

Waiting for an athlete to put a foot wrong.

'Fingers' Murphy will take the pain out of Olympic strains.

When Kevin Murphy watches sport on TV, he finds it difficult to relax, unlike the rest of Britain's armchair athletes. He is usually leaning forward in his seat, waiting for the mighty to fall.

Not that he has a death wish against Britain's sportsmen and women. It's just that as physiotherapist to the England rugby union squad, he finds it hard to switch off. "You can't help it. You are always watching to see them put a foot wrong", said the man known as "Fingers" Murphy to the cream of England's players.

Kevin has been a physio in Manchester for 20 years, the last six of them spent at Manchester's BUPA Hospital, where he deals with post-operative patients, rheumatology, and replacement hips and knees.

But he also manages to fit in a busy life as a sports physio, treating not only rugby players, but everybody from archers to wrestlers in a career which has taken him all over the World.

His stint on the international athletics circuit began in 1982, when he was asked to go to the Commonwealth Games at Brisbane. He was already doing some physiotherapy work with the English rugby team, and got the job through his contacts there.

The next year, he went to New Zealand with the British Lions rugby team as their first-ever tour physio. After that came the Olympic Games in Los Angeles in 1984.

He is currently making a return visit to the Olympics, joining a team of 20 physios helping to keep the British Olympics athletes in peak condition at Seoul.

A small, diffident man in his early fifties, Kevin is modest about a career which has brought him into close contact with some of the world's top athletes. Although he will describe the problems he has encountered in general terms, he is no name dropper.

Of the Seoul Olympics, he says: "It's just great to be going. To a certain extent, you hope you won't be needed". That's unlikely, if Kevin's experience in Los Angeles is anything to go by. On busy days, the physios were working three shifts, from 7a.m. till midnight.

"It was exhausting at times. At the end of the day, it was hard to get a beer up to your mouth".

At Seoul, the physios will be dealing with track injuries at a special clinic, as well as the sort of aches and pains which may be minor to ordinary mortals, but the difference between winning and losing for the athletes.

“A twinge in the hamstring or a pull in the shoulder might be nothing to you or me”, said Kevin, “but the athletes want to feel fully flexible, working with nothing on their mind”.

This was particularly true of solo competitors. “If you’re in a team, you can blame the ten other men, or the weather or the referee, but a runner has nobody to blame but himself”.

Despite the prima donna image often portrayed in the press, top athletes are not particularly difficult to work with, he says. “You have to build up a good relationship. If there is not a mutual trust between you, then the athlete will find somebody else”.

This year, he may have the chance to try out a new method of treating soft-tissue injury which he developed himself.

It involves a combination of intermittent compression and ice to reduce inflammation. In the past, physios have used one or the other, but not both. “It has proved itself to me, and another physio has done some research with it”, he said.

While his work at the BUPA hospital might seem a far cry from the pace and excitement of the Olympics, Kevin does not view them as different jobs.

“The aim is to promote full fitness, whether you are dealing with somebody who wants to drive his car again, or an athlete who wants to win the 1500 metres”, he said.