For the Love of the Game: A Sports Podiatrist Wins Big

Eliminate Medical Errors
Keeping Soldiers on Their Feet
How to Boost a Dwindling Practice
Soccer legend David Beckham readies for his high-profile move to the LA Galaxy. Abbey Wambach gears up for the Women’s World Cup in China. LA Kings’ Brian Willsie closes out another season. What do they all have in common? The care of Howard Liebeskind, DPM, whose lengthy résumé lists services provided for countless teams, including the entire Pepperdine University sports program. Penciled in between these obligations are 11-hour days, four days a week at his private practice in the Los Angeles suburb of West Hills—including one day a week in the operating room.

Howard Liebeskind, DPM  continued on page 20
Does he sleep? It’s hard to say. But his devotion to the practice of sports medicine is indisputable.

Dr. Liebeskind adjusts his private practice schedule to accommodate his responsibilities to various sports teams but regardless, his plate remains full. “This is unfortunately, but very fortunately, my life,” he said. “I’m a high-tech kind of guy—a very time-management oriented individual. I’ve been able to only have minimal conflicts in my schedule in the way that I’ve organized my work.” Luckily, his family approves. His wife Joyce is an avid sports fan, as are his daughters, Alison and Jessica. “They understand and support me, and they come to as many events as they can.”

Though it’s open throttle now, his career didn’t start out this bustling. In fact, like many recent college graduates, Dr. Liebeskind found himself prepared for the workforce but looking for direction. He had completed his DPM degree from the Illinois College of Podiatric Medicine in 1978 and later his residency in podiatric surgery at Van Nuys Community Hospital when he began working energetically in a private practice. He worked energetically in the practice for a couple of years when, by chance, his discerning eye set his now diverse career into motion.

During a family gathering, Dr. Liebeskind was amiss. The athletic shoe in an advertisement had a midsole construction characteristic that was opposite of what he knew to be bio-mechanically appropriate. The athletic shoe in an advertisement had a midsole construction characteristic that was opposite of what he knew to be biomechanically appropriate.

With his father-in-law’s encouragement, Dr. Liebeskind called the magazine’s editor and told him about the design error. “Are you sure?” the editor asked.

He was, and within 24 hours two men from the athletic shoe company’s product development team arrived at Dr. Liebeskind’s office to discuss his findings. A few days later he received another call from the editor asking him to participate in the magazine’s annual running shoe survey.

After nine hours examining athletic shoes at the magazine’s headquarters, he shared his thoughts, and a friendship developed. Shortly thereafter he was asked to become part of the publication’s technical advisory board. His and for biomechanics was opening doors, and it didn’t stop there. After the running shoe survey was published, it caught the eye of one of the athletic trainers at Pepperdine University, and he in turn invited Dr. Liebeskind to come and meet with him. “It was an exciting opportunity because at that time there weren’t many multi-disciplinary sports medicine programs around, and they had a very nice program,” Dr. Liebeskind said. He graciously accepted the spot as podiatrist at Pepperdine.

Word of Dr. Liebeskind’s podiatric expertise was spreading fast, and around 1984 he received a call from Mike Shuminsky, athletic trainer for the LA Clippers, who heard he was working with the Peppernine basketball team. The Clippers had just moved from San Diego to Los Angeles, and they asked him to come on board as team podiatrist.

Around the same time, UCLA was looking for a podiatrist because they were also starting a multi-disciplinary sports medicine program. A leading foot and ankle orthopedist at UCLA had heard a talk given by Dr. Liebeskind and subsequently gave his name to Bert Mandelbaum, MD, who was at that time an assistant team physician. After a series of interviews with Dr. Mandelbaum and Gerald Finerman, MD, who was head team physician, they chose Dr. Liebeskind to be the podiatrist for UCLA’s athletic program. A friendship with Dr. Mandelbaum developed, and Dr. Liebeskind’s career snowballed from there.

When Dr. Mandelbaum later became head of sports medicine programming for the United States Soccer Federation, his familiarity with Liebeskind’s work ethic and expertise led to Dr. Liebeskind’s position as podiatrist to the 1994 United States Men’s World Cup and National teams. Following World Cup ’94 Dr. Liebeskind assumed the role of team podiatrist for all U.S. Men’s and Women’s National teams. As his reputation grew, arrangements arose with Major League Soccer, the National Hockey League, Arena Football, and Major League Lacrosse.

“The relationships that have developed through my love and appreciation of athletic medicine have enabled me to interact with...
the medical staff of each team, which in Los Angeles has always been led by the preeminent orthopedic groups, so I’ve had great involvement and interaction with the Kerlan–Jobe Orthopaedic Clinic and the Santa Monica Orthopaedic Group. These two groups provide the care for most of the professional teams in town. Those relationships have grown and have become an integral part of my practice life, and I’ve been very much involved with the program that they’ve established so excellently in Los Angeles.”

Dr. Luiga Podesta, team physician for the LA Dodgers, LA Rip- tides, and the LA Avengers, values Dr. Liebeskind’s expertise. “He is an unbelievable asset to both my practice in orthopedic sports medicine as well as for the teams as our foot specialist. His forte is sports orthotics, and I think he’s probably one of the best clinicians for that in the world, based on the injuries I’ve seen him treat.” Dr. Podesta sends all his patients with podiatric needs to Dr. Liebeskind. “He’s able to give a very specific diagnosis, treat them, and get them back on the field very quickly.”

Soccer Hall of Famer and general manager of the LA Galaxy, Alexi Lalas, concurs. “Feet are a soccer player’s work horses. As a surgeon, I’ve been at the forefront of the latest advances in foot surgery, but in the sport of soccer, Dr. Liebeskind is simply a legend.”

Dr. Liebeskind is simply a legend in the game of soccer. If there is a foot problem, he’s the man you call. He’s a part of the Galaxy family, but teams all around the league routinely consult him.”

His people skills aren’t bad either. Much of Dr. Liebeskind’s success in working with athletes lies in his ability to understand the athlete’s mentality. ‘His credibility enables him to create a positive relationship with the player. This often produces a quicker and a healthier rehabilitation,” Lalas said.

Speaking of relationships, we’ve all heard that they are based on trust. That adage holds especially true in regard to Dr. Liebeskind’s professional accord with both the franchise he is retained by and the athletes he cares for. “I am there for the player and the franchise, but the trust between all of us and the professionalism that is exhibited can never be compromised, just as with any doctor/patient relationship. I have been able to maintain a perfectly healthy balance and a trust by all.”

And indeed, he has many players to look after. He is currently podiatrist for the LA Galaxy, CD Chivas USA of Major League Socce-