

PAN AM PROUD! (Winnipeg, 1999)
by Dr. Brian S. Seaman, DC, FCCSS(C), FICC

Although the Games only lasted 17 days, the Pan Am experience actually begins many months before. It starts with each health provider submitting an application through their respective National sports group, which in turn forwards a list to the Canadian Olympic Association (COA). Then, based on discussions between COA representatives, the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) and the Chief Therapist (CT), the final selection is decided upon. For the Pan Ams, the initial team of 36 individuals (including the CMO, CT and clinic manager) included two chiropractors, 21 therapists (PTs and ATs), six massage therapists and six MDs (one extra MD was added a couple of weeks prior to the Games due to scheduling problems).

The Pan Am experience really took off the first week of January when I received a telephone call one evening from Lois Pohlod who had been named the Chief Therapist for the Canadian team. It is interesting; what used to be referred to as the Canadian "Medical Team" (and essentially still is, based on our accreditations) is now "officially" the Canadian "Health Team". In fact, I was quite surprised to receive the call. I knew that I had the opportunity of travelling to the Pan Am Games with host medical services (as I had with the Calgary Winter Olympics in 1988) but I had not anticipated being named to the Canadian Team especially without the recommendation of a NSC (National Sports Organization). That was a first! A couple of days later, Dr. Ross Outerbridge (CMO; orthopedic surgeon from Kamloops, BC) gave me a call and welcomed me as a member of the team.

The first meeting of the "Health Team", and all the Mission Staff (over 200 of us in total!) was in May in Winnipeg. This gave the team members (the majority of whom were able to attend) a chance to get to know each other. This is very important, as you will be working with these individuals on an ongoing basis for 3 weeks. Although the Games only covers 2 weeks, as members of the "Health Team", we have to be in Winnipeg, and have the clinic set up, a full week in advance for those athletes who arrive early. There is also a couple of days after the closing ceremonies, for packing up the equipment for the next major games (Sydney 2000).

One of the interesting activities which the COA had arranged during the orientation, was to consider a variety of scenarios which we could encounter during the Games. The good thing is that the CMO and Chief Therapist generally have to look after these situations. However confidentiality is repeatedly stressed and in fact no such sensitive information about athletes or their injuries, is ever relayed via cell phone. The media has been known to monitor cell phone conversations with scanners during major games. Thankfully, no such difficulties arose during the Pan Ams.

One question which I have often been asked, was how did the various health practitioners interact in the Canadian clinic. Dr. Gord Partridge (the other chiropractor) and myself didn't run into any problems and in fact were often working with other members of the team on the same athletes. We also had three other chiropractors affiliated with the Canadian team, Dr. Greg Stewart (with Athletics Canada; aka Track and Field), Dr. Brian Lecker (rhythmic gymnastics) and Dr. Ken Mikkelson (swimming team).

Gord and I thoroughly enjoyed our time at the Pan Ams, where we recorded 343 chiropractic visits, treating athletes from 25 different teams and 21 different sports. The experience was fantastic and the athletes themselves, are a tremendous group of individuals.

We had access to all venues when attending in an official capacity (as a member of the Canadian Health Team). The Canadian clinic was on the campus of the University of Manitoba; specifically in the basement of one of the residences. We had the coolest area in the whole building! The clinic actually had two large rooms, one of which was the area for chiropractic and the physicians, and the other area for all the therapists (ATs, PTs and RMTs). This worked out very well, as the reception area, was in the chiropractic/medical room, with the chiropractic cubicles (but no open concept!) directly behind and across from the reception desk.

The protocol for major games, is that the athletes will come into the clinic, and request the service that they need. If they are unsure, or its a new injury one of the "docs" (at major games, that's the MD variety) was to assess them. This was not a major issue, though. There are a lot of athletes who are receiving chiropractic care either on a periodic or ongoing basis. Generally it's periodic because many of the teams travel a considerable amount during the year. As a result Gord and I, as did all the other members of the team, would often deal with multiple complaints or multiple injuries, which at times had been present for a number of months.

The only unfortunate factor with all of this, was that the residence in which the clinic was based, could only hold 600 individuals. That meant the mission (support) staff and Health Team had to be housed in a motel which was a 35 minute walk away. Thankfully there were shuttles in the early morning and after our Team meetings at night. The meetings would start at 10:00 p.m. and generally lasted 45 minutes to an hour. Thank goodness for a shuttle at night, the mosquitoes were terrible! They should have tested them for steriods – they were so big! Then back to our rooms and get rested up for the next day. Partying you ask? Not likely – a major games is like an endurance test. At least we were fed well at the cafeteria at Athletes Village (all kinds of different foods from South, Central and North America) and our rooms were air conditioned. This made up for the hot weather - - - up to 39C for almost two weeks. If you wanted to run, you did it in the morning or not at all!

Occasionally, depending upon your schedule in clinic, you may have a chance to attend events as a spectator, rather than as a member of the Health Team. One afternoon, I had the chance to see the Canadian Baseball Team beat Mexico (sitting along 3rd base line) and after the game, went over to an area of downtown Winnipeg known as The Forks. There were a number of bands and groups playing in an open air concert, including Great Big Sea.

On the last weekend of the Pan Am Games, the Canadian men's and women's Softball Teams played in the final round. The Canadian men won the gold medal against their U.S.A. counterparts, however the women lost a hard pitched game against the American team and had to settle for the silver. One of the coaches of the Canadian Men's Team was Mark Smith who is involved with Sports and Recreation in Nova Scotia with the Fair Play Program. This was Mark's fourth Pan Am gold medal, the first three he had won as a player. Last year he was also inducted into the Canadian Softball Hall of Fame.

Certainly two of the highlights of the entire games, were the opening and closing ceremonies. It was a great feeling entering the stadium for both events as a member of the Canadian Team. You cannot imagine how loud it is. The only thing louder was the Snow Birds doing a fly by right overhead (yeah, they were so low you could see the undercarriages!) The closing ceremonies were a bit less formal but I think everyone had a great sense of accomplishment. What may have looked spontaneous on T.V., was actually directed, with all of the athletes and teams being directed to run down onto the field to join the performers and watch the Guess Who up close.

It was indeed a great experience and one of which I was very fortunate to be part of. It is certainly an

honour to represent our profession and being a member of the Canadian Team at the Pan Ams, was very rewarding. I made lots of new friends and met a lot of great people. E-mail makes it easy to stay in touch. Would I do it again you ask? Let me think now – would I like to spend 3 weeks in Sydney or Salt Lake City or Athens or ?? WHEN DO WE LEAVE!

Originally published in the
NSCC Spinal Column