



BEYOND THE PITCH



Dr Jesus Olmo of Isokinetic is renowned for his successful stint as medical director at Real Madrid. He talks about the knowledge and experience he brought from the world of elite football to offer the clinic's patients

Words: James Rampton



Above: Dr Jesus Olmo

Most eminent doctors have impressive medical certificates on their walls. Not Dr Jesus Olmo.

The wall of his office at the Isokinetic Medical Group on Harley Street is decorated with a white Real Madrid shirt, three replica Champions League trophies and two FIFA World Club Championship gold medals. The display is testament to the role Dr Olmo and his team played in one of the club's most successful periods.

In September, Dr Olmo joined Isokinetic, one of the leading specialist sports medicine and rehabilitation groups in the world, as a consultant in sports orthopaedics and rehabilitation. Prior to that, between 2013 and 2017, he was medical director at Real Madrid, where he worked with some of the very best football players on the planet.

Speaking from his office at Isokinetic, Dr Olmo tells me he really enjoyed dealing with these elite players. He was particularly impressed by the Welsh star Gareth Bale, who recently captained his country in the World Cup. A doctor blessed with an engaging bedside manner, he says: *“Everybody knows that Gareth is an absolutely amazing player. In terms of technical quality, he is one of the most talented players I’ve ever seen. He is an outstanding football player, but he could also have been a good rugby player, a good athlete, a good tennis player, or whatever he wanted to be. He is a major natural talent.”*

Dr Olmo's principal achievement at Real Madrid, however, was not helping some of the best players on earth, but revolutionising the way the medical department at the top Spanish club was run. To borrow some football clichés, he transformed Real Madrid's medical services from an old-fashioned ‘route one’ method of treatment to a super-sophisticated, cutting-edge, ‘tiki-taka’ system.

According to Dr Olmo, who is also the director of The Doctor Olmo Clinic in Granada, Spain and co-founder of the Football Science Institute FSI, *“people think of Real Madrid as a very successful team, but when I arrived at the club in 2013, that was not the case. We had been beaten by Barcelona for many years and had not won the Champions League for 12 years.”*

Dr Olmo immediately realised that changes had to be made – and fast. That is far easier said than done, though, at an institution as conservative as a football club. The 56-year-old doctor, who from 1995 to 2000 was the head of medical services for the Spanish Rugby Union, explains. *“Football clubs can be very traditional. They think that they are perfect and that things should be done in a certain way because they have always been done that way. So when you come from another sport – in my case, rugby – and you want to do things differently, they say: ‘No, no, that won’t work. This is football.’ You know it’s going to be difficult, but you have to stick to your guns.”*

So Dr Olmo dug in his heels and set about dismantling the traditional structure of the club. He confesses that to begin with, *“it was pretty controversial”*. He had to engage in a diplomatic game. *“There are different interests at play. People think that the club, the coach and the players all have the same interests, but that’s not the case. It’s very difficult to make everybody happy.”*

But that did not stop Dr Olmo. *“We changed many things, but the main thing was that I acted not only as head of medical services, but also head of performance. So I was not only taking care of the injuries, but also helping to prevent injuries, to treat chronic injuries, and to manage the load, the recovery and nutrition performance”*



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for every player individually.”

Dr Olmo also regularly checked in on the club's most valuable assets: the players. They are all individual, highly successful businesses, generating millions of dollars and employing dozens of people, so their general welfare is vital.

Unlike players of the past, who used to train on a diet of pies and pints, the sportsmen of today have highly advanced training regimes, which they follow to the letter at home. Extremely disciplined, they all pay a great deal of attention to detail and display a champion's attitude to fitness. The doctor's job is to ensure that they are content and able to focus on their training.

Dr Olmo asserts that, while most players have to adopt a tough or arrogant image to hold on to their place in a very competitive environment, in private the majority of them are charming. At Real Madrid, he recalls, *“I had a lot of autonomy. I developed a very good relationship with many players. I went to their homes because I understood it was my duty. I was hired by the club to take care of the players, and I couldn't do that if they didn't have confidence in me. I needed to show them I was there to help them.”*

In the end, Dr Olmo's persistence paid off. Those at the club who had been dubious about the radical changes he brought in were ultimately won over. *“Individual high performance is good for everyone,”* he says. *“No matter what sport it is, it is a question of analysing every aspect of the athlete to do with performance and trying to improve it incrementally with what we call marginal gains. Those little improvements can make a big difference. It's the future. And fortunately, at Real Madrid, it worked.”*

Once the club started winning the Champions League, ▷



Far left: The Green Room at Isokinetic
 Left: On-field rehabilitation in
 Regent's Park
 Opposite: The Isokinetic clinic on
 Harley Street

people conveniently forgot their complaints about Dr Olmo's changes. The experience taught the consultant a great deal about diplomatically overturning tradition, about breaking new ground tactfully, both on and off the pitch.

Now Dr Olmo is bringing his years of expertise from Real Madrid to Isokinetic, which is recognised as a FIFA Medical Centre of Excellence and treats a very large number of high-level sportsmen and women as well as non-athletes who have suffered an injury. The consultant is part of a major drive at Isokinetic to revolutionise the field of sports science.

One of the most significant ideas that he is transferring from the football club is the holistic philosophy of medicine. He outlines what that means: *"We are looking at the whole person. At Isokinetic, the goal is not just healing a knee injury; it's bringing the patient to their desired level of performance. Obviously, to bring the patient to this level, you need to heal the injury, but also take care of why this knee injury has happened because maybe there was something wrong before it occurred."*

"So the whole body and mind come into play. We take care of every single aspect that can influence the physical conditioning and the performance and the health of the patient. For me, health and performance are the same thing. They are good for each other. Performance without health is not possible."

Dr Olmo, who also oversees trailblazing work in GPS monitoring and platelet-rich plasma (PRP) injections at Isokinetic, also firmly believes in the importance of communication between doctor and patient. *"You must detect how the person you are talking to is feeling. That helps*

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to shape your language with them. Medicine is an art, and it has a lot to do with confidence and trust. A doctor should communicate with a patient not only to have a clear diagnosis or good analysis, but to develop trust. It's about discovering how you inspire confidence in the patient because that's also good for healing."

These encounters, he adds, *"teach you how to manage top athletes, how to talk to them, how to understand their interests and in the end how to encourage them to have the best possible treatment."*



The area of injury prevention is also absolutely central to the work Dr Olmo is performing at Isokinetic, which has been a pioneering force in sports medicine since its foundation in Italy in 1987. A club will inevitably perform far better if it is able to field the same team every week. Look at the table-topping, pre-Christmas performance of Arsenal, who were able to put out virtually the same 11 for every game.

“We know a lot more about injury prevention than we did 10 years ago,” says Dr Olmo. “Injury prevention is not an easy thing. It is not just doing a couple of exercises. You have to assess the player’s individual body – how it’s built, its genetics, the alignment of the lower limbs. Does it have a problem controlling those limbs, has it developed muscle imbalance or joint stiffness? We can check many things about the individual player’s predisposition. But then, they must go through a training process that’s about managing load, recovery, rest, nutrition.”

One of the other innovations at Isokinetic, whose 200-plus staff see thousands of patients every year, is the Green Room. This has nothing to do with the theatre – rather, it is a crucial advance in sports rehabilitation. *“It’s called the Green Room because the floor is green like grass. It is a room with a force platform, lots of cameras and a big screen in front of the patient. The patients can see themselves performing all the things connected to their athletic activity – landings, changing direction, lateral strides, accelerations, jumps.*

“Imagine that you are a tennis player. You need to go to the ball and strike it with energy on one side and then go to the other side and do the same thing. We can retrain that player very easily in the Green Room setting. Because we have cameras and the force platform, we can measure how the

patient controls their lower limbs. That is a big advantage because sometimes the patient says, ‘OK, I have recovered my strength, I feel well.’ But we can measure his readings to be sure he is able to control the movements in his lower limbs, so he is performing well and with a low degree of injury risk. So it’s a massive tool for us.”

While any clinic could more or less replicate the set-up, it’s the knowledge behind all the thousands of evaluations that makes the Green Room unique. Isokinetic is sitting on a gold mine of data. That’s why, for example, *“when a football player who we know is prone to certain injuries comes to Isokinetic, we can detect things about them that can’t be detected in other settings. That way, we can provide the means to correct deficiencies.”*

I ask Dr Olmo what prompted him to leave professional football for Isokinetic. *“I am a sports medicine and rehabilitation doctor. For me, Isokinetic is the best sports rehabilitation organisation in the world. The methodology developed here is much more advanced than at any football club. The work I do here is very rewarding as well. We have a huge number of patients most of whom are not professional athletes who come to our parties and our meetings. They’re part of our family. They are so happy and grateful to us. That enduring feeling of gratitude is one thing I love about this job. Isokinetic really is the summit.”*

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