

Health Insights Today

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Fulfilling A Dream Interview with T.J. Hackler, DC

By Daniel Redwood, DC

A newly-minted chiropractor currently in his first year of practice, T.J. Hackler, DC, entered Cleveland Chiropractic College—Kansas City intent on working with athletes. A former college football player who also excelled at track and field events, he followed a time-honored path in chiropractic—after experiencing the benefits of hands-on care as a patient, he was inspired to become a doctor so that he could help others.

From day one as a chiropractic student, Hackler sought out extra training so that, upon graduation, he could hit the ground running as a skilled sports specialist. The hard work has already begun to pay off—Dr. Hackler now works with the track and field team of a major university and has treated National Football League players at their summer training camp (his contracts with the university and the NFL team do not permit him to identify them), as well as offering chiropractic services at a recent national Ironman competition.

Dr. Hackler expresses a strong dedication to expanding and refining his expertise, recognizing that his field requires life-long learning.

Most chiropractors who become deeply involved in treating athletes are, or have been, athletes themselves. Is that true for you?

Yes, I played all kinds of sports as a kid: football, soccer, volleyball, track, basketball, just about every sport you can imagine. When I went to college, I played football at Ft. Scott Community College and then got a scholarship in track and field at the University of Kansas. They said if I could high jump 7 feet or higher, I could get a scholarship, and I did.

So sports have been a really important part of your life since way, way back.

Very important. Injuries were part of it, too. I had knee surgeries, broken bones, pulled muscles, and contusions. I've got a hole in my quad from getting hit by opponents' knees as a defensive back playing football. I've had a lot of injuries and I've had to come back from a lot of injuries. I've seen how they've been treated and seen some of the right ways to be treated. I've also witnessed a lot of injuries to other athletes, and as I've learned to treat athletic injuries, I've spent a lot of time in the training rooms with athletes on different sports teams, seeing how they were rehabbed. In the process, I've learned a lot about sports injuries and what the mechanism of injury is.

For example, runners can have repetitive stress injuries of the hip where they go into the training room and receive electrical stimulation and ice, and that helps a little but that nagging injury is still constantly there. Unless you can really get in and actually break up the adhesions that develop there, the problem will persist. In high school and college I was treated with a method called Active Release Technique (ART), which helped me greatly. In my work as a sports chiropractor, I've found it very helpful with many of my patients.

When were you first introduced to chiropractic?

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In my senior year of high school, I was playing football. I caught a pass over the middle of the field and I went to jump over the safety and he clipped my legs. There were three people behind me that jumped over him with me and landed on the back of my legs and thighs, and pushed my shoulder and head to the ground in a kind of corkscrew motion. I finished playing the game, but by the time I got to the lockers I couldn't take my pads off. I drove home (which I shouldn't have) and I couldn't lie on the couch and move my leg without my back spasming out. I had to bring a mattress down to the living room. I couldn't roll over in bed. It was terrible.

I went and saw a chiropractor, Dr. Marty Decourcy. It was my first introduction to chiropractic and he also did Active Release Technique, which helped to address the muscular aspect as well as the adjustment and alignment aspect of it. Muscles move bones, and if you address both, then the adjustment holds a lot better so you can get the patient better more quickly, especially when it has to do with athletics. For athletes, you don't just need functional everyday movements; you need to get out there and be pounded, and also able to make quick movements. After receiving treatment from Dr. Decourcy for my injuries, I was able to be play football the next week.

What led you to become a chiropractor?

Until about halfway through my junior year of college, I didn't actually know what I wanted to do. I always knew that I loved the body. From the time I was in high school, I said I wanted to do something where I didn't have to sit behind a desk, where I wouldn't have to push papers all day or work with a computer all day. I wanted to work with people and stay involved with athletics. There's not many careers that let you do that. Throughout all my athletic years I had been treated by Marty with the ART and chiropractic and I had seen how much it had helped me. He was my mentor, to a certain extent. Anyway, it finally clicked for me one day that chiropractic had everything I wanted in a career.

Was it your intention, from the time you decided to attend chiropractic school, to use this to work with athletes?

Yes.

When did you first have the chance to do that? I know that when you were a student here at Cleveland Chiropractic College, some opportunities arose.

I started the certification program in the Active Release Technique before I entered the DC program here at Cleveland College. By the time I had finished my first year, I was certified in upper extremity, lower extremity, spine, biomechanics, and peripheral nerve entrapment.

If you took that many additional trainings, you were clearly very focused on this.

Incredibly focused. My opinion, going into this, was that I knew what I wanted to do, and I wanted to follow all the steps from the start so that I could do it. By the time I graduated, I wanted to be *really good*, so that I would be ready for the opportunities that I hoped would open up for me, with professional sports teams and other top athletes.

Tell us about working with the Ironman participants. First, what is the Ironman, for those readers who may not know?

The Ironman is a grueling race that is a combination of swimming, cycling and running. The full Ironman is something like 2.1 miles swimming, 110 miles on the bike, and then running a marathon, which is 26 miles. So it's

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incredibly rigorous and takes an amazing amount of commitment. There are lots of repetitive stress injuries that come along with that. In my ART training, I had studied the biomechanics of walking and running, learning how to analyze the patient's gait so that if they don't have good toe push-off when they run, or good heel-strike or torso rotation, or full hip extension or flexion—whatever it may be—you know what muscles are causing that inefficiency. And it may not even be a problem that the athlete can feel. It's working with a track athlete that's a top-level sprinter, and when you watch them run, if you see a little hitch in their step that they don't really notice, you know what muscle to treat. You treat it and then they run more efficiently.

So this is preventive, not just treating people who are injured.

Correct. It's preventive and it's also about increasing efficiency. It's not always about preventing an injury but also about increasing the efficiency to allow the athlete to perform better. So at the Ironman, which was in Madison, Wisconsin, we went up there and there were hundreds and hundreds of athletes. We set up a tent, not far from where hundreds of bikes were lined up in rows. The athletes came up and got in line, and we treated them throughout the three days we were there before the race. They would come and tell us if they had any problems, like if they felt a little tight in the hips and back while cycling, and we would work through that. We would also go over and watch them run and analyze them that way.

So you'd say that for a chiropractor or a chiropractic student to treat athletes at a high level, they really need some specialized training.

Yes. It's also important to know that there are different members of the team. There's the athletic trainer, the medical doctor, and the chiropractor. To treat athletes at a high level, you have to know what your niche is, to know when you can step in and say something, and when you maybe shouldn't.

You have to learn how to collaborate, how to work well with others.

In some ways, it's just like any other business organization. You know what your specialty is. If it's a large energy company, there are the tax professionals, the merger and acquisition professionals, and all the other players on the team. You know what you're good at, where you can find little problems that may need work, and then you relay that message to someone else so they can do their job as well.

How did it feel when you found out that you had the opportunity to work at a professional football team's training camp?

I was very happy. This was what I had wanted. I never had a question in my mind that it was going to happen. It was just, "This is my opportunity, I'm going to do it." That's the way I go about things. It's not, "I have a goal and maybe I'll get there." Instead, it's, "I'm going to get there, no matter what it takes." I had started to put the pieces of the puzzle together a few years before so that I would be ready when an opportunity like this came.

What was most surprising to you when you started working with world-class athletes including pro football players?

Well, obviously, they're large. It's really totally different than working with the general public. For one thing, moving a leg of an offensive lineman or defensive lineman is like moving the whole body of someone else.

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Also, I didn't think I would be that nervous, but when I went to training camp for a week last year, I was there by myself, without any other chiropractor. Over the week I was there, I gradually became more comfortable. I had discovered previously, when I was treating university athletes, that when I start out in a new situation, I don't perform quite as well right when I get there. It takes a while to get comfortable and get to know more people. But then I start to feel more in my element and I can start displaying that I have the capabilities of doing this well. So the biggest thing to me is the need to get used to it to reach full effectiveness.

Did the players seem receptive to this kind of work?

Definitely.

They were glad you were there?

Yes. Some players that didn't know anything about this work from before would have the ART and the chiropractic done. They didn't know me, and I look a little bit younger, so they may not have been sure about me. But after I treated them, they'd come back from practice and say, "Man! That was incredible. I could run." Even though their hamstring had been really tight beforehand. And then I'd adjust their hips, make sure everything's rotating nicely, and they'd get out there and they could run full-go with no holding back. So yes, they were very receptive.

Do most NFL teams have a chiropractor present during games to work with the athletes, or is it just before and after the games?

Yes, they do have them present during games. One of the things that has increased the number of chiropractors with NFL teams is free agency [in which players move from one team to another]. You have players who have been used to receiving this kind of treatment at their previous team. They've seen its value and they want to continue to receive it. Most of the chiropractors are on staff and travel to games with the teams. It involves treating the athletes before the game, then going in at halftime if somebody has an issue where they need help in order to compete in the second half, and then after the game as well.

What are your goals in your career at this point?

I work with the track and field team at a major university. I went with them to the regionals and national championships this past year and I am going to continue to do that in the future. The coaching staff knows how valuable this work can be, and they've seen what we were able to do. Their athletes competed better than they would have been able to do otherwise. So my goals are to be able to work with the collegiate track team, and to get through my trial period with the pro team.

But honestly, I just want to have my private practice to the point where it's a full practice, not because of any monetary gain, because that will take care of itself. I want to be the best that I can be. I want to eventually teach seminars for ART and I want to help as many people as possible. I've had a thing my whole life where I want to please people. That's not always good. But this is a manual, hands-on way that I can get someone feeling better, and improve their quality of life, short-term and possibly long-term as well. If I do that, then a lot of other things will fall into place. I think that taking that route, with that mental outlook on things, should also overflow into other parts of my life. In my opinion, that's the right way to do things.

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Are there any other stories of experiences you've had working with athletes?

I've had a number of athletes who have a lot of trouble running full-out without having pain in their hips. You treat them, and then a week and a half later they go and win two or three events in a state meet. Or, you have someone who comes in that has a problem with their throwing shoulder, and you give them two or three treatments and they're back throwing full-go. It's not necessarily any one story, but that when you see people one after the next, and treat them, and then they're all of a sudden back to working full-go with no restrictions. And then you get the next person coming in and saying that they heard how you helped their teammate. And then the trainer starts sending athletes over. The word spreads. It feels really good.

It sounds very satisfying. I'm very happy to hear what's happening with you. We're coming up to the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing very soon. Chiropractors have been part of the U.S. Olympic sports medicine team since 1980, and for many other countries as well. It has seemed to me that chiropractors working with high-level athletes—and other athletes, too, amateur, Pop Warner football, whatever it is—is a really important area where chiropractic can provide a needed service. And it's also a way of chiropractic expanding its value to the society. Does this seem to you to be an area with great potential?

Incredibly so. Sports is so very mainstream in our society. Think of the Super Bowl. There was a chiropractor, an ART provider, who was on TV treating someone on the sideline at the Super Bowl. People think, "If it's good enough for them, it's obviously good enough for me."

Daniel Redwood, DC, is Editor-in-Chief of *Health Insights Today*.