

Canada's physician to the Olympians

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Polio might have sidelined many potential athletes, but not Jack Taunton. This BC physician may have spent much of Grade 1 in hospital undergoing extensive rehabilitation, but he has been on the fast track ever since.

Today, this 52-year-old veteran of 61 marathons runs more than 100 km a week and a marathon a year. He's also an acknowledged sports medicine pioneer who will soon head off to Sydney as chief medical officer with the Canadian Olympic team. This, he says, is "a huge honour beyond my wildest dreams."

Mentors and fortuitous timing have marked Taunton's career. When he suffered a serious leg fracture as a teenager, physiotherapists became role models as he spent 32 weeks in a cast. Taunton attended Simon Fraser University and, following his father's lead, studied accounting. During his third year a kinesiology program was launched, and his high school track coach urged him to sign up. Taunton did, completing both undergraduate and master's degrees. About the same time he started running marathons, and began looking for a physician to help with his overuse injuries. He met Dr. Doug Clement, a sports medicine pioneer who would later become Taunton's medical partner.

Although Taunton doubted that he would be accepted at medical school, his academic and sports accomplishments at SFU — by this time he was competing internationally in marathons — proved beyond a doubt that he had a solid work ethic. "I was totally driven by being insecure and older than most of the students," says Taunton, the first kinesiology graduate to enter medical school at UBC. He earned his class Gold Medal.

The day Taunton finished his medical internship, Clement phoned and asked him to join in a sports medicine practice; later, Dr. Don McKenzie came on board; Today, some 25 years later, they teach, conduct research and practise at the Allan McGavin Sports Medicine Centre, which they founded at the University of British Columbia. Taunton credits his orthopedic colleagues and physiotherapists for the clinic's growth; its doctors now see about 1100 patients a week. "We couldn't have achieved what we have if it hadn't been for [Clement's] lead in clinical excellence and [McKenzie's] demand for research excellence," says Taunton, who admits to having a "foot in both camps."

When funding for sports medicine research got more and

more elusive, Taunton and his colleagues got more and more creative. They raised funds through an annual golf tournament and formed the BC Sports Medicine Foundation. They are now close to achieving formal funding for a fellowship program to train physicians in sports medicine.

As physician to numerous national and Olympic teams, Taunton has "seen it all" during international sports events, with heat-related problems providing the most dramatic moments. He recalls the 1987 World Student Games in Yugoslavia, when he took over the management of a British runner who had collapsed and had a seizure. Local doctors thought the seizures were related to epilepsy, but Taunton thought they were heat induced and got ice from kitchen freezers at the stadium to cool the runner down. The athlete regained consciousness 6 hours later, but Taunton was "almost thrown out of the country" for his altercation with the Yugoslav doctors.

He still witnesses wide differences in sports medicine expertise at international competitions. At one 1983 event in Malaysia, a 40 kg block of ice was brought in each day in a wheelbarrow, which doctors were to chip away at with a hammer as needed. Later, during the 1997 Commonwealth Games in Malaysia, 3 athletes collapsed and had heat-related seizures, but facilities and equipment were woefully inadequate. Today, Canadian athletes attending international games are accompanied by 2 tonnes of medical equipment.

Taunton, team physician for the Vancouver Grizzlies of the NBA, recently resigned after serving 20 years as doctor with the national women's field hockey team; he left after his daughter, Kristin, joined the team. He and his wife, kinesiologist Cheryl Taunton, have another athletic daughter, Carla.

What's ahead for this energetic physician? Taunton's latest venture is a privately funded complex in suburban Richmond that will combine a national training centre for elite athletes with a sports medicine centre for clinical practice and research. The facility will also accommodate studies involving cardiac rehabilitation and exercise for elderly women, 2 areas that interest Taunton.

"I've been very lucky in terms of mentors and to have come out of medical school at the same time as the fitness explosion," he says. "I've been extremely lucky to be able to take a hobby and put the whole package together." ?



Taunton: "Beyond my wildest dreams"