



*Until Every One Comes Home.™*

## **Professional Athletes and the USO**

Since its inception in 1941, the USO has been sending celebrities to visit the men and women of the armed forces all over the world. In the early days of World War II, the entertainers included stars of screen, stage, radio and the concert stage, as well as vaudevillians and “unknown” entertainers who participated in USO Camp Show tours both stateside and overseas. The sports world also turned out in support of the troops – the beginning of a long-standing relationship with the USO that continues to this day. From football and basketball players to knock-out boxers, golfers, major league sluggers and race car drivers, athletes have continued to play a leading role in the USO’s efforts to bring a touch of home to service members and their families.

### **The National Football League (NFL)**

This year, the NFL celebrates its 40<sup>th</sup> year working with the USO to support America’s fighting forces. The partnership began in 1965 when then-NFL Commissioner Pete Rozelle conceived of the idea of sending NFL players to Vietnam on “goodwill tours” to visit U.S. troops. The following year, the NFL joined forces with the USO and became the first sports organization to send a group of players to Vietnam and other parts of the Far East. The first group of players to visit service members overseas included four future Hall of Famers: Sam Huff, Johnny Unitas, Frank Gifford and Willie Davis. From 1966 until the removal of forces in Vietnam in 1973, players spent up to three-and-one-half weeks visiting remote firebases, aircraft carriers and other installations in Vietnam, Guam, Thailand and Japan. Among the dozens of players who traveled abroad were Don Meredith, Dick Butkus, Floyd Little, Jim Nance, Gene Upshaw and Larry Csonka.

In 1979, the USO began working with the NFL’s Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders. Also known as “America’s Sweethearts,” the Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders have participated on 59 USO tours as of Jan. 2006. The group has entertained troops in Iraq, Afghanistan, Kosovo, Germany, Belgium, England, Iceland, the United Arab Emirates, Bosnia, Italy and Hungary. Several other cheerleading squads also visited troops abroad, including squad members from the Los Angeles Rams, Houston Oilers and the Washington Redskins.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the USO and the NFL sent several active and retired players and coaches on handshake tours to bases around the world. Terry Bradshaw, Howie Long, Mike Singletary, Dave Fulcher, Mel Renfro, Matt Joyce, P.J. Foster and Terry White were just a few of the many NFL players to tour with the USO. Football stars have visited troops in such locations as Somalia, Bosnia, Italy, South Korea, Japan, Germany, Kuwait, Iraq, Qatar and Afghanistan.

In June 2003, the first large-scale entertainment tour to the Persian Gulf region since the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom -- Project Salute 2003 -- brought a host of entertainers and professional athletes to pay tribute to the men and women of U.S. and coalition armed forces. NFL players Duce Staley and Jason Taylor were part of the star-studded brigade.

In 2004, the NFL donated \$250,000 to the USO for construction of a new center at Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan named in honor of Pat Tillman. A former player with the Arizona Cardinals and an Army Ranger, Tillman was killed during combat operations in Afghanistan in 2004. In April 2005, current NFL stars Larry Izzo (New England Patriots) and Warrick Dunn (Atlanta Falcons) were on-hand to officially open the center.

### **The National Basketball Association (NBA)**

Since the late 1960s, the NBA and its players have demonstrated their steadfast support for service members around the world. NBA All-Stars Gail Goodrich (Phoenix Suns), Lenny Wilkins (Seattle SuperSonics) and Keith Erickson (Los Angeles Lakers) visited wounded service members at military hospitals in the Pacific during a 1969 USO tour. That same year, other NBA players traveled to Vietnam on USO tours to meet with troops and show their support.

Over the course of the Vietnam War, NBA players, such as Wes Unseld and Mike Riordan, toured Vietnam and the Pacific hospital circuit as well as military bases in Europe. The players met with service members, posed for photos, shot hoops and showed highlight films of their games.

In the 1980s and 1990s, players such as Joe Hassett and John Stockton signed up to tour with the USO. Additionally, the Harlem Wizards traveled to Iceland, Europe, Alaska and the Caribbean in the early 1980s, sharing insider basketball tips with members of the armed forces.

In 2001, members of the NBA Entertainment League played exhibition games and greeted service members on a USO tour to Korea. In 2002, members of the Denver Nuggets organization traveled to a naval support base in Naples, Italy; Incirlik Air Force Base in Turkey; and to peace-keeping bases in Sarajevo and Bosnia.

The USO's first tour to Iraq in 2003 included NBA players Troy Hudson, Ervin Johnson, Mark Madsen, Shawn Marion and Cherokee Parks. NBA Legends Bob Lanier and Spencer Haywood also accompanied the group.

Former NBA All-Star Charles Barkley joined NFL player Roy Green to visit service members on a USO tour to Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates in June 2005. Also that month, NBA Legends Artis Gilmore, Gail Goodrich, Spencer Haywood and Dan Roundfield brought the Larry O'Brien Trophy on a USO tour to Kuwait.

## **Major League Baseball**

The relationship between the USO and Major League Baseball reaches back to World War II, when National Baseball Hall of Famer Leo Durocher traveled with 22 other players, managers, umpires and writers to visit war theaters. Frank Frisch, Carl Hubbell, Lefty Gomez and Mel Ott also participated in USO tours during the war. Also in the early 1940s, Al "The Clown Prince of Baseball" Schacht traveled to Europe, Africa and the Pacific.

A decade later, in 1952, Schacht visited troops on a USO Camp Show tour to Korea. The visits by major leaguers continued and, in 1956, baseball legend Mickey Mantle joined Bob Hope on an Alaska trip.

During the Vietnam War, multiple groups of baseball players traveled into the most dangerous regions of combat activities to boost the morale of our armed forces. Joe DiMaggio, Vida Blue, Willie Stargell, Tug McGraw and Reggie Jackson visited troops in Vietnam and those convalescing in military hospitals in the Pacific region. Johnny Bench joined the legendary Bob Hope on a 1971 holiday trip to Korea.

When trouble began to brew in the Middle East during the early 1990s, baseball was again there for the troops. During Operations Desert Storm and Desert Shield in 1991, the MLB Players Alumni Association brought a touch of home to 25,000 soldiers in the Middle East during the October "World Series in the Desert" Tour.

Recent years have brought both legends and current players to duty stations around the globe. Ernie Banks traveled to the Mediterranean and the Balkans during the 2000 holidays. Roger Clemens visited service men and women in the Persian Gulf region in December 2002 and those stationed at Offutt Air Force Base, Neb., in April 2004. Bo Jackson also participated in a number of USO events stateside.

## **Boxing**

Professional boxers have been touring with the USO since World War II. Jack Sharkey and Mickey Walker toured the European Theater with the USO Camp Shows during the war.

The tradition continued during the Vietnam War. Floyd Patterson was one of the first to travel into Vietnam, where he shook hands with troops serving far from home. Champion boxer Sugar Ray Robinson helped the USO provide special holiday telephone calls home for overseas service personnel. Other boxers who visited troops during in the late 1960s and early 1970s include Emile Griffith (former Welterweight and Middleweight Champ), Jose Torres (former Light Heavyweight Champ), Art Hernandez (former North American Middleweight Champ), Paul Pender (former Middleweight Champ) and Jimmy Ellis (former Heavyweight Champ).

The support of professional boxers to travel abroad to visit troops continued over the next several decades. In 1990, boxer Thomas “Hitman” Hearns traveled to Saudi Arabia to “meet and greet” troops serving in Operation Desert Shield. The World Middleweight Champion sparred with willing opponents in makeshift rings at each stop of the tour.

Recent years have brought boxing superstars to visit service members serving both stateside and overseas. Boxing champion Sugar Ray Leonard visited troops at Fort Sill, Okla., in 2003. Most recently, legendary boxing promoter Don King brought the World Boxing Organization (WBO) Heavyweight Champion “Relentless” Lamon Brewster to “meet and greet” service members stationed at Ramstein Air Base on a USO tour in September 2005. The pair also visited USO centers and spent time with troops recuperating from injuries at Landstuhl Regional Medical Center.

### **Other Sports**

During World War II, scores of professional and amateur athletes logged thousands of miles in support of our military. Wrestler Nick Munday was in France and Belgium, and Ruth Aarons played table tennis with GIs in Normandy.

Athletes from different sports also came together during the Vietnam War to support our armed forces stationed around the globe. Stars of horse racing, tennis, golf and hockey took time out of their schedules to provide as much one-on-one interaction to troops serving our country. Members of the close-knit world of horse racing took part in the 1968, “The All Time Racing Greats” tour to Vietnam. Participants included Willie Shoemaker, Johnny Longdon and Bill Winfrey.

Jimmy Nichols, the famous one-armed golfer, traveled to hospitals in Korea and other locations in the Pacific in April 1969. Later that year, Nichols spent nearly two months visiting service members stationed in Europe. In 1970, tennis champions Gussie Moran and Nancy Chaffee Kiner spent time with military personnel in Vietnam. The National Hockey League sent five players to Vietnam for 21 days in 1972. The Minnesota North Stars who participated in the trip included Lou Nanne, J.P. Parise, Dennis O’Brien, Murray Oliver and Tom Reid.

Sports personalities toured the globe with the USO over the next several decades and, most recently, their continuing commitment can be seen in the number of stars willing to visit service members supporting Operations Iraqi and Enduring Freedom. In December 2003, NASCAR’s Mike Wallace was included on a holiday tour, visiting troops in Kuwait, Iraq, Afghanistan, Bahrain and Djibouti. In November of 2005, several National Hot Rod Association (NHRA) drivers visited military personnel recuperating from injuries at Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany. The tour, Operation Support Our Wounded, included six-time NHRA Pro Stock champion Warren Johnson, two-time NHRA Pro Stock champion Jim Yates, NHRA Funny Car driver Tommy Johnson Jr., and NHRA Top Fuel veteran Cory McClenathan.

Legendary golfer Arnold Palmer lent his support to the USO by participating in the 2002 USO golf tournament. In May 2005, PGA professional Bobby Lopez conducted golf clinics and performed “trick-shot” comedy shows for service members stationed in Guam, Japan and Okinawa.

Even the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) has come on-board to support the troops. In August 2005, top NCAA coaches and sports personalities traveled to Kuwait to coach military basketball teams as part of Operation Hardwood. Participants included Mark Gottfried (University of Alabama), Dave Odom (University of South Carolina), Bobby Lutz (University of North Carolina, Charlotte), Tom Izzo (Michigan State University), Bobby Cremins (former head coach, Georgia Tech), Kelvin Sampson (University of Oklahoma), Mike Jarvis (ESPN commentator and former coach, St. John’s University) and Jay Blias (ESPN commentator and former player, Duke University).

The USO tour tradition, begun 65 years ago, continues today. The USO is grateful to all professional athletes who have contributed their time and talents to support service men and women stationed around the world, ensuring them that they are not forgotten.

Note: This fact sheet was compiled, based on available USO historical records. It, therefore, may not include all professional athletes who toured with the USO through the USO’s 65 years of service.

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