

Has sports physical therapy been using the best therapeutic resources with athletes participating in the Olympic Games?

After the end of the 30th Olympic Games, which took place in London in 2012, I believe it is important to analyze the role of the sports physical therapist in this event that gathers the best high-performance athletes on the planet. As a clinical physical therapist who has had the opportunity to participate in different major sporting events and as a researcher in the field of sports physical therapy, I have observed the roles of science, clinical practice, and physical therapy in high-performance sports. The majority of injuries attended to by physical therapists during a sports event such as the Olympic Games are musculoskeletal in origin; they mainly affect tendons, muscles, bones, and cartilage in this order. Another important characteristic of these lesions is that most of them are classified as chronic, given the enormous overload professional athletes require from their motor system during the long training process. A considerable group of athletes mentions that they have been noticing the symptoms of the injury for months or even years.

The Olympic Games last about 16 days; however, the mean stay of an athlete in the Olympic Village is a week. This means that little or no clinical improvement is observed in this short period of time, given the chronic aspect of the injuries. The fact that a favorable prognosis cannot be presented leads to a situation that usually makes medical professionals, especially physical therapists, very worried. I have observed that many of them, regardless of their country of origin, choose to use physical therapy techniques and resources indiscriminately, without any evidence of their efficacy.

Even if there is scientific evidence that points to which resources are more efficient, I have still

seen colleagues propose interventions that lack scientific base; they prescribe the same procedures for professional athletes, who are elite competitors, as they would for non-athletes. I believe it is time to start utilizing science as an ally for the development of the sports physical therapy profession. Unfortunately, I believe this will be difficult because some colleagues assert that science is “complicated” Beyond that, they feel that those who should determine the efficacy of the so-called “alternative methods” are the scientists, not the ones who use the methods (i.e. the physical therapists).

Wouldn't it be easier (and safer) if sports physical therapists prescribed treatments that had been scientifically confirmed to be effective? It is important to note that there are free databases that can be used for the research on evidence in many fields of physical therapy knowledge including PEDro, which contains about one thousand articles about sports physical therapies that are supported by evidence. However, the sports physical therapy field has one of the lowest numbers of randomized controlled studies when compared to other fields of physical therapy knowledge. I believe that the professional acknowledgement the multidisciplinary team that works in high-performance sports seeks will only occur when we prove our actions with scientific evidence. There is no doubt that, with science, we will gain respect.

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