Life as a NZ Massage Therapist at the Olympics
John W Young, Sarah Cockroft, Joanna Smith
NZ Massage Therapy Research Centre, Southern Institute of Technology.

Background
Sports massage is one of the fastest growing forms of treatment for athletes for the prevention of injuries, enhancing performance and in rehabilitation. During 500 BC-50AD, the Greek and Romans used massage on Olympics athletes to relieve neuralgia and epileptic seizures. However, little is known about the practices of NZ massage therapists at the Olympics.

Purpose and Method

**Purpose:** To investigate the experiences of massage therapists at the Olympics. Selection, workload, treatment type / techniques, and time spent with each athlete were explored.

**Design and Sample:** The study used a qualitative survey. The participants were any NZ massage therapist who massaged at a minimum of one of the last two Olympic games.

**Questionnaire:** The 35 item (5-27, open qu.), semi-structured, qualitative, postal questionnaire elicited information on demographics and qualifications, the average day, massage types, and advice / recommendations for aspiring therapists.

**Procedure:** Participants were accessed using networks known to the researchers. Participants meeting inclusion criteria were emailed an information sheet, questionnaire, and invitation to participate.

Results

**Participants:** three self-employed massage therapists; response rate = 37% (3 of 8). Each was massage qualified to at least Diploma level with additional qualifications in specific sports disciplines, including CHEK 2, sports medicine, physical education and acupuncture. Each had 16-18 years experience working with elite athletes covering numerous sports (e.g. rugby, hockey, V8 supercars, athletics, cycling). All participants had been to the Olympic games as a massage therapist on at least two occasions.

**Selection process:** All participants applied to advertised applications, and went through a selection process involving an interview and review of previous experiences and references.

The Olympic massage therapy experience: Massage therapists were housed in comfortable, shared apartments in the NZ accommodation block at the Olympic village. Massage therapy services were based in the health clinic (sited in the NZ accommodation block) and massage therapy was commonly provided from “8 am to 8.30 pm” with therapists rostered for “7.8 hours per day duty” with the average massage hours being “4-5 hours per day”. Massage sessions were commonly 30-45 minutes duration. Breaks were variable as were the hours and quantity of work. No one day was the same. Therapists participated in “health team meeting in the mornings before the clinic opened to discuss any issues, concerns but often didn’t happen with the Doctors in particular often out at events”. The Medical team was comprised of Massage Therapists, Physiotherapists, Chiropractors, Psychologists, Dietician and Doctors. The most common body areas for attention by the massage therapist were: calves, hamstrings and quadriceps. Muscle trauma and over training were typical but most acute injuries were attended to by physiotherapists, chiropractics and team doctors.

Security was very tight and patience was required, but therapists felt safe. Down time was commonly used for “eat, sleep, exercise, watch sport, sightsee”.

Only one participant answered yes to “Has it been a dream of yours to go to the Olympics Games?” After being to the Olympic games all the participants said it was an honor to work with the athletes, for example “…ultimate honor to work with athletes at this level and help contribute to their performance and represent your country in a support role”. The relationship of therapists/athletes was professional but relaxed. It was stated “…confidentiality is a huge issue for them so just need to be mindful at all times to uphold this. Most [athletes] were very friendly and sociable in dining room at meals and in NZ common room/athlete lounge”.

Advice and recommendations for aspiring therapists: “To be friendly, relaxed and able to establish a personal connection”. “The relationships you formed with the athletes can continue outside the work environment which added to the experience”. “For massage therapists whose dreams are to massage at this level would be to massage at as many events as possible whether it is paid or just voluntary”. This proves your commitment to the sport and gets you name out there in the elite arena”. “A last piece of advice would be not to give up. Have the passion and keep going until you get to where you want to be”.

Summary

There are two ways of being a massage therapist at the Olympics – via a specific team, or through NZ selection (IOC). Aspiring therapists need to get involved, and get known. Australian’s sports massage therapists are using titles of Soft Tissue Therapist (STT) or Myotherapist (MT) to gain more recognition from other health practitioners. This may be a good strategy for NZ sports massage therapists to consider, especially if they want to provide injury management at elite events. Massage therapists’ are not just “Rubbers”. Future research could explore massage therapists benefits (e.g. recognition) or downside (e.g. lost business) post Olympics, effectiveness of massage for athletes, and perceptions (e.g. respect) of massage therapists by other members of the Olympic health team.