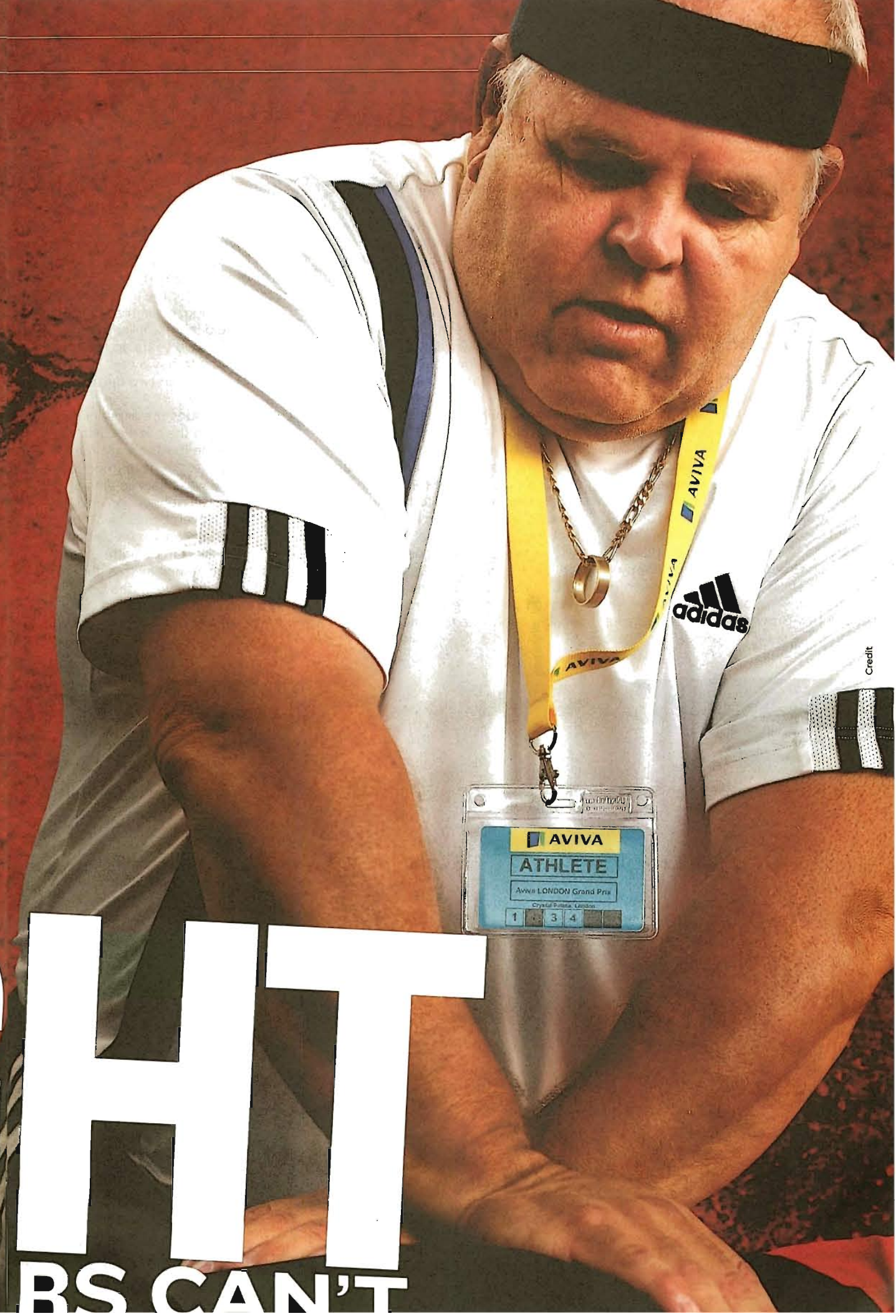


He's had his back broken in a car crash and has taken a gun from a hijacker on a grounded plane. He weighs 20 stone and has hands like shovels. But if you're an athlete, you really DO want to meet Andy Miller on a dark night...

"I HAVE THE WEIGHT TO GO PLACES OTHERS CAN'T



Credit

On the eve of the London Grand Prix at Crystal Palace, the lobby of the Croydon Park Hotel is teeming with some of the world's leading international athletes. They are milling around, lugging their bags and equipment, checking in or waiting for the lift. Sitting quietly on a sofa in the middle of this chaos, unbothered by the autograph hunters, is a man who has amassed 61 medals over the last three World Championships and the 2004 Olympics.

An infectious, enthusiastic giant with a booming laugh and huge hands, Andrew Miller is a 56-year-old American massage therapist who has been a fixture on the international circuit for over a decade, travelling 100,000 miles each year from his Phoenix base. He has lost count of the athletes who have experienced his special brand of massage - "That first session with me, you find Jesus!" - but reckons it easily exceeds several hundred. A brief roll call includes Maurice Greene, Tyson Gay, Jeremy Wariner, Haile Gebrselassie, Shawn Crawford, Ato Boldon, Veronica Campbell-Brown, Hicham El Guerrouj,

Lolo Jones and Kerron Clement. His proudest moment is the 100m final at the 2003 World Championships in Paris when three of his clients - Kim Collins, Darrel Brown and Darren Campbell - swept the medals.

"Andy gets the job done, no doubt about it," says the 2004 Olympic 200m champion Veronica Campbell-Brown, who worked with Miller in Athens. "Masseurs play such an important role, and Andy was great for me, getting me ready and helping me feel fresh for each race."

Miller originally wanted to play American football, and was representing Barack Obama's alma mater Occidental College in Los Angeles until he broke his back in a car accident in which his friend was killed. "We had a blow-out with the front tyre. He slammed on the brakes, we hit a sign, he went through the windscreen and bounced back off the sign and landed on my chest. That fractured my spine.

"The injury meant I couldn't play football that year, so I was hanging around the locker room with nothing much to do as I went through my rehabilitation. The football coach

[Barry Francis Ryan] didn't have any assistants, so I became his go-for guy, you know: go-for ice, go-for tape and anything else. Slowly he taught me more: how to do bandages, tape ankles, treat injuries. I really enjoyed helping athletes and decided this was what I wanted to do with my life."

Only a year after graduating Miller was on his way to Saudi Arabia to again work alongside Ryan as a sports therapist for the Kingdom's swimming, diving, basketball and track and field teams. Miller's plan was "to go for two years and earn enough money to buy a car." He stayed for more than two decades.

Miller describes the experience of living in the Middle East during the 1980s as, at times, like the "wild west" - never more so than when he was hijacked along with 112 other passengers on a flight to Riyadh in November 1984. "That was one of those once-in-a-lifetime experiences you can do without," he recalls. "Some Yemeni with a gun got in the cockpit and we ended up in Tehran. We were on the plane for 13 hours before the flight crew grabbed

the guy's gun. Some shots went off and I rushed forward. We got involved in a fight until I helped prise the gun out of his hands."

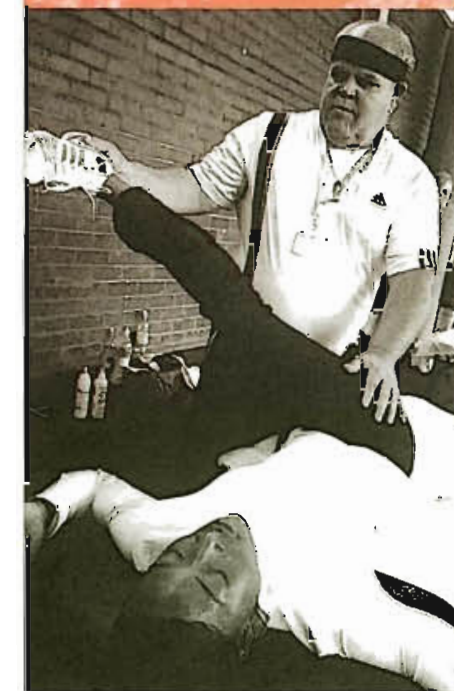
In 1995 Miller was with the Saudi team at the World Championships in Gothenburg when he bumped into an old acquaintance, Emanuel Hudson, the founder of HSI, who was managing a stellar cast of athletes including Greene, Boldon and Jon Drummond. "They asked me to help them out and a year later I joined permanently."

After six years with HSI, Miller branched out on his own to work with a wider range of athletes.

"There is no one who does what I do," he says. "I am the only massage therapist on the circuit available 24 hours. At a Golden League meeting they have people who work up to the meet, but when it is over I am the only one working past midnight.

"I focus on the maintenance stuff. If it hurts so bad that they need physiotherapy then they shouldn't be on the circuit. I am about getting people prepared so they don't get hurt. It is my aim to keep athletes healthy all year long. I am known for

BEAR'S HUG
It hurts but it does you good, apparently



"Oh, the first time I worked with him it was real painful. I ached for about three days. But you soon get used to it," she says. "I've seen the results, and it really helps."

Earlier Miller's interview with **SPIKES** was interrupted by a shout from the other side of the hotel bar. "Ask him about the effects of not working with him," yelled leading agent Karen Locke.

Miller smiles: "Karen looks after [World Champion 100m hurdler] Michelle Perry, who I worked with between 2005 and 2007 when she was at the top of her game. Now she isn't even on the team.

"People that I work with on a regular basis do not pull. They might strain or get lightly injured, but they don't get ganked or end their season or career. Maurice [Greene] and I parted company... and he never ran well afterwards."

Beijing was Miller's seventh Olympics. He calls the opening days of a major championship "the gauntlet" because he can work for 20 hours each day. "After that my arms are raging. You can actually feel the heat come off them."

But he has no intention of retiring soon. "I am committed to do the circuit for another four years, until London 2012, and I hope I can stay energetic to go at it for 10 years," he says. "After being hijacked and in a car crash you become fatalistic. When it's my time, it's my time. But God also gave me a gift to heal."

"There aren't many therapists as strong as me. This is manual labour in its purest form..."

using joint mobility and doing the deep-tissue massage therapy. I try to keep the muscles flushed out and supple, and keep the joints aligned so that, biomechanically, you get down the track faster."

Miller is a bear of a man. "I weigh 20st 10lb," he says proudly. "Yes, I'm big, but it isn't soft." He slaps his stomach and torso to prove it. "There aren't many therapists as strong as me. Either that or they don't realise they need to be more aggressive to get in there. Many would just rub the surface and not get down to the depths where I can go. I have the weight to go places others can't. This is manual labour in its purest form. I can do 12 and 15 people a day when others can only do four or five a day."

On the fourth floor of the Croydon Park Hotel, Miller is at work on the 100m World Championship bronze medallist Carmelita Jeter. It is hard not to wince and recoil in horror as he appears to fling her small body around the table like a dead rabbit on a butcher's block, cracking her neck and pulling her limbs in all directions, but there's barely a murmur from her. She lies face down and soaks it up. ▶

