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## **Massage at the 2002 Winter Olympic Games:**

### **Problems, Solutions and a Rosy Future**

By Ruth Werner, LMP, NCTMB

In February and March of 2002, an event of unprecedented proportion occurred in the unlikely setting of sleepy, conservative Salt Lake City. Some 230 massage therapists and 30 greeters converged on the city, representing 39 states and 12 countries.

They ranged in age from 17 to 74, and in years of experience from several months to three decades or more. These therapists comprised the 2002 Winter Sports Massage Team (WSMT). They came without pay. They closed down their businesses: some for a few days, some for two months or more. Many came not knowing where they would be able to stay, or how they would get around town. They came for a dual purpose: to support the Olympic and Paralympic athletes, and to support their profession as it works to claim its place as an indispensable service at the Olympic Games.

The obstacles that the WSMT had to overcome were immense, but the energy behind the team was even greater. No one did more to get massage to the 2002 Olympic Winter Games than Roger Olbrot, LMP and member of the now-defunct National Sports Massage Team, and his partner, Jennifer Pruetz, LMP. Roger began working on this project from the moment he knew Salt Lake City had won the Olympic bid. Jennifer joined him later in the process. This article is about how it all happened, what we did there, and where the future lies for massage and the Olympic Games.

#### **How It Got Started: Problems and Solutions**

Massage at the Olympics began at the Los Angeles Summer Olympic Games in 1984, but has never been a mandated part of the Games; the host city has always had the option to decide whether it wanted to offer massage services to the athletes or anyone else. To no one's great surprise, the Salt Lake Organizing

Committee (SLOC) had no particular interest in seeing massage therapy as part of the Olympic experience. The conservative (bordering on repressive) attitudes toward touch and alternative health care in Utah stacked the deck against it, and the fact that SLOC was distracted by the bid scandal for the first several years of preparation didn't help, either. This challenge was overcome largely through a letter-writing campaign that Roger organized, in which various countries' teams, coaches, and individual athletes were encouraged to write to SLOC to express their concerns about not offering the service. Finally, in December of 2000, SLOC decided that the 2002 Winter Sports Massage Team could be an Olympic contractor - not Olympic volunteers (who were provided with uniforms and food) or (God forbid) paid employees, but contractors who would work for the princely sum of a total of three dollars: \$1 for running a site at the Olympic Family Hotel, \$1 for running a site at the Media Center, and \$1 for running a massage clinic at the Athlete's Village. We took the offer and made the most of it.

Another challenge had to do with leadership of the sports massage team. A massage school in Salt Lake City originally won the contract, and the person they put in charge of the project contacted Roger to work with him. But as the magnitude of the project loomed larger and larger, that organization decided it wasn't going to be possible for them to devote the amount of time and resources it would take to pull it all together, so they bowed out of the process. SLOC then withdrew the contract.

At this point, the letter-writing campaign really began to bear fruit. As SLOC heard from more Olympic participants, they came to realize that it might be worthwhile to offer massage services. They got in touch with Roger, and he became the director of the WSMT in late September of 2001. Roger made one of his sanest moves when he recruited a co-director in Jennifer Pruetz. The team directors were in place by October 2001; massage services were to be available starting January 29, 2002. The Games were to begin on February 8, 2002.

So, we had four months to organize a sports massage team requiring more than 200 people, for an event taking place on a worldwide stage! Actually, we had less than four months; with heightened awareness about security and the threat of terrorist attacks, each and every Olympic contractor would have to undergo an FBI background check, so SLOC wanted applications and paperwork on every team member by October 15, 2001: a completely unrealistic deadline. At this point, the recent dissolution of the National Sports Massage Team became another obstacle. Without it, there was no national standard that could be applied to team candidates, and there was no infrastructure for communicating with therapists who specialize in working with athletes. Fortunately, with the help of managing editor Peter Crownfield, we were able to get

an announcement placed in the November edition of *Massage Today*, with information about how to apply for the team. The response was awesome. Within six weeks, we had over 400 candidates from all over the world.

Roger and Jen then had the daunting task of selecting team members from all the applications they received. They did this based on whether the application was complete (no time to babysit people through this one!), previous experience, training in sports massage therapy, and willingness to be flexible and easy to work with. (This last quality was perhaps the most useful, given the peculiar nature of the way massage was offered at these Games). The paperwork of the accepted team members was so complete and so conscientiously compiled that even though we missed the October 15 deadline, the 2002 WSMT cleared security faster and more efficiently than any other Olympic contractor. Once selected, team members were scheduled to work at some combination of the three venues in which massage was offered. Team leaders were also selected from the applicant pool; these were people who were able to take on leadership roles and act as liaisons between team members and the directors.

Meanwhile, there was the small question of where all the equipment we needed was going to come from. Because we were Olympic contractors, we couldn't offer the benefits of corporate sponsorship to our donors. Nonetheless, generous suppliers contributed thousands of dollars' worth of equipment. Earthlite made three standard tables, four hydraulic tables and 12 massage chairs available. Astra Lite contributed 11 tables. Biofreeze sent 18 gallons of lotion, and Nu-skin contributed cases of hand sanitizer. Many other businesses donated supplies, or made them available for very low cost, and we are grateful to all of them. After the games were over, the tables and chairs were made available at less-than-wholesale cost to team members.

The creation of a usable massage space at the Athlete's Village was the next hurdle. During the Olympics we had a 24' x 54' trailer with one sink and no working bathroom to house a greeting area, eight tables, and a massage chair. (The Paralympic workspace was slightly bigger and more comfortable.) We faced continuous inspection (some might say harassment) by the health department (one inspector said-and I'm not making this up- "I've never inspected a bordello before!"), and the fire department. The agreement between the WSMT and SLOC came so late, our building wasn't marked on any map of the Village, so it took the athletes a long time to find us. (We were also told that many people specifically kept the Massage Center a secret, so it wouldn't get too popular!) In spite of these discomforts and inconveniences, we managed to perform well over 2,300 massages at the Village during the Olympics, and over 1,700 during

the Paralympics.

The massage spaces at the Media Center and Olympic Family Hotel were much less problematic. The Media Center was a chairs-only venue, conducted in large, busy hallways. The Hotel venue was a hotel room dedicated to the purpose, which housed three tables and a chair.

So now we had a team of about 230 therapists plus 30 greeters, and we had usable (stretch your imagination a little) spaces for them to work in -- but where were they all going to stay? In a transaction typical of the on-again, off-again relationship we had with SLOC, it looked like we could have access to the several hundred volunteer homes that had been made available to Olympic athlete family members, but just before we were expecting the first wave of team members to arrive, SLOC changed its mind. Suddenly we had no housing for 149 out-of-town therapists. Roger and Jen frantically called in every conceivable favor available to them, and found space for all our team members, but many hosts were unable to provide any other amenities, like rides to and from public transit. This meant several of our team members had two-hour and more commutes between their work venues and their host homes. For this, they closed their practices? It's hard to imagine the level of dedication it took to fulfill this commitment, and yet the vast majority of our team members did just that.

### **What We Did Once We Got There**

So we overcame -resistance from SLOC; changes in leadership; blocks in communication; scheduling deadlines; ignorant health inspectors; difficult workspaces; and a monstrous housing crisis. We almost walked away from the contract when SLOC changed its mind about the size of the logo on our team uniforms (they finally conceded). Several team leaders stayed up late into the night, cutting labels off fanny packs and covering the manufacturer's names on table legs and massage chairs so we wouldn't be accused of trademark infringement. What did we do it all for?

We did it for this: at the Athlete's Village during the Olympic Games, we performed 604 massages on athletes and coaches representing 19 different events and 60 countries. We did almost 2,000 sessions with other Olympic staff. Workspace at the Athlete's Village was tight and the lines to get through "mag and bag" at security were long, but there were compensations. You can't imagine the thrill of seeing the hockey player or the Nordic skier or the speedskater you worked with last night compete (and sometimes win!) the next day. Several teams became dedicated clients and came back regularly throughout their stay. This was especially true of teams from smaller countries that couldn't afford to have a massage therapist on staff.

Many team members became personally invested in "their" athletes, and kept close tabs on how they did in each event. One special moment for me was watching the athletes come together for the walk down to the Olympic Stadium on the night of the Closing Ceremonies. Small groups of distinctive uniforms drifted in and out of formation, finally finding like-colored teammates, and slowly becoming larger and larger clusters of whole teams. When the athletes had left the area, we all went to the Village Theatre to watch the show on closed circuit TV (no commercials, no commentary, thank you very much). Afterward, we went back outside to welcome and cheer the returning athletes.

During the Paralympics, we did 442 sessions with athletes and coaches, and almost 1,300 sessions with other support staff. We worked with a much higher percentage of the Paralympic athletes than with the Olympic athletes, for a number of different reasons, including the fact that most Paralympic teams don't have massage therapists on staff. When the word got out that this service was available, they flooded the gates. It was inspiring and humbling to work with these extraordinary athletes whose physical strength is only sharpened by the obstacles they have overcome to compete at this level.

We did over 400 sessions at the Olympic Family Hotel, working with the International Olympic Committee (IOC), U.S. Olympic Committee, and SLOC members and support staff. The hotel was set up much like a massage school clinic, with tables separated by curtains. The work done here wasn't necessarily sports massage, but whatever the client happened to need at the time. We ran a massage site at the Olympic Family Hotel only during the Olympic Games; the site changed to a hotel with massage therapists on staff for the Paralympics, so we weren't invited to participate there.

At the Media Center, we did almost 8,000 sessions over the course of the Olympics and Paralympics. These were noisy, busy places, and spots for massage sessions often booked up for an hour or more ahead of time. Media Center shifts were for massage marathoners - here, more than anywhere, clients far outnumbered therapists. This was an exciting, if exhausting venue, and it was impossible to escape the presence of the televisions. It was fun to be with people who really knew the sports, though. I was working there the night of a controversial speedskating race. The journalist on my chair kindly explained to me why one athlete had been disqualified while another took the gold - I would never have figured it out on my own! During the Paralympics, the Media Center moved to a location directly connected to the Sledge Hockey Arena.

During games, the area would be empty of journalists, and I know at least a few team members managed to sneak in the back door of the arena and watch the hockey games live instead of on TV. The International

Paralympic Committee was so grateful for our services that they gave the 2002 WSMT 40 tickets to the Paralympic Closing Ceremonies -- another wonderful perk.

Many of our team members were featured by television and print journalists from their home states or elsewhere. All in all, we estimated that over 400 stories in print and broadcast media from all over the world covered massage therapy at the Olympics, including an official display that will be showcased in the Olympic Museum in Lausanne, Switzerland.

Over the whole event from February 8 to March 19, the 2002 Winter Sports Massage Team did 12,435 sessions, working with athletes, coaches, trainers, journalists, Secret Service and FBI agents, bus drivers, cameramen, and MacDonald's employees, all of whom had come for the same purpose: to compete and support competitors who were dedicated to the glory of sport, the honor of doing their best and the excellence of human effort.

We did this at some considerable personal cost. Many team members put their lives, their families, and their businesses on hold while they dedicated themselves to this event. Several people struggled with health problems including altitude sickness and a particularly virulent strain of flu. Another team member assumed that her chronic shortness of breath and fatigue was due to the altitude, and went home to discover she had developed congestive heart failure! (We're happy to say she's doing fine now.) Saddest of all, one of our team members never got to participate at all; she died just before the Games began, of complications from a seizure disorder. We held a small service for her at the Athlete's Village, and her picture will be part of the commemorative 2002 WSMT quilt that is currently in the making.

There was also a considerable financial cost in putting together the 2002 WSMT, most of which came out-of-pocket for the team directors, with some assistance from the Utah chapter of the AMTA. Roger estimates that the main expenses of phone bills and copying ran close to \$7,500 (this doesn't include the several months of lost income when he and Jen were unable to see clients). Five state chapters, including Washington, West Virginia, Nevada, Michigan, and Ohio, have contributed to the team to help offset some of this investment.

When I asked Roger what he would do differently if he had another chance, his answers were predictable: start earlier, delegate more responsibility, try to make housing, transportation, and work space more convenient for all the participants. All prospective team members need to be accessible by e-mail. He'd like to have a computer onsite to help keep track of statistics electronically instead of by hand. He'd like to see

some pre-Olympic training for team members so that an established sports massage protocol could be developed and followed for each event. In this way treatments could be more consistent. But would he want to change anything about the team - how it was run, or who participated? Not a thing.

### **Where Do We Go from Here?**

What's next for massage at the Olympics? Why in the world did we invest so much time at the Media Center and the Olympic Family Hotel? Some people would argue that those venues were a waste of time and resources, and that massage should only have been offered to the athletes. In a perfect world, I suppose, that could be true. But the fact is that massage is still working to find its place in the Olympic setting. By providing this service at these non-athlete venues, we proved that we are flexible, reliable, committed to being a team member, and, most of all, highly, highly appreciated. While the Olympics were in session, Roger and Jen had several meetings with the International Organizing Committee's Medical Commission to discuss the future of massage therapy in Olympic settings. The goal is to have massage therapy be a mandated service to be provided to the athletes by the host city, just as medical care is. Massage should not be an afterthought, squeezed in only when enough people complain about its absence. Right now the criteria for membership in an International Sports Massage Team are being developed. This team will operate as part of the physiotherapy medical group, putting us on an equal footing with other medical services provided at Olympic events. This opportunity has come about because of the outstanding job the 2002 Winter Sports Massage Team did and the favorable impressions they made on international medical commissioners who toured the facilities; they have paved the way for the future of sports massage at all Olympic Games.

When massage therapy is officially a part of the host city's responsibility, the door will open to a wide variety of wonderful benefits for Olympic sports massage therapists: the availability of corporate sponsorships, the possibility of being paid for our time, travel, and effort, and a position of responsibility that makes us part of the medical team. It means we can determine what kind of facilities we need to work in, rather than making do with what the Host City chooses to offer. It also opens the door to whole new administrative challenges: if you were responsible for putting together an international sports massage team, how would you do it? Is a massage therapist from France going to have comparable skills to a massage therapist from Bolivia, or Senegal, or the U.S.? How do you tell? The future of massage at the Olympics is bright indeed, with many new obstacles to help us grow further in our world community.

So brush up on your Greek and Italian; announcements about joining an International Sports Massage team to work at the 2004 Summer Games in Athens, and the 2006 Winter Games in Torino, should be appearing soon.

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Click [here](#) for more information about Ruth Werner, LMP, NCTMB.



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