

Acupuncture: A Natural Next Step for Sports Medicine

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A sports medicine plan would not be complete without the rich tradition of holistic methods. Techniques derived from Ayurvedic medicine, Homeopathic medicine, and Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) complement the western approach in assisting athletes in the prevention and treatment of injuries.

This article will focus more specifically on acupuncture and other techniques derived from TCM which have long been known to facilitate top athletic performance by increasing the flow of vital energy (Qi) and blood thereby maximizing vital organ function, lung capacity, immune response, and hormonal balance. All of this combined promotes strength, flexibility, cardiovascular and endurance training as well as facilitates prevention and quick healing of athletic injuries.

Historically, Chinese culture has incorporated these ancient healing techniques into the martial arts of Tai Chi Ch'uan, External Kung Fu and Wu Shu practice. Acupuncture, acupressure, and Tui Na Massage as well as certain "*hit medicines*" derived from Chinese herbal medicine have been regularly used to prevent and treat sport injuries associated with these athletic endeavors.

The combination of these ancient healing techniques along with the more western sports medicine techniques first became evident to me in 1980 while obtaining a Masters degree in Sports Medicine at San Francisco State University. The curriculum included a course about acupuncture and acupressure as a viable method to treat sports injuries. Acupressure techniques were actually used by the San Francisco State athletic trainers on a regular basis for injury prevention and treatment of their athletes in those days. I also had the opportunity in 1986 to treat my first professional athlete, a pitcher for the Philadelphia Phillies (MLB).

The combination of acupuncture along with conventional sports medicine has become more evident in recent years in the professional sports arena. Today, acupuncture has been added to the sports medicine list of techniques to keep professional athletes fit both on and off the field. Many top athletes have found acupuncture necessary for recovery and prevention of injuries. New York Knicks (NBA) shooting guard Allan Houston was one of the first to announce he was receiving acupuncture treatments. He claimed that the acupuncture not only helped promote the healing of his ankle injury but also helped him to play better which peaked public interest and curiosity about these ancient healing techniques.

Shaquille O'Neal (NBA), Mark McGwire (MLB), and Regan Upshaw (NFL) have all used acupuncture to hasten the recovery process. John "Jumbo" Elliot (NFL) received acupuncture treatments to relieve muscular tension and

soreness. He incorporated his acupuncture as part of an extensive program that kept him healthy enough to play 12 seasons of professional football. New York Jets head trainer David Prive reported that other Jets have found acupuncture treatment helpful for pain relief. Hockey player, Jaromir Jagr (NHL) received electro-acupuncture for a debilitating groin injury. After just three sessions, Jagr was pain free and able to return to hockey play. Former San Francisco 49ers (NFL) Steve Young and Jerry Rice have been treated with acupuncture and Canadian speed skater Kevin Overland claims that receiving sports acupuncture helped him to earn a bronze medal in the 1998 Olympics. All of these reports from these famous athletes certainly substantiate the fact that acupuncture has been a growing trend in athletics for quite some time.

Acupuncture works in the following ways to help an athlete back into sports action:

- ✿ *Reduces pain*
- ✿ *Promotes healing of contusions and bruising*
- ✿ *Reduces swelling and inflammation*
- ✿ *Increases range of motion*
- ✿ *Enhances flexibility*
- ✿ *Decreases muscular spasms*
- ✿ *Cuts healing time*

You don't have to be a professional athlete to benefit from sports acupuncture. It provides an exceptional method to address a variety of muscular and skeletal problems including a minor pain all the way to an extensive injury resulting from overuse. Whether it's prior to running a marathon, getting into "tip top shape" or after an everyday, normal athletic activity to help rebuild the muscle tissues, acupuncture is a good choice.

By strengthening vital energy (Qi), acupuncture provides more 'umph' during a workout. It also enlivens the spirit and strengthens will power sometimes necessary to stick to a workout schedule. It can become something to look forward to at the end of a heavy workout week. An acupuncture treatment promotes a more restful sleep which gives the body a chance to rest and replenish after a heavy workout.

Acupuncture works best when incorporated into a multi-faceted approach to maximize an athlete's healing capability and health maintenance. Used in tandem with the traditional sports medicine wisdom such as R.I.C.E. (rest, ice, compression and elevation) along with cardiovascular, strength, endurance and flexibility training provides more effective treatment options for an athlete. Other methods such as ultrasound can also be combined for maximum effectiveness.

Therapeutic massage is another essential component utilized to increase blood circulation, promote flexibility through stretching techniques, increase lymphatic flow, relieve stress, release tight and knotted muscles, and to enhance soft tissue healing during the initial acute phase of an injury.

Herbal remedies such as “*dit da jiao*” commonly known as “*bruise juice*” can be rubbed vigorously into the skin to hasten the healing of contusions by eliminating blood stagnation in the affected area. This remedy is part of an entire branch of TCM called “*hit medicine*” which includes valuable information regarding the use of herbs for the prevention and treatment of athletic injuries. Other herbal remedies available are used for their analgesic, anti-spasmodic and anti-inflammatory effects applied externally or taken internally.

A sound and well balanced nutritional plan is also essential for an athlete. Acupuncture can be used for weight management and to help reduce cravings for sugar and other unhealthy food substances. It also promotes optimal metabolism and enhances digestion.

Sports psychology is another important aspect of proper athletic conditioning because one must have a strong mind to have a strong body and vice versa. Acupuncture also promotes a positive attitude, increased energy, peaceful and calm mind as well as enhanced mental capacity. It will also help you to focus better during training as well as during a competition.

Commonly Asked Questions about Acupuncture

How does acupuncture help an athlete?

It opens up the flow of vital energy within meridians (*energy pathways*). Because vital energy is believed to be the master of blood in TCM; it can be said that as energy flow is increased, so too is blood. This combination of increased vital energy and blood flow promotes healing, increases energy reserves, and maximizes overall health. This, in turn, promotes athletic endurance, workout recovery, flexibility, strength, and cardiovascular fitness. There is also the belief that acupuncture may work as an analgesic by releasing endorphins, hormone like pain relievers, from the brain.

Is acupuncture successful at treating sports injuries?

Injuries are a “*fact of life*” in the sports world. Athletes constantly push their bodies to extremes, and oftentimes go beyond their physical limits. A combination of acupuncture, massage, proper nutrition, herbal and homeopathic remedies can be of great assistance in the healing of injuries. Combined with conventional therapies, athletes are usually able to return to active training and competition sooner than expected. Injuries ranging from a pulled hamstring, ligament strains and sprains, tendonitis, bursitis, to more serious bone fractures can benefit greatly from these therapies.

In addition, Acupuncture enhances an athlete’s ability to avoid breakdown or injury. Many of the acupuncture points are specifically indicated

for the treatment of pain or injury to the body. It can be used readily to treat conditions of the shoulder, knees, ankles, neck, calves, back, head, and hands.

What can acupuncture do for the mental aspects of athletic training?

Acupuncture enlivens the spirit and strengthens will power which is an aid in “*sticking*” to a workout schedule. It also promotes restful sleep, which is an essential component for giving the body the necessary time to replenish from sports training.

How often should a sports acupuncture treatment be received?

A series of acupuncture treatments are received once or twice a week for a total of 10 to 15 sessions. After this initial series, sessions vary according to individual need. Treatments could be received on a bimonthly or even a monthly basis or on an as needed basis depending on one’s workout schedule. However, for an acute injury it may be necessary to receive acupuncture treatments once or in extreme cases even twice a day to get back on the playing field quicker.

Receiving an acupuncture treatment is something to look forward to at the end of a workout week. It is an excellent form of “*body maintenance*.” Just as people do regular “*tune-ups*” on their cars - they must do the same for their bodies. A workout includes not only the physical training for a sport but also building and rebuilding of the body. The body, mind, and spirit are seen as functioning interdependently.

By integrating a treatment program of acupuncture, therapeutic massage, proper nutrition, herbal support, and a sensible approach to preparation and training, injuries can be minimized. Even as the athlete’s intense training and competition stresses the body further, regular treatments help keep the body in balance. By maintaining balance, the body is less susceptible to injury.

Shoshanna Katzman is author of Qigong for Staying Young: A Simple 20 Minute Workout to Cultivate Your Vital Energy, Avery/Penguin Group USA, October, 2003 along with a companion DVD and video produced by Swing Pictures, LLC. She has been a Tai Chi and Qigong practitioner since 1974 and Director of the Red Bank Acupuncture and Wellness Center (healing4u.com) since 1988. Shoshanna was the first woman President of the National Qigong Association (nqa.org) and currently serves as an Editorial Adviser for Body & Soul Magazine. She is President of the New Jersey Acupuncture Examining Board, producer of annual women wellness conferences (caringwomen.com) and co-author of Feeling Light: The Holistic Solution to Permanent Weight Loss and Wellness Avon Books, 1997.

