

# Between Cali and Kyiv – Transcontinental Sports Physiology

*Zwischen Cali und Kiew – Transkontinentale Sportphysiologie*

**The transatlantic contacts in Sports Medicine are numerous, especially to the United States, the world-wide leading country in science. Each year scientists from all over the world are traveling to the meeting of the American College of Sports Medicine. Exchange of investigators occurs regularly. Here I want to describe the origin and importance of contacts to South America and additionally Eastern Europe for which I am working since many years.**

But my first contact with a topic of sports medicine occurred already in 1958. When I matriculated for medicine at the university in Bonn, Germany, a small x-ray photo of my thorax was made to exclude tuberculosis, a still frequent illness at this time. Some weeks later I had to go to an additional check: no tuberculosis, but my heart was rather large. The doctors suggested a pathological change which they did not find. Probably I had an athlete's heart unknown at this time. During many years, I went rapidly to school by bicycle six times per week at least, 5 km ending with a mountain ascent, and back home in the afternoon or evening. During holidays we travelled across Germany with big package to the Alps, also by bike. The high peaks covered with snow filled us with enthusiasm. My friend Reinhold and I hiked across Tyrolian mountains and studied one year in the regional capital Innsbruck, Austria. This caused an interest for biological high altitude effects.

## South America

My famous subject in medicine was physiology, especially cybernetic aspects. Therefore I became a collaborator of the exercise physiologist Jürgen Stegemann at the German Sports University in Cologne. There a scientific exchange with Colombia in South America in 1971 began. After the full professors the assistants, too, travelled to the capital Bogotá, Columbia, for seminars. In 1973 no direct flight communications existed. We had to travel to New York, U.S., and from there to Bogotá. Since Lufthansa was a state-owned company as the universities at this time, we got seats in the first class! After the seminar we stayed for holidays in the country and were invited privately to Cali, Columbia, a town at an altitude of 1000 m with agreeable tropical climate and fascinating landscape, including snow-covered volcanoes. We had excursions from there to the 1000 km long coast of the Pacific

Ocean in Colombia covered mainly with mangroves. Near the coast whales got their children. There are only 3 cities, the largest called Buenaventura (good adventure).

We were very impressed and when in 1982 a guest professorship for physiology was founded in Cali by the German Academic Exchange Service, I applied and got the position.

The stay was fascinating. The climate in Colombia near the equator depends on altitude, there are no seasons, only heavy raining during some months. Up to 1200m it is tropical, then more and more moderate, eternal snow above 5000 m. I began investigations on anemia, a frequent health problem because of insufficient nutrition with proteins and iron in poor people (3). After one year I had to return to Germany to my department of Sports and Exercise Physiology at the Medical School Hannover, but my assistant Walter Schmidt, later professor in Bayreuth, was my successor in Colombia. We both travelled regularly to Cali and later to Bogotá. Lasting contacts began with two universities (Universidad Nacional und Pontifica Universidad Xaveriana, the second led by Jesuits). A special aspect were investigations in females which are rare (2). Two Colombian physiologists came to Hannover and later to Berlin for longer stays. We had also contacts to institutions in La Paz in Bolivia. The capital is situated in a large valley between 3300 and 4200 m of altitude. The Austrian physiologist Hilde Spielvogel as well as French scientists investigated effects of this environment (e.g. (6)). Also Walter Schmidt and his group performed various investigations (8). During congresses in Colombia we met Ginés Viscor, a cell biologist from Barcelona in Spain, who also investigates altitude acclimatization and adaptation (7). Further contacts existed with exercise physiologists in Santa Maria in Brasil near Porto Alegre, where I and later my coworker Norbert Maassen presented results of our investigations. In Chile the effect of regular shortlasting altitude stays is a frequently studied topic, e.g. (1). The first author Claus Behn of this article has German ancestors and worked some years at the Free University Berlin.

A drawback in South America is the high level of criminality caused by poverty. Many people in Colombia have been attacked by robbers. But even this experience can be slightly positive. The robber who took away my money gave my creditcard back. >

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**Prof. Dr. med. Dieter Böning**

*Board Member*

*Association for the Pro-  
motion of Sports Medicine  
(Verein zur Förderung der  
Sportmedizin e. V.)*



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## KORRESPONDENZADRESSE:

Prof. Dr. med. Dieter Böning  
Institut für Physiologie, Campus Mitte,  
Charité - Universitätsmedizin Berlin  
Charitéplatz 1- Virchowweg 6  
10117 Berlin, Germany  
✉ : dieter.boening@charite.de

## Eastern Europe

When we go into the other direction to the east, there are contacts to Poland to Zbigniew Szigula, the head of the Department of Sports Medicine in Krakow. He stayed for some time in our institute at the Medical School Hannover. After my change to Berlin he organized an International Symposium about Exercise Physiology where I presented a lesson about altitude training (2). Halfway between Berlin and Kyiv I met there the Ukrainian Exercise physiologist Michael Kalinski who worked then at the University in Kent near Cleveland in the United States. We interchanged scientific and political experiences. We were both interested in history. Michael informed me about Ukraine. For the first time I heard of the terrible famine called Holodomor (murder by hunger) caused by Stalin in 1932. Corn was confiscated and partly thrown into the sea. It was obvious that Michael is an Ukrainian patriot. He had left the Soviet Union in 1990. He invited me to his university in Kent where he worked at that time. We invited him to us in Berlin where he gave a lesson about doping in the Soviet Union, also published in this journal (6).

Later he worked at the university in Murray/Florida and returned after retirement to Kyiv. Last year he published the memories of his life beginning in 1944, available from Amazon (5).

## Conclusion

To close: International contacts to distant countries are interesting and stimulating. With modern techniques they are much easier than in the last century. We have performed transatlantic doctoral examinations using the internet for the connection between Berlin and Bogotá. ■

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