

CLINICAL EYE CARE



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Doctors of optometry carry the torch for athletes

Excerpted from page 8 of the July/August 2016 edition of [AOA Focus](#).

Faster. Higher. Stronger.

That Olympic motto will take on some added import for doctors of optometry this summer as U.S. athletes gather to compete against the world in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. That's because for years, doctors of optometry have helped train the eyes of American athletes for the [Olympics](#).

“Optometrists have unique knowledge and insights into sports performance that no other sports-performance trainer has.”

These doctors, who specialize in sports vision care and enhancement, have opened athletes' eyes to how they can enhance their performances through eye tracking, eye-hand-body coordination visualization, visual memory and visual reaction time. The eyes might just be that competitive edge they seek.

"Most people think that you either have 'it' or you don't," says Graham Erickson, O.D., a professor at Pacific University College of Optometry in Forest Grove, Oregon, where he teaches courses in pediatric optometry, vision therapy and sports vision. "They don't think about vision being something you can improve."

Dr. Erickson, who has worked with Olympians, adds, "Traditionally, the focus has been on the physical side of sports. And there certainly is a lot of focus on the mental side also. But I think of vision training as physical training. There's always a thought that I can be a little faster, a little stronger, a little quicker. These athletes are always looking to optimize."

Live Chat

Eyes on the prize

Jeanne Derber, O.D., is the eye care provider at the U.S. Olympic Complex in Colorado Springs, Colorado, the flagship training center for the United States Olympic Committee (USOC). She also is the U.S. classifier for the International Paralympic Committee and the International Blind Sports Association.

Dr. Derber works primarily with athletes on the national team who will be heading to the Olympics in Rio, Aug. 5-21. Some might need routine examinations. Occasionally, though, an athlete might get poked in the eye or need to be examined for a concussion. Blurry vision and sensitivity to light are among the symptoms of traumatic brain injuries.

Dr. Derber does more than write prescriptions, however. She will leave her fully equipped exam room in the Olympic campus' sports vision center to closely observe the athletes on their fields of competition: the pool, the track, the courts. She believes she can be of more value in advising athletes if she has been on their turf.

"Some athletes are very particular about their eyes. They want to know they are at their peak. They want to know they are at their best and that you're going to help them be the ultimate they can be," Dr. Derber says.

Helping athletes make the grade

Optometry, according to Bronson Hamada, O.D., has a role to play in the training of elite athletes.

Dr. Hamada owns a practice in Huntington Beach, California, not far from the Olympic training center in Chula Vista, California, and he currently works with U.S. Olympic athletes who play volleyball, water polo and soccer.

Studies have reinforced the view that vision training can boost performance. For instance, oft-cited research published in 2014 showed the results of an integrated perceptual learning training program—described as a vision training video game—for members of the University of California Riverside baseball team. Afterward, the players' eyesight showed improvement (a 31 percent jump in visual acuity), along with their batting averages. Players also saw a 4.4 percent decrease in strikeouts.

"Optometrists have unique knowledge and insights into sports performance that no other sports-performance trainer has," says Dr. Hamada.

"There has definitely been a change in thinking about vision, but we still have a long way to go," he adds. "Think about elite sports performance in terms of a report card grade. Coaches train the body to achieve an A+ grade in physical fitness, but then accept that an athlete hasn't even had a current eye examination, or accept that 20/20 is 'perfect' vision, or accept that an athlete removes his or her vision-corrective lenses prior to competition."

Dr Hamada adds, "For an elite athlete, 20/20 would be equivalent to a vision grade of C-, or 'below' average. So what is the human potential if they are an A+ from the neck down and a C- from the neck up?"

[Click here](#) to read the full story on pages 18-25 of the July/August 2016 edition of *AOA Focus*.

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