

The 2004 Athens Olympiad and Massage Therapy

by George Peter Kousaleos. LMT | © 2004 All rights reserved.

Following two years of planning, which included many months of organizing selection criteria, press releases, an information and application website, and then choosing 170 massage therapists from a field of over 500, the Athens Health Services Sports Massage team 2004 took shape through the summer months of June and July. The return of the Olympics and Paralympics to Athens, Greece this year was also the return of massage therapy to one of the birthplaces of this important manual art that enhances performance and supports restorative powers.

Yes, the ancient Greeks understood the nature of touch therapies. They realized that structured touch could help warriors and athletes achieve a higher level of optimal performance, as it could restore patients who were burdened by illness, strain, or sorrow. The ancient Greek healers also knew that touch could lift spirit, allowing one to soar and yet remain calm and centered.

But in 2004, and for too many years before, Greece had lost touch with the full realization of the modern profession of massage therapy. The Athens 2004 Olympiad offered a stage where international massage therapists from 18 countries could come together in a magnificent team effort to support the physical and psychological needs of the 16,000 athletes, coaches, and support staffs of the XXVIII Summer Games.

As one of five co-directors and founders of the Athens Health Services Sports Massage Team 2004 I had a special view of this operation from my position within the Olympic Village, a beautiful, fully modern city that will serve as an upper-middle class neighborhood for those who lost their homes in a major earthquake that struck the coastline of Greece in 1999. Adjacent to the Olympic Village was Dekelia, a large multi-sport training center built on the grounds of a Greek air force base. Over 90 massage therapists worked daily at these two important sites. Others worked at various competition venues including track and field, aquatics, rowing, beach volleyball, basketball, tennis, softball, and baseball.

Each day, I saw exhausted athletes enter massage treatment rooms where magic would happen. One of the athletes was Igor Cassina, a previously unknown Italian gymnast who surprisingly won the gold medal in the men's individual high bar. The day after his victory he came to the massage therapy clinic to place his medal around the neck of the

blind massage therapist who had regularly treated him, and then around the neck of her guide dog. He thanked them both deeply, claiming that her skilled touch and the calming presence of this wonderful animal enabled him to perform beyond anyone's expectations. The joy experienced by every massage therapist who was in the waiting room that day was palpable, and yes, magical.

Another hero of these summer games was Kenenisa Bekele, of Ethiopia, who ran for the gold in the 10,000 meters and won the silver in the 5,000 meters. He also came regularly to the massage clinic, brought by his doctor, who was also his translator. It was this noble doctor who oversaw Kenenisa's medical, nutrition, and hydration needs, and who also gave him his daily massage treatments. This Hypocrites-like Ethiopian asked a different favor of the massage team – simply a table to work on, some lotion to share, and a quiet space where his athlete could release the pressure and tension of the expectations of his country. When told that he and his athlete were always welcome at the clinic he quickly embraced my hands and bowed his forehead to touch them, saying, "grateful thanks". My heart was filled with the pure expression of this man's trust in our humanity.

Many of the athletes were very honest and direct when they talked about why they were in Athens and what their realistic goals were. Some spoke about the honor of representing their family, their town, and their country. Some were more concerned with the importance of performing at their highest level – achieving a "personal best" at the most important athletic event in the history of the world. And still others focused on the linkage of these Games, and therefore themselves, to the ancient souls that ran, jumped, threw, and wrestled on this soil and rock over 2,700 years earlier. And so it was for the massage therapists who came to excel at their craft – that powerful combination of pride, ambition, and history. Everyone could feel it.

Each day I would leave the northeast corner of the Olympic Village to enter Dekelia, the magnificent training center that was intersected by cedar forests and a myriad of plants and flowers native to these hills. There you could see athletes training for gymnastics, boxing, track and field, swimming, judo, diving, water polo, fencing, tae kwon do, and wrestling. Massage therapists were moving from one training venue to another as athletes schedules shifted from heavy training to competition preparations. Their co-captains, including Pete Pfannerstill, of Tampa, FL managed the schedules and motivated their teammates to perform at their highest level for each and every athlete.

My time in Dekelia was spent in admiration of the abilities and skills of the athletes, coaches, and massage therapists. I used a few moments during some of those afternoons, usually under the shade of the dense forested areas, to look to the heavens

and thank all my grandparents for their gift of my life. They all left Greece as teenagers, came to America to raise robust families and create a new life. They taught their children and grandchildren to never forget the heritage, the language, and the ancient ones who gave a culture to the world that still shapes our understanding of philosophy, art, democracy, and peace through sports.

Every massage therapist who attended the Athens 2004 Olympics and Paralympics will tell many stories that characterized their experience. They will talk about the amazing athletes they met, about the teammates from around the world that are now "friends for life", and about the honor that was bestowed on them for working as caring professionals who volunteered a measure of their life to be a part of this glorious Olympic history. Many of these therapists believe that participating was a transformational experience, and perhaps was the most important event of the professional career. Every team member I have spoken to since his or her return from Athens has already committed to returning to another Olympiad in the future. Each of them feels blessed by having touched and witnessed the highest combination of human strength, speed, grace, and beauty.

I'm with them!

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