

Winter 2013

Alumni Profile

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Recommended Citation

Davis, Laura (2013) "Alumni Profile," *Linfield Magazine*: Vol. 9 : No. 3 , Article 14.
Available at: https://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/linfield_magazine/vol9/iss3/14

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Keeping athletes healthy



Diana Palmer '86

A midnight slide down a Melrose Hall banister resulted in a sprained ankle for Diana Palmer '86 – and also launched her career path.

As a Linfield sophomore, Palmer had little idea of what her future held, but the sprain led her to the athletic training department and she was hooked. She spent the rest of her time at Linfield working in the treatment center under Tara Lepp, professor of health and human performance, who offered hands-on teaching that Palmer models to this day as a professor of kinesiology at Westmont College in Santa Barbara, Calif.

“Tara threw responsibility at us right away, and you had to learn on your feet,” said Palmer, who said Lepp ran one of the best training rooms she’s seen. “At Linfield, I had the benefit of teachers who cared about my personal life and who weren’t afraid to push me.”

During a career that has taken her around the world, Palmer has worked with elite athletes at the Ironman World Championships, World Cup matches, the Pan American Games, the Olympics, and countless other athletic venues. For 10 years, she traveled extensively, following teams internationally every six weeks or so, and also serving as head athletic trainer at Westmont.

“I loved the cultures, the people, the athletes I met, and I got to learn from other specialists all over the world,” she said. “I couldn’t have asked for a better learning environment.”

Her favorite part was working with the International Development Program, which assisted athletes who couldn’t afford their own team and athletic trainers.

“That put everything together for me – working with amazing professionals from all over the world and giving to people who are in need,” she said. “That’s what I’m made for. I tell my students, it doesn’t matter if you’re working with a 70-year-old patient, a collegiate athlete or an Olympic athlete, you treat them all the same.”

After a decade of international travel and 14-hour work days, Palmer recently scaled back her commitments. She now splits her time between work in a private physical therapy clinic, and teaching at Westmont. In addition, she has served on the medical staff for the Santa Barbara Polo Club since 2002.

Palmer has seen her share of changes in the athletic training industry. As one of the first females to work in professional men’s soccer, she recalls the surprise of athletes when she’d walk into the locker room.

“Every time you go to a new place you must prove who you are,” Palmer said. “You walk in with grace and you learn. When doors open, you walk through them. I wouldn’t have taken all these opportunities without my faith.”



Diana Palmer '86, medical staff for the Santa Barbara Polo Club, offers care to an injured polo player. She has spent her career treating elite athletes at the Olympics, Ironman competitions, the World Cup, Pan American Games, and other venues.

Palmer was one of Lepp’s first athletic training students at Linfield, and Lepp remembers her well.

“It has been exciting to watch Diana take the base of knowledge she gained at Linfield and expand on it through advanced studies at the graduate level and worldwide learning experiences,” Lepp said.

At Linfield, Palmer studied physical education and psychology, following in the footsteps of her father, Densley Palmer, director of counseling services at Linfield for 16 years. She remembers being pushed hard by professors, including Lepp and George Oja, and that work paid off in graduate school.

“Linfield’s education made walking into grad school a breeze,” said Palmer, who earned a master’s degree in movement studies and athletic training at the University of Oregon. “Everything they taught the first year, I had already learned.”

Over the years, Palmer has used her psychology training as much as the exercise science and athletic training, explaining that the mental state of an athlete ties directly into his or her physical healing and perception of pain.

“We can’t heal patients physically unless they’re 100 percent healthy mentally,” she said. “Being able to recognize that there’s a whole person behind the injury helps a lot.” 🍷

– Laura Davis