

THE ROAD TO ATHENS:

A pathway for the young health professional?

By Mark Alexander July 2004

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The Road to Athens

The aim of the following article is to outline a pathway for aspiring sports physiotherapists to work with national sporting bodies at Olympic Games. My name is Mark Alexander and I am the physiotherapist for the Australian Olympic Triathlon Team traveling to Athens this year. I have been the physiotherapist with the team for 3 years attending the previous 3 world championships and the 2002 commonwealth games in Manchester. There are obviously many directions that lead to working as a physiotherapist at an Olympic Games therefore the following is just the path I followed on the road to Athens that may assist the young physiotherapist in there Olympic endeavours.

University studies comprised of one year of Human Movement Studies and then a Bachelor of Physiotherapy from which I graduated in 1995 from the University of Queensland in Brisbane. During my physiotherapy degree I completed sports massage, sports taping and first aid courses to enable me to volunteer as a sports trainer for sporting teams at university that interested me. I also regularly sought out the top sports physiotherapists in Brisbane that worked with sports that interested me and volunteered for 2-3 hours a month to observe them assess and treat patients. This was both an excellent learning experience and also an ideal chance to network.

In my final year of physiotherapy I was extremely lucky to complete my elective placement at the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) in Canberra. This exposed me to the cutting edge of sports medicine and sports physiotherapy in Australia at the time and allowed me to practice my skills and gain confidence working with elite athletes as a young health professional. The major benefit of working as a student at the AIS was the network of sporting health professionals that I met and liaised with daily that assisted me in the future to work with various national teams.

After graduating I worked for 18 months in a major teaching hospital in Brisbane rotating through all the mainstream departments developing a wide range of knowledge and skills in all areas of physiotherapy. I thoroughly recommend this to all young physiotherapists despite the usual repulsion of working in the wards with chests, sputum and the like. Numerous times on tour on the eve of major competitions my rusty chest physiotherapy skills have been called upon to clear productive chests. There are numerous advantages gained by working in teaching hospitals as a new graduate that are difficult to replicate in private practice such as:

- Working with senior physiotherapy assistance in an ideal non-intimidating social learning environment to further knowledge and skills.
- Attending orthopedic surgery to extend anatomical, diagnostic and prognostic knowledge.
- Working in intensive care units and emergency departments that assists in future on-field sporting emergencies.
- Gaining exposure to a variety of weird and wonderful conditions that are not regularly seen in private practice:
 - neurology (e.g. multiple sclerosis / motor neurone disease)
 - rheumatology (e.g. ankylosing spondylitis)
 - orthopedics (e.g. multi-traumas, joint replacements and severe OA)
 - cardio-thoracics (e.g. pneumonia / cystic fibrosis / cardiac patients)
 - paediatrics (eg juvenile RA / minimal cerebral palsy)
 - oncology (e.g. bone tumours)
 - women's health (e.g. post-partum issues)

During those eighteen months in the hospital I worked part-time 2 nights a week and Saturday mornings in a leading sports physiotherapy private practice that I had previously attended as a volunteer. This opened up numerous opportunities to travel with various local and state sporting teams to national titles in sports that I had previously played and was interested in working in. It is also beneficial to work with local sporting teams week in week out to expose oneself to acute on-field injuries and the respective management.

Every job opportunity from 2 years after graduation was due to the network of physiotherapists that I had met previously and also from being in the right place at the right time. I initially set goals to work with elite rugby teams and then to work with the Australian Olympic Triathlon team as they were the two sports that I had participated in and enjoyed the most throughout my life. There is no substitute for actually having competed in the sports that one wants to service as a physiotherapist to understand the biomechanics, physiology, injury risks and profiles and the lingo related to the sport to gain the trust of elite sportspeople and management staff involved. One negative trait to avoid is the idolisation factor that many young physiotherapists fall trap to when treating elite high profile athletes for the first time. They are all normal people albeit with a larger pay packet than the physiotherapist but they respect being treated as equals.

Another incontrovertible factor that will positively influence employment in the elite sporting arena is the regular attendance of continuing education courses to further one's knowledge and skills. Currently continuing education is essential to register with most national physiotherapy registration boards. It is now mandatory in Australia to be a specialist sports physiotherapist to work at future Olympic and Commonwealth Games. To achieve this specialization, one must have completed a masters degree in sports physiotherapy and have passed high level exams.

In summary there are a few key elements to potentially working at Olympic Games and other major sporting events with national sporting teams and bodies such as:

- An inherent love of and prior participation in specific sports.
- Motivation, sacrifice and drive to be involved in specific elite sports.
- Volunteering of time to learn from more experienced sports physiotherapists.

- Undergo specialist education in relevant sports physiotherapy areas.
- Develop networks within the sports physiotherapy community related to one's sport of interest.
- The ability to communicate and work effectively within a team environment

One thing to remember though is that elite sport is not the pinnacle sign of a good sports physiotherapist as there are plenty of ordinary sports health professionals working with elite teams and conversely some great sports physiotherapists working at an amateur level. Working with elite sport does have some drawbacks but they are far outnumbered by the positive experiences. The most important factor as a sports physiotherapist is the sole focus on doing everything in one's power to ensure the best possible performance of the team or individual that one is servicing. At the end of the day all other issues are secondary and generally destructive to that process. Being involved at an Olympic Games has always been a dream of mine and I know it will be extremely rewarding both professionally and as a life experience and I wish all readers the best in whatever sporting endeavour they choose whether it be in the backyard or at an Olympic Games.