therapy volunteers.

KNOW THE SPORT, KNOW THE AthLETE

“It’s a great atmosphere,” says Jerry Scott, “but it’s critical to get to know the athletes quickly, learn what they need and like, and then be able to deliver.” He also enjoyed the opportunity to spend his off-time with some of his athletes, “getting to know more about their sport, watching them work out, and seeing the intensity and devotion required to attain their level of performance.”

Whether or not you are selected for national or international appointments or choose to partake in them, the OTC program allows a massage therapist the opportunity to meet and work with some of the best athletes in the world, including Olympic and World medalists, and also many upcoming, talented athletes sure to be seen in the future. You will have the chance to expand your skills and knowledge in a way that you may not have at your home practice.

“Sports massage encompasses all the different skills that you have as a massage therapist and then some,” says Delano. “For example, knowing the difference between how much deep tissue an athlete can take before a competition is crucial. Also knowing the physiology and anatomy behind sports injuries is equally vital.”

Delano likes to see a variety of skills in prospective volunteers. Swedish, integrative and Thai can all be incorporated into the work you do with an athlete. She stressed that sports massage goes beyond pre- and post-event massage. It requires understanding what individual athletes can and can’t take. For example, Delano recounted that in massage school, she was told no deep tissue before competition, and yet her experience with the female hockey players negated that rule because some of the girls really needed it. That comes down to knowing the athlete and knowing how massage will affect his or her performance.

In Chula Vista, Langford worked with a lot of different sports such as track, soccer and field hockey. “There is a difference between a race walker versus a sprinter,” he says. “You need to know that difference because you don’t want to do a whole bunch of work on somebody that will alter his or her performance.”

But how can you get to know the sport and individual athletes intimately in just a couple of weeks? Through creativity, and a little bit of courage, you can get to know them well.

No one can know every sport inside and out. So, when faced with working on archers, Langford went for the total immersion method. He went to their practice sessions, watched them shoot and then tried it himself.

“I wasn’t bad, either,” laughs Langford. “Of course, I was only shooting 30 meters, while they were shooting 70 meters.”

Jen Durrant, a member of the 2004 Paralympic swim team, receives trigger point therapy on the gluteals after a hard day’s practice in the pool. The XII Paralympics Games will be held September 17-28 in Athens.
That’s exactly the kind of mentality that separates good sports massage therapists from the really excellent ones. “I didn’t know anything about judo when I started,” says Delano, “but I went to their practices and then I knew why they were having hamstring problems.”

She also spent some time on a wrestling mat. “It took me a while to figure out wrestling,” Delano says. “The pressures on the athletes are so intense, I’d go to practices and sometimes I’d grab a wrestler and say show me this move, and then I truly understood why certain issues came up. It helps to get in there and play the sport and know what these athletes are going through.”

Travis Snyder, from Newburgh, Indiana, is a certified massage therapist (CMT), ATC and a physical therapy assistant (PTA). He works in an outpatient orthopedic clinic as a PTA, and does outreach to a local high school and a professional baseball team as an ATC. He volunteered as a massage intern at the OTC in Colorado Springs in summer 2003.

“It was my first time working in a close multidisciplinary environment,” says Snyder. “It was extremely rewarding to see how each aspect of the medical field feeds off of each other and works together to give comprehensive care to each athlete.”

He also found that working with Olympic athletes was a breath of fresh air: “Their motivation is not financially or parentally driven,” Snyder says. “Their mental attitude, work ethic and attention to detail made working with them most rewarding.”

Like other volunteers who have been through the program, Snyder would highly recommend this experience to other colleagues. “Know and understand the needs of athletes, especially at a professional level,” advises Snyder. “The majority are not there for a recreational massage, but utilize massage as another training tool.”

The training centers are open all year, and Delano is actively seeking volunteer applications. “You’ll see a lot of different injuries and literally work head to toe in one day,” says Delano. “You’ll expand your skills and have a good time, too.”

The OTC program is a golden opportunity to watch sports up close and see how elite athletes live, practice, train and deal with injury and rehabilitation. And who knows, you might walk away with your own gold medal someday, too.

Bob McAtee, NCTMB, CSCS, is a sports massage therapist with 23 years experience and maintains an active, international, practice in Colorado Springs, Colorado. He worked as a massage volunteer at the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta. McAtee also serves as the president of AMTA’s Colorado Chapter, and can be reached via his Web site: www.stretchman.com.

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