

# The Injury-Free Season:

## Proactive Recovery for Modern Players



## INTRODUCTION: The World's Game and Pain

The FIFA World Cup is the most-watched sporting event on the planet, bringing together billions of fans across more than 200 countries and territories. In 2026, the tournament arrives in the United States, Canada and Mexico, and [new research](#) from Loughborough University warns that the variation among 16 host cities creates significant environmental and physical risks for players.

The physical demands of soccer mirror those faced by athletes in every sport and at every level, from youth leagues to marathons. The human body endures repetitive motion, high-impact contact and cumulative wear and tear. Every athlete, regardless of age or level, faces a common question: How do you stay durable throughout a long season?

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- **How do you shift from reacting to injuries to prevention?**
  - **How do you build a body that performs at its best, year after year?**
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The answer for athletes is chiropractic care. Your doctor of chiropractic (DC) takes a whole-being approach, evaluating joints, muscles and systems. DCs serve on the medical staff for [90% of professional sports organizations](#), including all 32 National Football League (NFL) teams and 30 Major League Baseball (MLB) teams. [U.S. Soccer's High-Performance Department](#) includes DCs on its sports medicine staff for the U.S. Women's National Team, alongside other doctors, athletic trainers and physical therapists.

In her book *Adjusted Reality*, Sherry McAllister, DC, President of the Foundation for Chiropractic Progress, introduces the Foundational Seven pillars of whole-being: Investment, Replenishment, Nourishment, Movement, Adjustment, Contentment and Revitalization. These pillars guide the chiropractic philosophy that health is built through daily choices, and that every athlete and family can benefit from this approach, whether they are competing in the World Cup or playing in a weekend league.

### ATHLETE VOICE: *Olivia Athens*

**Olivia Athens, a pro soccer player for OL Reign, grew up receiving chiropractic care from her father, Dr. Nick Athens, a DC who has been practicing for over 40 years. "He was just the most supportive dad," Olivia says. "He saved us so many times — me, my mom, my siblings, friends and family."**





## CHAPTER 1: Prevention, the Foundation of Durability

The athletes who enjoy the longest careers invest in their bodies before injury strikes. Your body performs best when the mechanics of movement work in harmony with your biology. Just as a great car engine is useless without proper maintenance, the body tends to protect one area when its alignment is not maintained, creating vulnerability elsewhere. That guarding response is where many injuries begin.

### What prevention looks like across sports:

- **IN SOCCER**, accounting for rapid direction changes, explosive sprints and the relentless pounding of 90-minute matches
- **IN BASKETBALL**, absorbing the impact of constant jumping and lateral cuts
- **IN RUNNING**, managing the repetitive stress of thousands of footstrikes per mile
- **IN FOOTBALL**, preparing the body for high-impact collisions and abrupt stops

DCs assess gait, posture and muscular balance to identify issues before they become injuries. A [meta-analysis](#) of studies involving athletes and chiropractic care found that performance and rehabilitation are significantly improved by chiropractic care. In one randomized controlled trial, elite Taekwondo athletes experienced an 8% increase in leg muscle strength after a single adjustment.

Those results extend well beyond the training mat. At the elite level of professional soccer, DCs have become essential members of the medical team. [The LA Galaxy](#) has employed a DC since the club's founding in 1996; Dr. George Billauer has also served as the team DC for the U.S. Men's National Team since 1992, spanning over 300 matches and five World Cups. A DC served on the medical staff of the [Canadian men's national soccer team](#) at the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar, reflecting the shift toward multidisciplinary care teams.

## HOW CHIROPRACTIC HELPS

[Research](#) on chiropractic and muscle strength/corticospinal excitability demonstrates that a single chiropractic session can increase muscle strength by enhancing the brain's ability to activate muscles, with significant implications for athletic performance and injury prevention.

### ATHLETE VOICE: *Marshall Ulrich*

Marshall Ulrich, dubbed the "Endurance King" by *Outside magazine*, has completed over 130 ultramarathons averaging more than 125 miles each, climbed the highest peak on every continent, and finished 13 expedition-length adventure races. At 57, he ran across America with the third-fastest time. Ulrich exemplifies that durability comes from decades of investment in prevention, with daily habits making long-term careers possible.

## CHAPTER 2: The Anatomy of a Sports Injury

Every sport carries its own injury profile, and soccer is a striking example. Roughly [45% of emergency room visits](#) for soccer injuries involve athletes age 14 or younger, ACL tears in youth are far more common than they were 20 years ago and an estimated 50% of youth sports injuries are caused by overuse. Here is a snapshot of the most common injuries by sport:

- **SOCCKER:** Ankle and knee sprains, hamstring and calf strains, anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) tears and concussions
- **BASKETBALL:** Stress fractures, patellar tendinitis, ankle injuries and muscle contusions
- **FOOTBALL:** Contusions, ligament tears, head injuries and lower-extremity fractures
- **BASEBALL/SOFTBALL:** Rotator cuff injuries, elbow overuse injuries, ankle sprains and muscle strains

When the body sustains an injury, it instinctively guards the compromised area. That compensation shifts stress to neighboring joints and muscles, increasing the risk of a secondary injury. This is the “top-down” treatment model: [research shows](#) that athletes have a greater risk of lower-body injury for more than a year following a concussion, underscoring the importance of whole-body assessment.

DCs are trained to trace symptoms back to their root cause and treat the whole person. Chiropractic care is drug-free, offering an alternative to medications that carry risks of misuse.

### ATHLETE VOICE: *Dr. Nick Athens*

Dr. Nick Athens has been a practicing DC for over 40 years and is the father of NWSL soccer player Olivia Athens. From the practitioner and parent perspective, Dr. Athens has spent decades on the sidelines treating young athletes’ injuries, advocating for second opinions and emphasizing the importance of proper diagnosis over rushing to interventions. When Olivia broke her fibula in college, one doctor recommended surgery. Dr. Athens pushed for a second opinion from a specialist at Stanford University, who confirmed the break would heal on its own. Ten weeks later, a chiropractic adjustment restored Olivia’s range of motion. “It was like Fourth of July fireworks,” she says.

## IT STARTS AT YOUR FEET: *The Kinetic Chain*

Your feet are the body’s foundation. Improper gait, foot strike or subtle differences in how one-foot functions compared to the other can translate stress upward through the knees, hips, pelvis and spine. Over-pronation, for example, creates an unnatural internal rotation in the lower leg that has been shown to [increase the risk for knee injuries and back pain](#). DCs evaluate the complexities of the foot and the kinetic chain, adjust affected areas to optimize joint function and can recommend custom orthotics for patients who need additional support.



## YOUR POST-MATCH RECOVERY TOOLKIT

- Prioritize 8 to 9 hours of sleep per night to allow muscles and the nervous system to restore
- Stay hydrated before, during and after activity, especially in outdoor sports
- Use dynamic stretching before activity and static stretching after
- Schedule regular chiropractic visits to address alignment and joint mobility

## CHAPTER 3: The Cool Down vs. the Adjustment

Every athlete knows the importance of cooling down after intense activity: light jogging, stretching and foam rolling. These steps help muscles begin to recover, but passive rest addresses only part of the equation. True recovery involves restoring proper joint motion and optimizing communication between the brain and body.

Recovery science spans every sport. Sleep is where adaptation happens, nutrition fuels repair and hydration supports every system. An adjustment goes deeper than a cool-down: it restores joint function and supports the nervous system. [Research using electroencephalograms \(EEGs\)](#) has shown significant changes in brain wave activity following chiropractic care, suggesting adjustments may support neuroplastic changes in how we experience pain and manage sleep. As Dr. McAllister emphasizes in *Adjusted Reality*: “the symptoms are different from the problems.”

### ATHLETE VOICE: Zach Bitter

**Ultra-endurance athlete Zach Bitter, holder of multiple 100-mile world records, says true gains happen during recovery.** “Sleep, nutrition and proper training load” are his three priorities. “You can have a great workout, but you improve by recovering from it.” Bitter notes chiropractic’s modern focus: “There’s more emphasis now on finding and solving the root issue, not just temporary relief.”



## CHAPTER 4: The Micro-Trauma of Headers and Collisions

Soccer is unique among major sports in the practice of heading, in which players deliberately strike a high-velocity ball with their heads. [Heading](#) is one of the leading causes of concussion in the sport. Yet concussion risk extends well beyond soccer: football, basketball, cycling, hockey and even cheerleading all carry significant head-impact exposure.

Even seemingly minor impacts warrant professional assessment. Concussion symptoms may take days or weeks to appear. Early intervention is critical, and repeated impacts without proper recovery can compound into serious, long-term consequences. Likewise, parents should understand that a pain-free child is not necessarily a healed child. Masking pain with medication, especially in young athletes, can be dangerous.

DCs are trained in concussion protocols and can monitor cognitive, behavioral, physical and mood-related symptoms. Sprain and strain injuries in the soft tissues and joint dysfunction often accompany head impacts, and DCs address these co-occurring injuries as part of a comprehensive recovery plan.

### ATHLETE VOICE: *Merril Hoge*

Former NFL running back Merrill Hoge knows the toll of head injuries firsthand. After suffering multiple concussions during his playing career, Hoge became an outspoken advocate for early intervention and comprehensive recovery. His experience underscores why athletes in every collision sport need a care team that treats the whole person, and why DCs play a critical role in monitoring recovery beyond the point where symptoms disappear.

## CONCUSSION RED FLAGS FOR PARENTS

A consumer-friendly [symptom checklist](#) across cognitive, behavioral, physical and mood categories:

- 1 COGNITIVE:** Confusion, difficulty concentrating, trouble recognizing common items
- 2 BEHAVIORAL:** Abnormal crying, aggression, irritability or repetition of actions
- 3 PHYSICAL:** Headache, dizziness, fatigue, fainting or balance issues
- 4 MOOD:** Anger, anxiety, loneliness or apathy toward things once cared about



## GROWTH SPURTS AND THE YOUNG ATHLETE

As children grow, significant changes in the biomechanical properties of bone can make them more susceptible to stress injuries. Bone stiffness increases while resistance to impact diminishes, and sports that demand repetitive single-direction movement can create muscular imbalances that young bodies are less equipped to absorb. DCs can help young athletes navigate these transitions by:

- Assessing gait, posture and muscular balance at each stage of development
- Designing age-appropriate strengthening and flexibility strategies
- Monitoring skeletal alignment during growth spurts to identify vulnerabilities early

For a deeper look at how DCs support student athletes, read the F4CP article [Giving Student Athletes the Chiropractic Edge](#).

## CHAPTER 5: The Young Athlete – Growing Bodies, Growing Demands

Youth sports in the U.S. is a [\\$43-billion industry](#), and the intensity of youth athletics has surged across all sports: soccer, gymnastics, basketball, swimming and baseball. Children are specializing earlier, training harder and sustaining injuries that once appeared only in adult professionals.

Young soccer players are developing disproportionate quadriceps strength without adequate hamstring development, increasing the risk of knee pain and injury. This type of muscular imbalance is common in youth sports, where repetitive, single-directional movements dominate. Growth spurts challenge coordination, requiring young athletes to periodically relearn how to manage a taller, larger body. These transitions are vulnerable windows for injury (see sidebar: “Growth Spurts and the Young Athlete”).

DCs offer sports physicals, spinal screenings, scoliosis checks and posture assessments tailored to growing bodies, helping young athletes maintain balance and flexibility through developmental transitions, all without drugs or surgery.

### DC VOICE: *Dr. Karen Slota*

**Dr. Karen Slota made history as the first female DC in the NFL.**

Her journey from the U.S. Coast Guard to the sidelines of professional football gives her a powerful perspective on developing young athletes. Dr. Slota understands the demands placed on growing bodies at every level of competition and advocates for DCs as essential members of the care team from youth sports through the professional ranks



## CONCLUSION: Your Blueprint for a Better Reality

Whether you are cheering from the stands at the World Cup or lacing up your own cleats for a Saturday morning match, the path to durability is the same. Prevention, smart recovery and a whole-being approach to your health will keep you moving for the long haul.

Your DC is trained to treat the whole person, every joint, every system, without drugs or surgery. Chiropractic care is growing on the global stage, with F4CP now represented by ambassadors in South Africa, Ireland, Malaysia, India, Australia and beyond. As Dr. McAllister writes in *Adjusted Reality*: "Our lives are built on movement, and what doesn't grow dies."

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**Take the next step in your own injury-free season:**

**Pick up a copy of *Adjusted Reality* by Dr. Sherry McAllister, available wherever you buy your books.**

**Find a Doctor of Chiropractic near you at [f4cp.org/findadoctor](http://f4cp.org/findadoctor).**

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