The Evolution of U.S. Sports Massage
“This was the first moment of connecting us: we had a group, we had a mission ...”

—Benny Vaughn on the landmark meeting of sports massage therapists in the mid-1980s during the creation of the sports massage credentialing exam and a national sports massage team

By KARRIE OSBORN
The lens through which we typically look at the beginnings of sports massage is colored by tales of ancient Greek Olympians being massaged with oils and herbs, with the goal of creating a better athlete, a better competitor, a better champion. Truth is, it remains a pretty accurate view of what sports massage can do.

Sports massage today is a valuable component in most collegiate, professional, and Olympic training programs across the country. Modern-day athletes and trainers know about massage therapy and its value in the training room, both for recovery and competitiveness. Go behind the scenes at any international sporting event, and you’ll find massage therapists—working for an individual athlete, a team, or an organization. And more sports medicine teams are including massage therapists in their ranks. But this wasn’t always the case.

What was the path that brought sports massage to its current position? How did this niche therapy evolve to being an important partner in today’s sports medicine teams? To appreciate the path traveled, we look to those who have lived it—the leaders, and often unsung leaders, of the field of sports massage who witnessed firsthand the profession’s growth and evolution, and who helped it happen. Let’s let their memories create insight into the journey from there to here, and identify a few of the milestones along this cobbled path.

Reigniting the Fire
Sports massage in the United States got a kick-start during the 1972 Summer Olympics in Munich, when Lasse Viren, otherwise known as the “Flying Finn,” won both the 5K and 10K race in record time. The buzz started when Viren divulged he was receiving deep-tissue massage on a daily basis. Massage therapists around the world, and especially here in the United States, stood up and took notice.
Benny Vaughn says massage therapy is the most sought-after health service by Olympic athletes.

START AT THE BEGINNING
Whenever you start a conversation about sports massage, one name consistently enters the dialog—Benny Vaughn. Considered by many to be the “father of US sports massage,” Vaughn has seen the evolutionary milestones of manual sports therapies up close and personal.

Starting as an athlete himself, Vaughn went to the University of Florida in 1969 on a track scholarship before eventually transitioning to the other side of the training table in the early 1970s. Many, including most of those interviewed for this article, credit Vaughn with their own success in the field. So what milestones does this icon recognize in the history of US sports massage?

Starting the Conversation
Vaughn starts by paying homage to Jack Meagher and his 1980 book, *SportsMassage* (Doubleday), which Meagher coauthored with Pat Boughton. “It’s what started the conversation,” Vaughn says. “It was the first time folks started to see the term sports massage, and that got things moving in that direction.”

In his text, Meagher wrote: “Whatever sport you play, Sportsmassage [the spelling Meagher coined] will give you 20 percent extra—extra performance, extra protection, extra time, per game, per season, per career.” Thirty-six years later, and that’s still the conversation being discussed today. (See “Razor’s Edge,” page 52, for more on the role of sports massage and peak athletic performance.)

A Community is Born
Not long after Meagher’s book was published, the work of US sports massage therapists became more visible and leaders in this genre began to stand out. Vaughn says it was a collaborative meeting of the minds at a resort in the Pocono Mountains in the mid-1980s that propelled the course of modern-day US sports massage. It was there that Robert (Bob) King, co-founder of the Chicago School of Massage Therapy, tasked the group with creating a sports massage certification exam. Vaughn remembers his own role as one of the first examiners for that now defunct test.

At the same time, an effort was underway to create a national sports massage team that would work events and promote massage therapy in general. “I recall Bob’s idea behind that,” Vaughn says. “He thought that sport would be a great vehicle to simply support massage therapy. It would be visible to the public, it would be transparent. Spectators could stand at a tent at a road race and see the athletes get massaged. It wasn’t behind a closed door, but outside in the daylight.” The end goal, he says, was demystifying the notion of massage.

Vaughn says both the sports massage certification and the creation of the sports massage team were instrumental to the evolution of US sports medicine—not only for the goal of creating public awareness, but also for the added benefit of creating a community of colleagues.

“There were many massage therapists around the country who had been working alone in the sports,” Vaughn says. “Many were working singularly and in vacuums. This was the first moment of connecting us: we had a group, we had a mission, we had a sports massage team, and we worked as a tremendous vehicle and ambassador for massage.”

A Potential Realized
The 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta is a milestone Vaughn is personally attached to. These Games marked the first time massage therapists were included as part of the official Olympic volunteer force that provided service to the athletes. MTs had been at the Games before, and often provided massage to volunteers and staff, as well as athletes, but they weren’t part of the official Olympic family. “In 1996, I made it a point to change all that,” Vaughn says. “This was a big turning point for me,” he recalls. “At that time, I was employed by the Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games as a manager for Athlete Medical Services. My responsibility was to arrange the sports health care for 10,000-plus athletes and their support teams that were coming to Atlanta, including the care they received at the Polyclinic, as well as the various venues.” Vaughn says he made sure massage therapy was included as part of those official services.

The goal, he says, was to ensure that every massage therapist participating in the Games was on the official credentialed roster. This afforded the MTs uniforms, access to the venues, and support. Vaughn says they were also working side by side with athletic trainers, and with equal standing.

That was the beginning of massage having a seat at the table in an official way. “Every Olympics thereafter, massage therapy was a credentialed part of sports medicine services in the Olympic Village,” Vaughn says.

But it’s not just that massage is now at the table. It’s also that it’s being requested in record numbers. “It’s still the most sought-after health service during the Games to this day,” Vaughn says. “When the US Olympic Committee does their debriefing with the athletes, and asks what services they like to have or need more of, massage therapy is always on the top of the list.”
Improving Performance

Between coordinating specialized trainings for massage therapists, helping prepare athletes for the NFL Scouting Combine, and running his own program at the CORE Institute in Arizona, George Kousaleos is eager to talk sports—specifically, how massage can help sports performance. He has a long résumé of accolades and history in this profession, and is today building a national sports massage team intended to have a presence in every major league, professional sports town.

So what does Kousaleos see as milestones in this field?

Returning to the Roots

“First, for me, would be the 2004 Athens Olympics. I was asked, with four others, to organize a sports massage team for Athens. We wanted a truly international sports massage team, representing the five continents, covering eight to nine languages, and we did exactly that.” Over the course of 18 months, Kousaleos and his group selected 170 MTs from 18 countries. “It was the first time massage therapists were part of the Olympic medical team,” he says. “Over the course of the Games, we delivered 11,000 massage sessions.”

It was also a full-circle moment for Kousaleos when he saw his first massage instructor, Benny Vaughn, working on an athlete in the Olympic village. “I was one of Benny’s first students,” Kousaleos says of his massage school experience in the late ’70s. “In Athens, I found Benny working on one of the US track athletes. We’re in the bright sun of Athens, and I said, ‘Benny, it was exactly 25 years ago when we first worked together; 25 years later, our dream has come true and we’re together here in Greece.’ That was probably the most amazing moment for me in those 17 days.”

The Etiquette of Celebrity

In September 2015, LeBron James posted his out-loud musings on Facebook about wanting to hire a full-time massage therapist—and the Internet went crazy. First-year practitioners, grizzled veterans, and even unlicensed massage students posted their email addresses along with eager requests and often outrageous offers to help.

It’s hard not to get caught up in the celebrity phenomena, but when your role is to administer hands-on, therapeutic work to professional athletes, you should be as far removed as possible from the celebrity fawning James endured as result of his post. If you want to be a sports massage therapist at this level, experts say you need to leave your star-struck status at the door or you’ll never get another gig with this type of clientele.

As with all client/therapist relationships, working with elite athletes requires a mountain of trust and respect, both between therapist and athlete, and between therapist and athletic trainer. There is no room for anything less than impeccable professionalism.

Sports massage therapist Jody Stork, the first female in the Florida Marlin’s clubhouse back in 1993, says the number one rule is that what’s done or said in the clubhouse or treatment room, stays there. Nothing leaves that safe space. “When people find out you work with professional athletes, they start asking a lot of questions: Is the player married? Where do they live? Would they sign this (item) for me?” Just as with your everyday clients, the highest ethical standards need to be maintained, and these questions are never things you divulge or entertain.

Confidentiality is even more crucial when it comes to information about injuries. In fact, there is a fine line when discussing injuries with the players themselves. “When working with the player, discussing your thoughts regarding their injury and how to treat it is not acceptable in the professional clubhouse,” Stork says. “Discussion about the player’s ability to come back from an injury—to hit, throw, run—is between the team doctor and the athletic trainers. I’m not saying I wasn’t informed about the injury and the protocol to follow; it just wasn’t my place to discuss it with the player.”

Success in this environment, she says, requires knowing both your place in the pecking order, and understanding the expectations others have of you and your work.
Proving the Point
Kousaleos, who has been part of important massage therapy moments over the last several decades, says a personal high point in the evolution of his own work was the success he found working with athletes at Florida State University (FSU). “I had been providing services to FSU for the last 20 years, but six years ago, there was a change of the director of sports medicine and a new head coach of the football team.” With the new staff, there was a renewed commitment to keeping FSU athletes prepared and healthy. To that end, 15 massage therapists worked with FSU’s athletic trainer to reduce the number of soft-tissue injuries of the team’s players. “Last year, those injuries dropped 92 percent from the year before. This is one of the top football teams in the country, and they’ve absolutely committed to sports bodywork,” he says.

STILL MUCH TO LEARN
After 46 years of working in sports medicine and perfecting his world-renowned Active Isolated Stretching (AIS) protocol, Aaron Mattes is not yet ready to put his table away. “There is still so much to learn,” the 73-year-old says.

As the developer of AIS, Mattes, like Vaughn, is credited with helping propel the understanding and potential of sports medicine. “I started in Illinois with guys like Walter Payton, Dick Butkus, and Gale Sayers [all Chicago Bears football greats and pro football Hall of Famers]. They worked with me for years because of the success we had. And, even coming out of a sport like football—a really, really, rough sport—they weren’t getting hurt. You see Walter Payton, who played 13 years and only missed one game, and you know something’s being done right.”

Mattes believes there are many more doors of inquiry to open when it comes to sports medicine and athletics. “There’s still a lot of things we can work on together. I don’t know that we’ve reached anywhere near the end of our potential.”
Even after decades of working with the world’s best athletes, seeing his techniques being used in sports programs at all levels, and teaching the next generation of sports massage experts, Mattes is excited about future applications of the work.

With AIS specifically, Mattes has been working with dementia, Alzheimer’s, and spinal cord injury cases. He says his findings are exciting. “It’s one of the reasons I’m not really ready to step aside. I think there are more things to discover. I think there are more ‘aha’ moments to come.”

“EVERYONE’S AN ATHLETE”
With a private practice in Aspen, Colorado, and experience working at sporting events around the world, massage therapist Linda Lynch says sports massage is work that can be effective for all clients. “Everyone’s an athlete—Benny says that,” Lynch says, referring to her mentor Benny Vaughn. “Everyone can benefit from this. You don’t have to be a paid professional to want to find your best performance.” And that’s what sports massage delivers.

Thanks to her geographic location, Lynch, who is also trained as a nurse, works on athletes from all venues (climbers, kayakers, mountain bikers, road cyclists, runners, skiers, etc.). She underscores that the work we call sports massage is really the compilation of tools all massage therapists have at their fingertips. So, whether the client is an elite athlete looking for a calming massage or a noncompetitive, active adult who needs some specific, targeted work, a practitioner’s sports massage toolbox can do it all.

When contemplating the growth of the profession, Lynch identifies Vaughn’s facility in Texas as a concrete milestone in the evolution of sports massage—and she has seen some of the finest athletic facilities in the world.

Michael McGillicuddy says the massage profession benefited from the free publicity sports massage garnered at road-side athletic events.

“Benny’s clinic—the Benny Vaughn Athletic Therapy Center in Fort Worth—is truly the epitome of what we can offer people as sports massage therapists,” she says. It encompasses not just manual work as a therapist, but all that we can do with compression therapy, taping, and other modalities. It shows the depth of care we can offer. “Benny’s facility is where I see the best example of what we can provide. It shows the potential our profession has for providing comprehensive sports care as massage therapists.”

“A T-SHIRT, A BAGEL, A BANANA, AND A BOTTLE OF GATORADE”
The first sports massage workshop Michael McGillicuddy ever took was under the tutelage of Benny Vaughn, on January 31, 1984. It remains one of the highlights of McGillicuddy’s professional career. “I had not been in massage school a month before signing up for the workshop. As soon as I knew there was a type of massage you could apply to athletes, I knew what my specialty would be.”
McGillicuddy, owner of the Central Florida School of Massage Therapy in Orlando, remembers his eagerness after graduation to join the local and state sports massage teams coordinated by the Florida State Massage Therapy Association. “I joined the team as a team member, then a team coordinator, then a team trainer, and finally, I became the state director of sports massage,” he says. “When we started, the sports massage teams would provide free sports massage at local and state events. Often, the only pay a sports massage therapist received was a T-shirt, a bagel, a banana, and a bottle of Gatorade.”

Still, the work had its rewards. McGillicuddy says a few underlying things were happening during this “free massage” period. “One, I was gaining valuable hands-on experience. I was meeting, and marketing my services to, other health-care professionals. And two, the sports teams were generating a lot of free publicity for massage therapy. At almost every event, TV crews would arrive and film sporting events, showing the athletes receiving sports massage—both pre- and post-event. The TV coverage at this time was one of the most powerful advertisements for massage therapy in the country.”

By 1990, McGillicuddy had found a way to give his own students some invaluable opportunities and started offering a sports massage internship in conjunction with the University of Central Florida. “Athletes from many of the sports teams would come into the athletic training room and mark a body chart with their name and sport on it. We’d give them a 15-minute sports massage treatment.” McGillicuddy says the internship allowed new MTs to gain the necessary information for starting their own sports massage practices or to join a sports team. But it also expanded the awareness of the value of massage therapy to all the athletes.
AN INVITATION INTO THE CLUBHOUSE

For Florida-based massage therapist Jody Stork, the milestones she attaches to the advancement of sports massage focus on a philosophical shift. It was the early 1990s, and Stork earned acceptance in a big way. Not only was she hired to be the Florida Marlin’s first massage therapist, “I believe I was the first female in their clubhouse.” Stork, who earned a World Series ring when the Marlins won the championship in 1997, would come to every home game to be available for the players, and eventually found a therapist to travel with the team so they could maintain their quality of care while on the road, too.

Stork began working for the Florida Marlins baseball team after meeting the team’s executive vice president, Jonathan Mariner, at a local Chamber of Commerce event. Mariner, who today serves as the CIO for all of Major League Baseball, says, “I didn’t know anything about massage generally, so Jody explained what she did and told me, ‘I want to work with the Marlins.’ I directed her to our head athletic trainer, Larry Starr; we were a brand new franchise, and I was brand new, too. I didn’t have any expectation that anything would come out of it.”

Starr, however, was known for trying new ideas. “I’ve been either credited or criticized for a lot of things in baseball,” says this Hall of Fame athletic trainer. Now retired, Starr was the league’s first-ever certified athletic trainer, and held that title with the Cincinnati Reds during their Big Red Machine heydays. He was also the man responsible for bringing strength training (lifting weights) into players’ workouts—something previously dismissed as unimportant.

“The mantra I always had is what else could we do to help athletes decrease their injuries and improve their performance? Sports massage is a no-brainer that way.” But it didn’t mean it would be easy bringing massage into the clubhouse. “It was not easy at all. In fact, it was frowned on for a number of reasons,” Starr says. The perception of what massage was—a nice thing to do, but with really no application to what they were doing as athletes—was the first hurdle. Being a female was another. “Together, Jody and I were able to sell it to the players, the coaches, and the administrators.”

Beyond getting all the stakeholders on board with massage, Starr says one of the biggest problems was figuring out who would and wouldn’t get a massage that day. “Who do I screen out? Everybody wants a massage from Jody.” During spring training, they alleviated the problem by directing rookie players to Stork’s massage school—Space Coast Education Center—after the day’s workouts to receive free massage in the student clinic. Starr says the line of players waiting for massage outside her school was a testament to the work’s value.

Not Forgotten
There are many stories and many people who couldn’t be included in this snapshot of sports massage history. From the foundational work of James Cyriax, MD; to the volunteer efforts of Myk Hungerford, PhD, Gail Weldon, and others to bring massage to the Olympics pre-1984; to the newer generation of sports massage experts such as Whitney Lowe and James Waslaski, there remain many more heroes whose stories we didn’t have the space to tell. Have a story to share? Email karrie@abmp.com to continue the conversation.
While there were a few folks who delivered massage to professional baseball players in the decades before Stork, such as “Joe the Rub” with the Yankees, Starr says Stork brought a professionalism to the work that had been missing. Today, Starr says he would be surprised if there were any teams left that don’t affiliate with massage therapy in some way.

Mariner agrees: “Massage in baseball is much more prevalent now. Just in the course of discussing the role of sports medicine in the clubhouse, the mention of massage therapists is just standard.” And that conversation will only broaden to include the realm of preventive massage work for athletes, “especially given the investment in players and that it’s much less expensive to keep them healthy and on the field,” he says.

Terry Pendleton, a third baseman for the Marlins in the ‘90s, and current first-base coach for the Atlanta Braves, says massage made a huge difference in keeping him on the field. “I was an older player—35—at the time, so I needed a little more to keep me in everyday play,” he says. “I would see Jody about twice a week and would even go to her school for extra work, and to be a guinea pig for her students.” Before coming to the Marlins, Pendleton says he had never seen a massage therapist at the ballpark. The players wanted the MTs on site, but the medical staff didn’t, he says. “I don’t think other teams really understood what massage could do to keep you on the baseball field.” Today, Pendleton says most clubs have massage therapists on staff, including the Braves. In the big leagues, Pendleton says, “massage is definitely here to stay.”

Stork credits the emergence of massage in professional baseball with her home team. “The Marlins are really the ones that started it. The entire Marlins organization was about the health of the players. It was about the mind-set this particular organization had in 1993; they were so far ahead in their thinking.”

GROWING STRONGER
With the acceptance of sports massage growing exponentially throughout the various athletic communities, here and abroad, there is no better time for therapists interested in pursuing this genre. “The kind of opportunities we have now did not exist 20–30 years ago,” Kousaleos says. But what’s important, Vaughn cautions, is that the profession continues to expand the education requirements for massage therapy in general to include improved assessment skills, because ultimately in sports massage, “your strategy of care is only as good as your assessment.”

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