

Massage Magic

By Laurel Freeman, B.A., L.M.T.

Most of us can't do everything the best runners do. We don't have the time to spend as many hours training and resting as they do. Even if we did, we probably don't have the genes to handle the volume and intensity they can. But of you can lie on a table, you can adopt at least one of their training techniques and get the same benefits. You can get a sports massage.

Sports massage improves circulation, relaxes muscles, increases muscle tone, nourishes cells for rejuvenation, strengthens the muscular system, soothes nerves, promotes sleep, assists in recovery, and increases energy. With all those fantastic qualities, it's no wonder Arturo Barrios, Mark Plaatjes, Kim Jones, and many other world-class runners get massages regularly.

Although interest in massage has grown lately, massage is far from a fad. It goes back at least 2,000 years in India (polarity), 3,000 years in Japan (shiatsu), and over 4,000 years in China (acupressure). Hippocrates and Plato both referred to the healthful effects of massage. Massage was very likely part of the preparation for the original Olympians in ancient Greece, just as it is now a fixture in the training of current and aspiring Olympians.

Even if you're not contesting for an Olympic berth, you're still an athlete. Whether your goals are related to competition, fitness, or some of each, you repeatedly apply stresses to your body. For the most part, your body responds to the stress by growing stronger. Yet, if you could look into your muscles immediately after exercise you would see the following:

- ◆ metabolic waste products
- ◆ microscopic tears in the muscle cells
- ◆ extra fluid brought in to protect the torn cells
- ◆ small spasms to keep the torn cells from being used.

A muscle in spasm stays contracted. This shortens the muscle, keeping it from stretching and from exerting force when it needs to. Over time, this lack of full muscle function can contribute to additional chronic conditions:

- ◆ decreased circulation due to spasm
- ◆ larger muscle tears (more likely if the muscle is in spasm)
- ◆ scar tissue from the tears

Decreased circulation slows the healing process. Eventually, the torn muscle fibers are replaced with scar tissue, but the problems aren't over then. Scar tissue can be rough, irritating nearby muscle fibers. It can also bind the fibers together, a condition known as fibrosis. In either case, scar tissue keeps your muscles from performing as they ought to. This leads to more tears, which

leads to more spasm and more scar tissue. Sports massage is how you can break this cycle.

Immediately after exercise, massage flushes from your muscles the metabolic wastes from the exercise and the extra fluid brought in because of the microtears. It also dilates the blood vessels in the massaged area, resulting in increased circulation for up to 45 minutes afterward. Increased circulation continues to remove waste products and speeds the healing of the microtears. You can achieve some of the same benefits with a good cool-down routine, but massage has been found to be more effective.

For the more chronic side effects of running, sports massage is valuable therapy. Massage softens scar tissue and aligns it so it won't irritate its neighbors. It also breaks the hold fibrosis can have on your muscles. Massage lengthens and relaxes muscles, decreasing or eliminating the spasms that keep your muscles from performing to their capabilities and that make future injury more likely. Fewer spasms also means greater circulation, which is useful during exercise and recovery.

How often should you receive a massage? Once or twice per week would be ideal. Practically speaking, it depends upon your finances and your goals as an athlete. If you are an athletic person and work out three to seven times a week, a massage once or twice a month would be very beneficial, especially if you like to run races back to back. If you have never received a massage before, don't wait until just before a race for the first one. It is better to receive several sessions before an upcoming event—you will get more out of the massage afterward and your body will be able to prepare for the event and have a faster recovery rate. Consult with your sports massage therapist for optimum performance.

Usually only professional runners can justify the expense of a massage immediately after a hard workout. However, more and more races now have sports massage therapists on hand doing pre- and post-race massage. The massages are often free—even if there is a small fee, it will be money well spent.

There is one more benefit to massage—your state of mind. Like conventional massage, sports massage leaves you relaxed. Beyond that, it increases your body awareness. A person who receives massage regularly learns that allowing the body to fully relax lets the muscles perform at a higher level when they are called on. You have to feel this sensation to fully appreciate it.

If you make massage a part of your training, you can expect to see increases in flexibility, muscle tone, and restful sleep and decreases in injury, spasms and soreness, recovery time,

and race times. What are you waiting for?

REFERENCE RESOURCES

If you want to read more about this topic, here are a few resources worth looking at:

- The Healing Art of Sports Massage*, Joan Johnson, 1995
- Active Isolated Stretching*, Aaron L. Mattes, 1995
- Performance Massage*, Robert K. King, 1993
- Sports Massage*, Jack Meagher and Pat Boughton, 1980
- Sports Massage Taking the Field*, AMTA pamphlet, 1995
- Sports Without Pain*, Ben E. Benjamin, Ph.D., 1979

FINDING A SPORTS MASSAGE THERAPIST

While massage has been around for thousands of years, techniques have been developed over the last 25 years that are of specific benefit to athletes. Sports massage therapists are trained massage therapists with additional training in working with athletes.

At present, 21 states in the United States that license massage therapists. Each state regulates how many hours of training professionals must have to say they are massage therapists there. If you live in a state without licensure, call the American Massage Therapy Association (AMTA) at (708) 864-0123. To belong to the association, a therapist must graduate from an accredited program or have at least 500 hours of training.

There are many sports massage programs offered around the country, ranging from 28 to 1,000 hours of training. Ask your therapist how much training he or she has received. In looking for a Certified Sports Massage Therapist, you can call the AMTA and ask for a list in your area. All Certified Sports Massage Therapists are members of the National Sports Massage Team. To receive this certification, they must complete a massage sports course and taken the certified written and practical exams given by the AMTA.

Laurel J. Freeman, B.A., L.M.T., National Certified Sports Massage Therapist, has worked on many world-class athletes and lectures in health related fields. She is a member of the Florida Track Club and the American Massage Therapy Association. **Note:** The author grants permission to copy and share this article, as long as both the author and **FootNotes** are acknowledged.

FootNotes: Page 16, Spring 1996, circulation approx.: 24,000

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