Volunteerism: At the Core of Athletic Training

The death of Georgian luger Nodar Kumaritashvili prior to the start of the 2010 Winter Olympic Games in Vancouver is a sobering reminder of the risks and dangers of athletic competition. Equally important was the rapid response of the sports health care team immediately following this tragic incident. A cadre of qualified medical personnel, including athletic trainers, physicians, and emergency response teams, responded to the catastrophic incident in an instant.

This got me thinking about how many sports health care professionals it takes to staff an event such as the Winter Olympics. The countless hours these professionals put in, often in volunteer roles, is remarkable. Volunteerism has been at the heart of our profession for many years. I can personally attest to the wide range of activities at which I have volunteered my professional expertise throughout the years and the many grateful athletes and physically active individuals who have benefitted from my care.

Perhaps the Olympic movement embodies this spirit of volunteerism more than most. For many years, a former graduate school classmate of mine at the University of Arizona, Mr. Ed Ryan, coordinated the sports medicine effort at the United States Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs, Colorado. It was through his efforts that I was introduced to the volunteer program for athletic trainers and how vitally important this effort is to the success of the United States Olympic mission.

In fact, back in the early 90s on a trip to Colorado Springs, I met with Ed, who provided my athletic training students and me with a tour of the Olympic training facilities so I could witness the important health care efforts of the athletic training volunteers. These efforts certainly do not go unnoticed by the athletes and coaches who have come to expect the highest level of sports medicine the world has known—a point that was reinforced as I watched the U.S. 4-man bobsled team take to the podium to receive their Olympic gold medals.

One athlete on the stand, push man Steve Mesler, was a student athlete at the University of Florida during my tenure there in the early 90s; it was very rewarding to see an athlete who had overcome so many injuries during his training become an Olympian and walk away with the ultimate prize. I personally know how grateful he is for the sports health care professionals that have provided care for his injuries throughout these many years.

So one might ask, how do I get involved in the Olympic volunteer effort? The United States Olympic...
Committee has a link on their official Web site that explains the volunteer program for athletic trainers and other sports health care professionals in greater detail (http://www.teamusa.org/about-usoc/medical-clinics). With state-of-the-art facilities at Olympic Training Centers in Colorado Springs, Colorado, Chula Vista, California, and Lake Placid, New York, athletic trainers, along with other medical professionals, will vie for a spot to work with some of the best athletes in the world. Using a credible and valid method of evaluation, volunteers must first complete a 2-week rotation at one of the training centers before they are invited to work competitions at the Olympic Games. Interestingly, volunteers may also choose to work with the United States Paralympics athletes as well.

I close with a short story written by Erma Bombeck (Copyright Erma Bombeck, 1990. Reprinted by permission of the Aaron M. Priest Literary Agency, Inc.).

I was a “thousand points of light” long before volunteerism lighted up the sky and had an official name. I have had my lights short-circuited, burned at both ends and occasionally punched out.

I hang in there because generally volunteerism is a dazzling galaxy of gems that streaks across the sky and illuminates the world when it falters and cannot find its way. Americans are intrigued by royalty.

Hardly a week goes by that we are not treated to headlines of a member of a royal family somewhere who is too fat, fools around, is a bad mother, doesn’t earn his allowance, drinks too much or is just plain boring.

Americans never have felt the need for a hierarchy who live in castles and get paid for waving and going to funerals, but I would like to propose for this country a royal family who would have no political power but would symbolize what we are all about and set the tone for our nation...the Royal Family of Volunteers.

You cannot be born to this royal family. You must earn your way through its ranks. Just because your mother was a “queen” among volunteers and helped stock the treasures of your local art galleries doesn’t mean they are your legacy or that you will inherit her deeds.

Congress will not appropriate a salary for your efforts. If you are a Red Cross worker who rushes to California to aid victims of an earthquake, expect to work 12 hours a day, seven days a week, for no less than a month before you return home.

You won’t even have your own principality, especially if you volunteer your medical services to travel down the Amazon River on your vacation to tend to the surgical needs of small children in Brazil.

The perks of royalty, which usually add up to yachts, box seats, parades and state dinners, may translate to long hours, dry sandwiches, cots, rejection, cold coffee, screaming kids, broken-down buses and emotional pits that are tough to climb out of.

Royalty as a rule is recognizable. The Royal Family of Volunteers are nameless, faceless and forgettable. They are often taken for granted, and only a fraction of them are recognized for their talents.

So how do you know you’re royalty. Ah...it’s the crown jewels that give you away—that sparkling tiara of smiles you have given and tears you have shared, and the rich legacy of caring.

REFERENCE


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