

# THE LOWDOWN ON RUBBOWNS

## Massage Therapy for Swimmers Works On Multiple Levels

by Michael J. Stott

**C**oaches cite core strength and feel for the water as modern keys to fast swimming. Of growing importance in this fluid dynamic is massage, a hands-on treatment first used by the Chinese more than 3,000 years ago.

Fundamentally, massage is the manipulation of soft body tissue, a diverse healing art that can function as therapy, rehabilitation, stress reduction, an adjunct to athletic training or simply an indulgence. From a competitive standpoint, massage makes muscles more receptive to performance and, more importantly, recovery.

Benny Vaughn, athletic trainer and sports massage pioneer, first recalls seeing massage used on swimmers at a conference

meet at the University of Florida in 1975. "There were two tables for 10 teams. Now every school has one or two tables, and in swimming if you don't have a massage therapist, it's like you are not up to snuff," he says.

Massage has come to Masters in a big way. Therapists abound at national and international competitions, all offering worthwhile services and hope to battle-weary swimmers. The portable tables at Short Course Nationals in Indianapolis last May were just the latest bivouac in what is becoming a sport essential.

To the uninitiated, massage seems a luxury wasted on the rich and famous, but a conversation with dedicated athletes paints a more holistic picture. Broadly, massage may be categorized as either clinical (rehab), spa (relaxation) or sport (performance enhancement) with the main differences appearing in nomenclature, perception and application.

Sport massage further subdivides into clinical, maintenance and event, notes Robyn Wilson, owner of University Sports Massage Inc. in Gainesville, Fla. Wilson has been a subcontractor to the University of Florida for 14 years, working with all Gator sports but football. Her business provides university athletes with clinical, maintenance and event massage.

What Vaughn saw on deck years ago was pre-, inter- and post-event massage. Today almost all national or world-class athletes are attended by healing hands. Four-time Olympian Dara Torres, with whom Vaughn worked at the University of Florida, made sports massage an integral part of her swimming routine. "When in college and training for Sydney, I got massage and it helped my muscles recover quicker than anything I did. I got lactic acid out of my system so my next workout or race would be the best possible," she says.

Most therapists agree that massage is not designed to replace current pre- or post-event practices, but is more an enhancement of existing training. Davis Aquatic Master Kari Wilkinson first experienced massage at the PMS Short Course Championships in Santa Cruz, Calif., in April 2003. After swimming the 1000, tight lats and an impending 50 fly led her to plunk down \$10 for a 15-minute "sports stretch massage" from a licensed massage therapist. "She manipulated my

shoulders, back, hips and legs and really stretched them out," says Wilkinson. "Not only did I feel better and more relaxed, but when I swam the fly I felt like she'd added two inches to my arms, and my shoulders felt pliable as rubber bands."

"When I'm training a lot I get

**Mike Stott, a contributing writer for SWIMMER, is a member of Virginia Masters in Richmond. He also coaches the boys and girls swim teams at The Collegiate School, where the girls' team has a dual meet record of 116 and 2.**

### BENEFITS OF SPORTS MASSAGE

A regular therapy program can serve to

- Improve circulation
- Enhance recovery
- Decrease delayed muscle soreness
- Promote flexibility and range of motion
- Facilitate muscular relaxation
- Reduce adhesions, swelling and pain
- Facilitate functional scar tissue development and muscle restoration integrity
- Reduce the likelihood of overuse injuries
- Warm or loosen muscle and connective tissue
- Improve mental focus

>>> Source: University Sports Massage Inc., Gainesville, Fla.



BrandXPictures/Maitton Images

very tight in the lats, shoulders and both upper and lower back,” she says. “I can take long baths and showers but nothing beats a great massage. Depending on the type, you can get stretched in ways that you can’t do alone. Back, hips, and legs (for me) are the key muscle groups.”

Masters swimmers tend to be a focused and opinionated lot—and effusive in their praise of massage. Longhorn Aquatics Master Kim Tarnower started receiving regular massage as a triathlete 20 years ago and remains addicted to this day, especially in recovery from hard workouts, competitions and the cumulative effects of training. “One massage will undo damage that no amount of stretching or time off can repair,” she says.

Trip Hedrick has spent a life-

## HOW TO FIND A MASSAGE THERAPIST

- Referral from other Masters swimmers or a sports-minded physician
- Online Internet search in your local area
- Yellow Pages listings under massage

Look for someone with good training, an understanding of your sport and accreditation. The American Massage Therapy Association represents more than 51,000 massage therapists in 27 countries and promotes ethics, standards, certification, school accreditation and continuing education. AMTA members must meet all local or state licensing requirements.

time in aquatics and witnessed the benefits of massage both as a coach and swimmer. For 12 years Hedrick was the head swim coach at Iowa State and currently is the 50-54 SC and LC national champion in the 50 and 100 butterfly and freestyle as well as world record holder

in the 50 and 100 fly.

Hedrick has used massage throughout his swimming days for recovery—and since his 2000 heart attack—as a stress reliever. “Massage therapy can also be a beneficial diagnostic tool for swimmers since a good MT can readily notice muscular imbal-

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ances that can impede swimmers or lead to potential injury. I view it as both serving rehab and pre-hab for injury treatment and prevention,” he says. “I think utilizing massage on a regular basis is ideal, but especially important during intense training cycles and at big competitions for faster recovery and increased flexibility.”

Snake River LMSC swimmer Kyra Martin cites numerous benefits, the foremost being pain management, especially soft tissue discomfort. An intense trainer, she dislocated a shoulder and

now uses massage frequently to keep muscles limber and shoulders pain free. “Massage helps enormously...really getting into deep muscle. There is nothing like going into a massage and feeling like a tight ball of rubber bands and coming out feeling like Jell-O,” she notes. Not only does it relax her physically, but spiritually, as well, she says.

Finding Dr. Feelgood is a trial-and-error process. The Internet and Yellow Pages are fine, but more likely a better source is a referral from a swimming friend. Massage

patients agree that finding a simpatico partner is a must. Tarnower’s MT is also the official therapist for the University of Texas women’s basketball team and does a lot of work with swimmers.

“I think it is essential to find an MT whom you like and are comfortable with, because it is actually a very intimate relationship. You are entrusting your soft tissues and money to this person. You want to get a good result without feeling like they have done some kind of damage or that you have wasted your money,” she says.

It’s a given that therapists vary with technique. Hedrick tried three before teaming up with Amanda Smith, a licensed massage therapist in Ames, Iowa. “It’s important to try a lot of MTs until you find one that works for you. She’s a very active athlete and we connected,” he says. Part of that connection involves feedback during massage, which advances the healing process immeasurably. Being a self-advocate is critically important, observes Hedrick, especially when the price of pain (or not) is \$50 to \$60 per hour.

Serious athletes like Hedrick have complex and unique needs, which is why Vaughn advises those in the market to look for handlers with good training (preferably licensed for knowledge and safety reasons) and an understanding of the sport for which they are seeking help. Wilson suggests seeking an individual practitioner or a clinic with a sports or medical massage orientation because it facilitates address-

ing specific needs, such as orthopedic or joint injuries.

Frequency of massage comes down to physical needs, training level, competitive schedules and budget. Shannon Welch, a Masters swimmer with O\*H\*I\*O and a massage therapist, swims four days a week and competes once a month. He receives massage for relaxation and asks for deep tissue or neuromuscular massages if he has specific hip or calf problems. Welch has worked the last two YMCA and USMS national championships with other therapists serving up pre- and post-event treatment.

Those with heavy training schedules also use massage therapy for maintenance. Wilson sees Gator swimmers on a weekly basis for massage maintenance, which also allows her to address injury or discomfort on a sub-clinical level.

For Masters swimmers such necessary pampering comes with a cost. Prices vary by region, setting and type of massage. Tables at Nationals typically run \$1 a minute or 15 minutes for \$10, with shorter duration sport stretch massages generally costing less than full-body makeovers.

Spa setting costs invariably run higher than rehabilitation clinics or chiropractic offices where more MTs are beginning to establish residency. Although Martin pays but \$40/hour at the spa she attends in Pocatello, Idaho, Wilkinson notes that prices in the Davis, Calif., area can run anywhere from \$65 to \$100 an hour. In Iowa, Hedrick reports that \$50 to \$60 is more the going rate. Regardless of

## THE RIGHT MASSAGE FOR YOU

- Clinical massage is cost-effective and is used for rehabilitation of physical and musculo-skeletal injury.
- Spa (or relaxation massage) is more broad-based and non-specific, frequently used to relieve stress and associated complications.
- Sports massage is designed to enhance athletic performance by addressing both physiological and psychological concerns such as soft tissue injury, dysfunctional muscle, restrictive range of motion, pain, fatigue and high anxiety.

Within sports massage, there are several subcategories:

- **Clinical Sports Massage** is intended for the rehabilitation of physical injury, dysfunction and/or pain generally caused by overtraining, changing training behaviors and equipment, or sudden traumatic damage.

Clinical massage aims to:

- identify the problem
- facilitate healing
- address dysfunction
- return the athlete to optimal performance
- consider the activity biomechanics and recommend approaches to prevent injury recurrence

- **Maintenance Sports Massage** is given as part of a regular training regimen, it aids recovery training by broadening, elongating and flushing sport-specific muscles and muscle groups.

- **Event Sports Massage** is a short-duration massage to help the athlete physically and mentally throughout a competitive event.

## EVENT MESSAGE

- **Pre-event sports massage** warms (increases circulation), stretches muscles and soft tissues, mobilizes joints and stimulates the nervous system.
- **Inter-event sports massage** helps athletes recover from one event while preparing for the next.
- **Post-event sports massage** is designed to drain metabolic waste, increase circulation, stretch soft tissues and relax tight, sore muscles.

## OTHER RESOURCES

### The American Massage Therapy Association

>>> Visit [www.amtamassage.org](http://www.amtamassage.org). Click on the “AMTA Find a Massage Therapist” locator on the web site, or call 888-THE AMTA.

### University Sports Massage Inc.

>>> [www.universitiesportsmassage.com](http://www.universitiesportsmassage.com)

### Understanding Sports Massage

>>> Patricia J. Benjamin, Scott P. Lamp, Human Kinetics Publishers, 1996.

### Jack Barnathan, D.C.

>>> [www.nystrength.com](http://www.nystrength.com)

price and frequency of therapy, a relationship with an MT is an emotional, physical and financial investment.

There are alternatives, but none quite as satisfying as the hands-on approach. Self-help tools such as the loungers and massagers at Sharper Image and Brookstone, while enticing, tend to be pricey and too non-specific for true athletes. A number of hand-held devices can be useful. Hedrick likes foam rollers, which also can be a terrific training aid to improve body balance, he notes.

Self-massage is another option though most agree that approach is a poor substitute because access to the body is relatively restricted. "I've tried to rub my own shoulders," says Martin "and it's not the same. It doesn't get into the deeply knotted tissue."

In addition to massage, Wilkinson takes long baths and does a lot of stretching of her lats, core and lower back to

complement her 4-6x, 3500-6000 yard workouts. "Beyond massage I think people really need to stretch," she says. "But my advice is to scrape your pennies together and get a good massage once a month. Treat yourself, especially if you have a lot of events."

Not everyone believes that 24/7 massage is the ultimate answer. Jack Barnathan, D.C., renowned sports medicine chiropractor, has spent 20 years working with "every sport there is." His clients have included Torres and Arnold Schwarzenegger.

"Massage is great, but I have a caveat, he says, "especially regarding pre-race. I'm really wary about athletes being over-stretched through deep muscle work. Massage is magnificent for recovery. There is a gigantic role it plays that is underestimated by both athletes and sports health scientists and trainers," he says.

"We'll see more of massage in the days ahead," promises Vaughn. <<<

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