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An Interview with Danielle Chow-Leong by Nicki Iskander '15

Danielle Chow-Leong '99 completed an honours degree in Physical Health and Education from the University of Toronto before graduating from Sutherland-Chan. She then started a mobile practice taking on personal clients in the NBA, NFL, MLB, palliative care, and the film industry. Danielle has been under contract with Athletics Canada, the national governing body of athletics in Canada, since 2013. She has travelled with the track and field team to two World Championships, two Commonwealth Games, and one Olympic Games.

What made you decide to become a massage therapist?

I wasn't sure what I was going to do once I got my Phys Ed. degree, but I did know that I wanted to work with people, and to continue studying the human body within the realm of therapy. I needed something that allowed me to be self-employed. I had no desire to work 9 to 5, dress up to go to work, or ever have to fill out another vacation request form (funny the things that motivate us). Massage therapy checked off all those boxes, so I thought, "How bad could it really be?" It's almost 20 years later and I've never looked back.

Why did you choose to study at Sutherland-Chan?

I asked some sports medicine doctors what they would want to see on a resume if they were to hire a massage therapist. One of the things that kept coming up was that an applicant would automatically be in the running if they had gone to Sutherland-Chan. My research showed that S-C also had the best pass rate at the board exams, so that was where I was going to go! I actually had never heard of the school and was thrilled to find that it was right down the street from where I was living. I figured it was meant to be, and as they say, the rest is history.

When did you realize that you wanted to work with professional athletes?

Working with professional athletes was not a conscious decision that I made. While in my second year at Sutherland-Chan, one of my U of T professors (a sport psychologist) came in to Student Clinic for a massage and I happened to be the therapist. I worked with her for about two months and then she referred a National Team cyclist to try me out. It was an amazing two-year learning experience, one that I could not have got from any textbook.



Danielle with running phenom Andre De Grasse.

Then about two months after I graduated from Sutherland-Chan, an NBA player was referred to me and through referrals my professional athlete repertoire grew. I was intrigued by the sport-specific things that these athletes needed their bodies to be able to do and loved working with them to try to achieve those outcomes.

What is the biggest difference between your mobile practice and working with Athletics Canada?

Being self-employed and mobile, you not only end up doing massage therapy treatments, but, depending on your expertise, also advising on remedial exercises, self-care, active release therapy (ART), acupuncture, and maybe even visualization. When working within a medical team, the best way to be successful is, as they say in track and field, to “stay in your lane.” Do what you do best. If it's soft tissue then make that your bread and butter.

There are many times when you and the other healthcare providers on the medical staff refer to each other for advice. I may be working on an athlete's hip and if I'm not getting the release that is needed, I will call on the physio or chiro to take a look, and either give their opinion or try to resolve the issue using one of the tools in their toolbox. There are many times as medical staff you get together and decide the best route to take to help the athlete overcome an injury and you could each be given a different aspect of the injury to work on. This is where it is very important that you do your part and trust the process and the other members on your team. This is how the athletes get the best possible treatment.

You've travelled all over the world with Athletics Canada. Name some of your favourite places and a destination you would not have otherwise visited.

Almost every major games I've been to with Team Canada has been in a place that I had not already seen. I'd say being able to climb the Great Wall in Beijing after World Championships in 2015 was definitely on my bucket list. Australia, Spain, and Glasgow were other places I had heard a lot about but never thought I would get to. We don't always have much time to sightsee, but who says you can't tell a lot about a place from their airport and their track?

Do you know someone who should be at Sutherland-Chan?

You see them in your clinic – meet them in your neighborhood – they may be acquaintances; they may ask you about your profession and more importantly they may inquire about your education. We know that our greatest source of referrals is from those who say, “A Sutherland-Chan grad told me about the school!”

Please encourage those who express interest in the massage field to consider Sutherland-Chan. Direct them to our website or suggest they contact the school for a tour.

Our grads are our best resource – we thank you for your ongoing support of the school!

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What's one memorable moment that stands out from your travels with Athletics Canada?

Every major championship and training camp has many memorable moments. Some come from the accomplishments of the athletes, but many also come from personal interactions with the athletes and the other staff. One of the more recent ones occurred while at training camp this past January in Grenada. It was a combined para- and able-bodied sprint camp. One of our para athletes posted a picture at the track on social media. Para athletes from all over the world commented on how great it was to see both para and able athletes sharing the track, celebrating the knowledge of coaches and medical staff. Apparently, Canada is one of the only countries to do this. It was a proud moment to know that Canada was taking the lead on this and the rest of the world was watching.

How do you balance your responsibilities working with Athletics Canada with your mobile practice?

I am very fortunate that this has really never been an issue for me. Most of my mobile clients I've been treating from 10-19 years and they have standing appointments. I get my assignments from the team with enough notice to let them reschedule for when I'm in town, or they can wait until I return. My clients have always found it cool that I get to travel the world and have told me that it makes them proud to say that their therapist is away with athletes representing Canada.

What are the biggest challenges that you've had to overcome in your career as a massage therapist?

As a mobile therapist from almost the beginning of my career, not having worked in a multidisciplinary clinic, one of the biggest challenges was learning how to get respect from other healthcare providers. It took me a while to be able to communicate with chiro and physios as I had always worked alone.

The more I did it, the more confident I became, and I realized that that was half the battle. Being able to work with Team Canada as part of a medical team has been one of the greatest learning experiences I've ever had.

The other challenge I've had as a self-employed therapist is dealing with the actual billing side of my business, especially when it comes to deciding when to raise my prices and by how much. No one really likes to bring up money and I am no different. We all have clients that we've been treating for as long as we've been working and may consider family, but I have to keep reminding myself (and my peers remind me as well) that it is still a business I'm running and I need to keep my prices in line as my expenses rise. My business has afforded me a comfortable lifestyle that enables me to travel with the team for up to five months a year, but that also means that when I am in town I need to make sure that I'm running an efficient and profitable business.

What is your favourite aspect of being a massage therapist?

I really love making people more aware of what's going on with their bodies, and even more than that, arming them with the knowledge and tools to be able to help themselves in the future. There is nothing like feeling you played a part in someone's healing process, whether it contributes to winning an Olympic medal or making it possible for them to get through a work day pain-free.

Being a massage therapist allows you to change your focus as often as you like and still be working as a manual therapist. I feel very fortunate that I can go from working in palliative care, to small children and babies, to Olympic and professional athletes, all within one scope of practice.

It's not a bad thing to be self-employed and able to make your own hours, and to structure your business as you see fit. Being a mobile therapist can make for long days and nights, but all that is forgotten when someone messages you and says that they need you and will take any time you have available, day or night.

Do you have any advice for recent grads?

I would tell recent grads to go out and experience many different work environments and different populations before you settle on one. You don't know what you really want or enjoy until you take a stab at different things. I also think that the earlier you specialize in one setting, the less likely you are to try working with different populations in the future. It gets harder to try different things as we get older. It's much easier and less intimidating to ask for advice earlier on in our careers.

Try to hone your craft and focus on learning to feel with your hands, and "listen" to what the tissue is saying. Some RMTs get out of school and want to get as many credentials behind their name as possible, but unless you can really take in how different types of tissues feel and respond to different kinds of touch, you end up doing a lot of cool techniques without really knowing the effect it's having on the body. I've learned that clients don't really care that you are treating them using the latest gadget or newest techniques, but they do recognize when they feel better regardless of how you achieved that. My motto is, "Be an expert at what you do best." This will ensure that you keep honing your skills and will always want to strive to be better.