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ARE OUR SPORTSMEN AND WOMEN GETTING A FAIR MEDICAL DEAL?

P Firer, M Ferguson

South Africa is blessed with a large and top-rate sporting population and with top-rate doctors and scientists interested in all aspects of management of sports participation.

Yet somehow our players are being short-changed.

Do top-rated international cricketers have to be trundled around England for numerous assessments and investigations by people not really known to the team management, only to be sent home for diagnoses and a management plan? This on two separate tours!

Does an international soccer goalkeeper have to undergo outdated investigations, followed by an unnecessary operation in a foreign country by a surgeon totally unknown to the team management, the player, or even the orthopaedic community in South Africa, then to be told that he needs another operation to correct his problem?

Does an international hockey goalkeeper have to have an injury for 6 weeks before a diagnosis is made and it is too late for adequate treatment to enable him to participate pain-free in an international event?

Do our sporting teams have to tour without the most experienced experts to handle their problems?

There is also a growing misconception in South Africa that we can produce 'sports medicine specialists'. There is no such individual, and it is impossible for one person to attain the necessary knowledge and experience.

Let us consider the fields of sports medicine and break them up into 'pre-participation' and 'in-competition' areas as far as the sportsman is concerned.

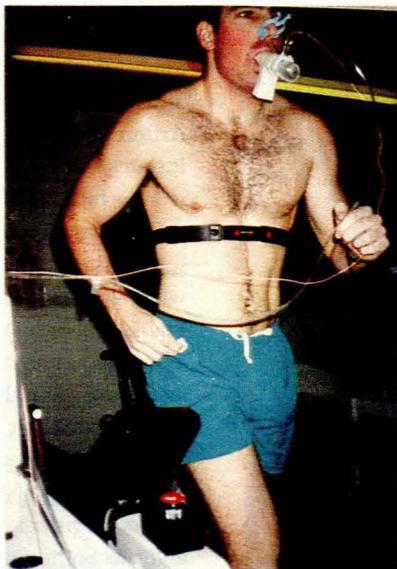
Ponky Firer and Mark Ferguson specialised in orthopaedic surgery at Wits and are in separate private practices in Johannesburg. They have a common interest in orthopaedic sports trauma, Dr Firer concentrating on the knee and Dr Ferguson on the shoulder. Both are committed to the principle that every sportsman should have the right to be treated by specialists specifically trained, experienced and interested in sports injuries, and this article was prompted by their frustration at the poor handling of some of our international athletes.



PRE-PARTICIPATION AREAS

The pre-participation areas require **physiologists** to assess the status of the individual and prescribe programmes aimed at overcoming weaknesses, preventing injury and optimising performance, **nutritionists/dieticians** to prescribe the intake necessary to replace energy losses and to develop the right physiological status for peak performance, and **psychologists** to assist with mental training. **Sports**

physicians are doctors trained specifically in the understanding of medical conditions related to sport, training, climatic conditions and their physiological effects, drug-related requirements, and managing medical problems that may occur during the pre-event phase and problems related to the female athlete. **Orthopaedic sports traumatologists** (orthopaedic surgeons who have specialised and practice in the field of sports injuries) are needed to treat any injury sustained during this pre-event phase, while **physiotherapists/biokineticians/chiropractors** aid in recovery following injury. **Masseurs** step in after heavy training sessions to reduce muscle soreness and stiffness.



sports-related medicine is most competent to handle this problem, i.e. a sports physician who has knowledge and experience of sport and medical conditions related to sport.

Finally, **mental 'injury'/breakdown** can occur during competition, and here a sports psychologist is of value in helping the athlete.

It is essential to have these three experts available to athletes wherever and whenever top-level competition takes place, and

it goes without saying that physiotherapists and masseurs are an essential part of any medical team during competition.

No physician working in the field of sports medicine can have the necessary experience to handle all medical and physiological problems *as well as* injury problems — most suited to an experienced orthopaedic sports traumatologist. Nor can they handle the specific psychological problems of the athlete. So there is no such thing as a sports medicine specialist — sports physician yes, orthopaedic sports traumatologist yes, sports psychologist yes, nutritionist yes, but one global 'sports medicine specialist', *no!* This is why Australia, the USA, Sweden, the UK, France and other prominent countries take orthopaedic surgeons and sports physicians

as part of their medical team to all major sports meetings.

It is accepted that on certain long tours to foreign countries, teams cannot take a full medical complement. On a 3-month cricket tour to England, for example, it would be an unaffordable luxury, but the medical staff can be in contact with South African experts (which the cricket medical committee have in place) to make quicker and better assessments and management plans. However, Bafana Bafana going to a World Cup at which 95% of the significant problems players are likely to experience are injuries, should have taken an experienced orthopaedic sports traumatologist to look after their players in the best way possible. No player should have had an unnecessary operation!

International-level sportspeople injured in South Africa need to be referred (preferably under the guidance of their sporting bodies, and ideally through medical committees such as those cricket and rugby have in place) to orthopaedic surgeons who have specialised interest in sports trauma — thus avoiding delays in diagnosis and management of the elite athlete.

There is a time for sports science and a time for sports injury management — pre-event and during the event, respectively. The experience required in the two areas is so vastly different that no one person can do both. We need to recognise this, because our South African sportsmen and women need and deserve the best!

IN-COMPETITION AREAS

Only three things can happen to an athlete during the competition phase that can affect his or her performance.

Most important and potentially devastating is **physical injury**. Here a doctor who has specialised and is experienced in injury is needed (the orthopaedic sports traumatologist), i.e. someone whose working day is mostly spent in this area.

A **medical condition** can arise, e.g. viral illness, rashes, dehydration. A general practitioner who has specialised in

