

For those who know the Athletics circuit, Andrew Miller is a common reassuring face. For the athletes who keep the sport alive, he is the must-have sports therapist. Chris Turner tells the amazing story of this gentle giant with healing hands.

Photos © Andrew Miller

Andrew Miller has table, will travel, will heal



Air travel is exhausting and stressing. The weight of a protective hard skin suitcase, let alone its intended contents tends to weigh more than the standard 20-25kg baggage allowance. Then there is the usual clenched teeth check-in discussion where the traveller tries to convince a harassed member of the airline's staff that a flexible suit-bag, a carrier bag of duty-free and a laptop case can in tandem constitute "one piece of hand luggage only".

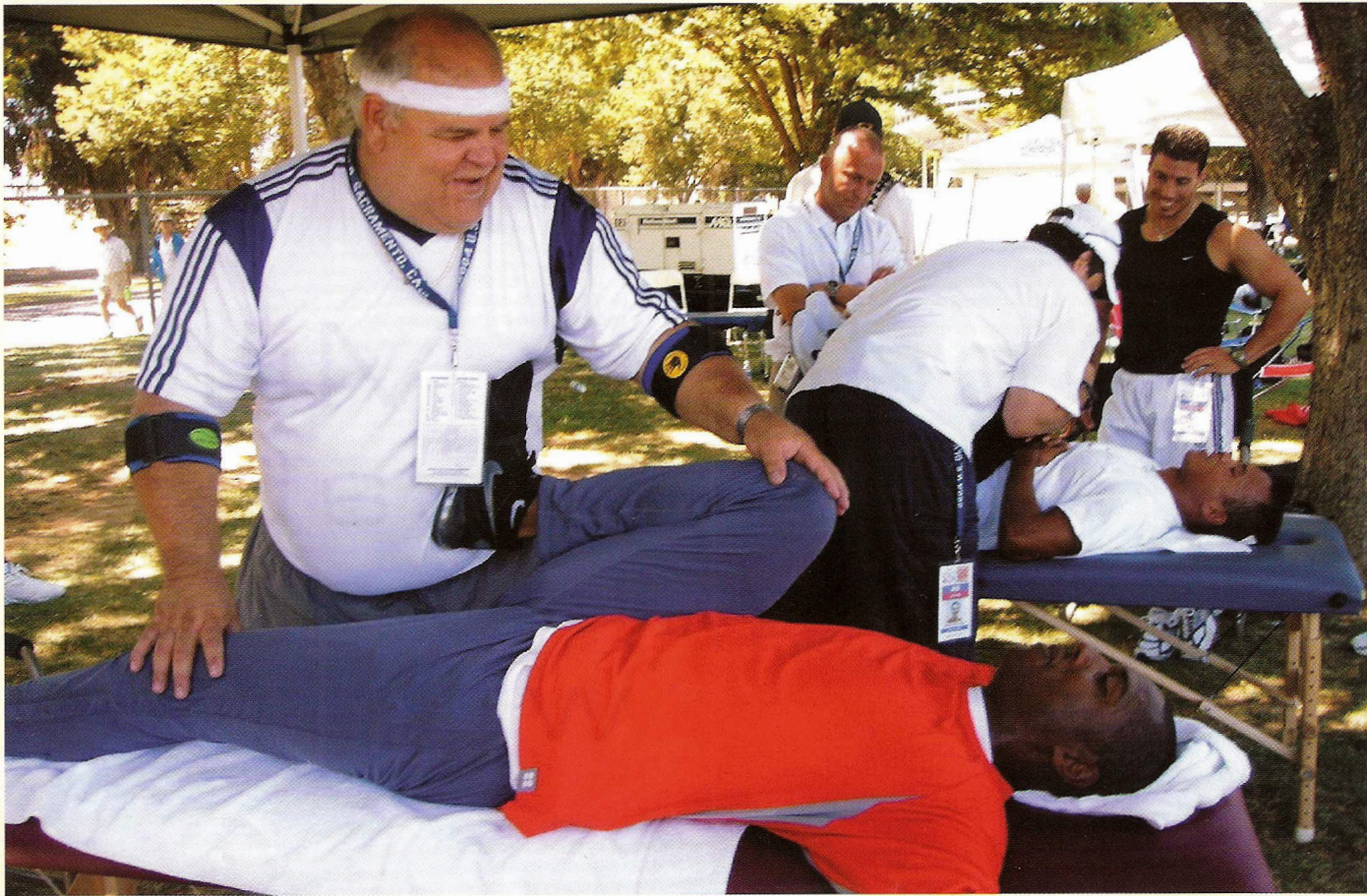
Yet most of the world doesn't know what travelling stress is about. Try adding a "collapsible bed" - ok some poetic

license there, "a massage table" - to your luggage weight list the next time you fly.

That item constitutes the most essential element on the packing inventory of Andrew Miller, who is one of the world's most renowned sports therapists. The 53-year-old who resides in Phoenix has been working in international athletics since the 1976 Olympic Games - experiencing to a total of six Olympics - and from the Gothenburg World Championships of 1995 travelling year-in, year-out, around nearly the entire circuit. That is an awful lot of airport check-ins, a lot of outsize-luggage carousels, and nights spent in anonymous universally decorated hotel rooms.

In that time many of the world's top athletes have come to depend on Miller making "the flight". At the Athens Olympic Games alone, he worked on the injuries and concerns of the winners of six individual gold medals. Names such as Veronica Campbell (200m), Tonique Williams-Darling (400m), Hicham El Guerrouj (1500m/5000m), Felix Sanchez (400m Hurdles), Dwight Phillips (Long Jump). We could also mention another six Athens individual minor medallists, or another sixth fourth placers or the work Miller performed on the medal winning Jamaican women relay squads (gold and bronze), and half the members of the USA men's and women's 4x400m quartets (both gold).

"When I come over (to Europe each season) in late June I



am there until after the World Athletics Final. I am a 'Road Warrior', confirms Miller. "The circuit isn't easy with a massage table, a large suitcase, a back pack, and a laptop every place you go. You do get tired."

Yet it was only by sheer chance because of a car accident in September 1970 at the start of his freshman year at Occidental College that Miller was introduced to Sports Therapy.

"That same year, the College had a new Athletic trainer named Barry Francis Ryan," recalls Miller. "He was new and had no assistants, and I was injured and couldn't play (American) football. So Barry decided that if I was going to be hanging out in the training room everyday doing back exercises for my rehabilitation (from the accident), he would put me to work helping him. He started me out as a "go for" (go for ice, go for tape, etc.), and then began to teach me how to tape ankles, knees, etc., run the ultrasound, muscle stimulator, hot packs, whirlpools, etc. Later, he taught me how to assess and analyze different types of injuries."

"While there, I was introduced to a number of orthopaedic surgeons and I learned how to do rehabilitation programmes for post operative knees, ankles, and shoulders. I worked as a student trainer for my 4 years of college (September 1970 - June 1974), and one year as an assistant after graduation (June 1974 - October 1975)."

So the originally designated Maths Major metamorphosed into a sports injury specialist, and P.E. Minor which he was taking in combination with the Maths became the major element of his college studies.

"At the end of my sophomore year after 5 maths classes with a 4-"C" and 1-"B", I had discovered while working in the training room that I had healing abilities, I switched to a P.E. Major with an emphasis toward Physical Therapy school, but then I got the opportunity to work in Saudi Arabia."

Signed up along with his college mentor Barry Francis Ryan in November 1975, Miller emigrated to Saudi Arabia and began a long association with the fast developing elite sports community in the Kingdom. Initially, he worked with the national teams for swimming, basketball, diving, and track and field but between August 1975 to 1992 in a long term contract as Head Sports Therapist at the al-Helal Sports Club, he prepared their football (soccer), basketball, tennis, handball, volleyball, and track and field teams.

Miller, whose war-hero father had died on active duty in 1963, and so had been raised by his mother since he was eleven, had made the trip to Saudi to "make enough money to buy a car and see the world a little", but stumbled onto a quick route to full maturity as an adult.



"Being fresh out of college I was not set in my ways so I went to Saudi open eyed and willing to work within their system and not trying to change it to anything I was familiar with."

Miller's open-minded attitude meant he "got along well" in his new country of residence. Teaching himself Arabic and learning to scuba dive, he experienced what must be one of everyone's worst nightmares when he was hijacked on a Saudi flight to Tehran, Iran in November 1984 during the Iran-Iraq war. Miller experienced life up-front in Saudi Arabia in a manner he could never have envisaged back home.

"In the late 1970's and early 1980's it (Saudi Arabia) was wild and crazy, kind of like the 'Wild West', but as the infrastructure matured, it became more like big city life in just a different culture."

The sports medicine he pioneered at the al-Helal club set the standard for all sports clubs in the Kingdom, and from 1992 through to 1996 he concentrated on establishing, equipping and staffing the first chiropractic office in the Kingdom, and working increasingly with national Saudi teams in a variety of sports in particular Track and Field athletics. Gradually though the fun which he had originally sought started to become just the routine of a regular job, and with his 'mission' completed in the Kingdom he started looking for a way out of the country.

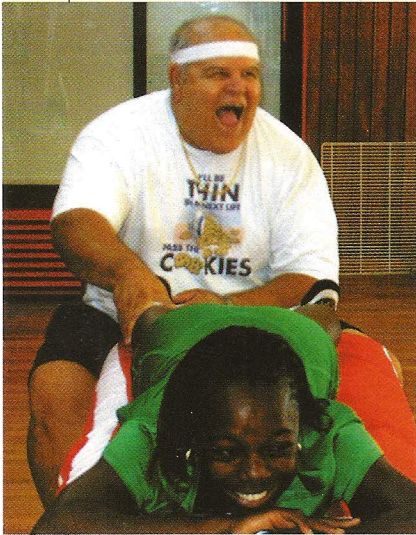
Amazingly his 1970 car accident was again the thread which guided him. Barry Francis Ryan who had turned the rehabilitating 'go-for' into a sports therapist in Occidental, had worked on former 440yard World record breaker John Smith when he was at UCLA. Smith by 1995 was one half of (Emanuel) Hudson Smith International (HSI) athletics management company, and Miller, while working with the Saudi team in Gothenburg at the IAAF World Championships, met up with the HSI team who by chance were having problems with one of the therapists they were using.

Miller had actually met Hudson earlier in 1978 while he was attending Chapman College. Here Miller's Saudi Arabian connections had also borne fruit because Hudson's room mate just happened to be Prince Nawaf bin Mohamed who was a big supporter of the al-Helal Sports Club.

"So when I started doing my work (for HSI) on Ato Boldon, and Jon Drummond (in Gothenburg) it was a natural fit with John (Smith) and Emanuel (Hudson), and the rest is history." It was a relationship which brought about countless personal bests for the HSI squad. Yet Miller was never 'on-salary' and despite the mutual success, when the subject of exclusivity became a thorn in June 2002, Miller moved on and became freelance. Prosperity has followed without any doubt.

"I think my most memorable moment was the World

From Veronica Campbell (left) to Stacy Dragila (previous page) Andrew Miller works on dozens of athletes throughout the year. His magic hands helped five athletes become Olympic champions in Athens and many more clinch an Olympic medal.



Championships men's 100m final in Paris in 2003 where the athletes I worked on took gold, silver and bronze - Kim Collins, Darrel Brown, and Darren Campbell."

"I can't think of any worst moments. 'Knock on wood', most of the athletes I work on regularly only have minor injuries. Maybe, Brussels 2004 when Felix (Sanchez) pulled up at 250m. He hadn't mentioned that his leg was tight before he went to the start line, and had he told me and I had tested and found its weakness, he might have scratched from the race and kept his unbeaten winning streak intact."

I think this past Olympics in Athens when I worked frequently with Veronica Campbell, Debbie Ferguson, and Aileen Bailey is another high. Their consistency and high level of achievement speaks for itself."

"The most talented athlete I have ever worked with had to be Dan O'Brien (former three time World champion and World Decathlon record breaker), though I didn't work on him during his most productive years. Maybe one of the most gifted athletes would be Maurice Greene."

Miller is an impressive character. Don't ever wish the physical misfortune of sitting next to him in tourist class in any airplane, as nature requires that this gentle giant fills the space of two passengers. Joking aside, if that harassed check-in desk clerk does give you window seat "4A" next to Miller's abode in "4B", don't complain, put up with the space restriction, and delight in a flight of good conversation and marvellous anecdotes.

He retains the frame of his American football playing days.

Miller's large and supple hands which in yesteryear must have smothered both the ball and his opponents, nowadays only inspire confidence in an ailing athlete.

"I am probably the strongest therapist that most people will ever work with in their life."

"My work is mainly proactive. I feel that it helps keep the muscles supple and less prone to injury. Yes, I think the athletes have a greater sense of security and confidence in my skills to help them recover from minor aches and pains from competition."

Working on the one-day meet track and field circuit out of hotel rooms and at the side of the warm-up track Miller's dedication requires him to offer an 'open-all-hours' service which is virtually unique in this sport and has saved many an athlete's health career before and after a competition.

"The hardest time of the year is the first 5 days of a World Championships or the Olympic Games, with the 2 a day sessions you get a lot of work and not much sleep. I call it the gauntlet. I still enjoy the work and the travel, but I doubt I'll make it another 10 years doing the whole circuit."

So if you ever meet Andy Miller struggling with a table in an airport baggage reclaim area, put your own cares aside for a moment and give him some assistance. As hundreds of the world's best athletes will testify, Miller's healing hands are too good for simple carrying. The "go for" has made good.

Chris Turner is the Editorial Manager of the IAAF Website