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EXAMINER/FRAN ORTIZ

Olympians, left to right, Mike Buncic, Ken Flax, Gregg Tafralis and Jim Doehring know they owe BALCO executive director Victor Conte, top, a boost

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Getting athletes in tune

Musician now helps competitors attain biochemical balance

By Dwight Chapin
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TALK ABOUT career switches! Victor Conte spent nearly two decades as a professional musician, playing bass with the Oakland group Tower of Power and Herbie Hancock.

"But I have three small daughters," he says, "and it was getting very difficult to say to them, 'See you in five months.'"

So Conte went looking for another source of income, which turned out to be running a medical lab, of all things.

Conte, 38, is executive director

of Bay Area Laboratory Co-operative of San Mateo, which is testing trace minerals in some of America's best Olympic athletes, trying to help them stay healthy and enhance their performances by bringing their bodies into the proper biochemical balance.

BALCO, a management and marketing company, sells diagnostic tests to physicians nationwide, collects specimens of whole blood, plasma, red blood cells, urine and hair and transports them to San Jose to be analyzed. The results are checked by Dr. Brian Goldman, BALCO's medical director, who recommends a program based on an excess or deficiency in trace minerals such as zinc, iron, chromium and magnesium.

The focus at the moment is on elite athletes.

"We have a data base of a couple hundred of them," says Conte, "at

least 25 of whom will be competing in Seoul."

In the group of what Conte calls "BALCO Olympians" are swimmer Matt Biondi, discus-thrower Mac Wilkins, six of the other eight American competitors in the discus, shot put and hammer throw and all 10 members of the U.S. judo team (through the impetus of assistant coach Willie Cahill).

"I've been involved in the testing since March," Wilkins says, "and it's been very beneficial to keeping my body in top working form. By using magnesium and zinc at bedtime, I found I could sleep more restfully and wake up with relaxed muscles. I also had a problem of cramping, and I've been able to cut down on that."

Weightman Greg Tafralis says that following the BALCO results has helped him remain injury-free during a time in which he has set

[See CONTE, D-2]

◆ CONTE from D-1

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personal records in both the shot and discus.

Trace mineral testing is nothing new in Soviet-bloc nations.

"Biochemical testing is done at least twice a year on every Eastern-bloc athlete," Conte says, "more often if they're injured. But virtually nothing is being done in this country."

"Here, athletes are given nutritional supplements without any regard for their individual needs. I'd say 90 percent of America's serious athletes take these supplements, but the majority are doing themselves more harm than good because they're uninformed and take them indiscriminately. The only way to scientifically tell what your needs are is through testing."

Track coach Bob Rush of the College of San Mateo, a BALCO supporter, agrees.

"Taking multivitamins the way American athletes do is like firing a shotgun and trying to hit everything," he says. "Through this testing, we know what needs to be brought up to levels that are good for the nutritional balance of the body."

In 1986, Conte says, a book on health and nutrition that grew out of a conference of 2,200 sports scientists from 100 countries devoted eight of 10 chapters to trace minerals.

"This was aimed at helping athletes to achieve their biological potential, he says, "to compute it down to feet and inches and pounds and ounces."

Still, Conte and his BALCO team haven't had much luck in selling their system to the nation's athletic hierarchy.

"We sent a proposal to the chief medical officer of the U.S. Olympic committee to prove this in fact works," Conte says, "but there's so much red tape."

Backers concede there isn't a lot of hard evidence yet on the benefits of trace-mineral testing, at least concerning world-class athletes, but they say it doesn't much matter.

"Even if the results are only helpful psychologically," says Wilkins, "that's very important to an athlete."

Conte says he's picking up all the costs of both the tests and supplements for the Olympians he's working with, and he'll be in Seoul — a minister without portfolio — to monitor their progress.

"This work," he says, "is equally as exciting as the music business. It doesn't offer the same immediate gratification as soloing in front of 50,000 people, but the benefits I receive are immeasurable, because I know I'm assisting them in actualizing the Olympic dream."