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By Dr. NATASCHA WESCH

ZEN TIME

– Meditation for Athletes

(In talking with Christian Redmann this past spring, we learned that he meditates for some 45 minutes each morning and then again in the evening. That prompted us to ask a Dr. Wesch for her take on meditation.)

When most people think of athletes, words like tough, strong and zoned-in come to mind. At the same time, most would say that the words 'athlete' and 'meditation' don't belong in the same sentence. However, athletes who practice meditation can expect to see noticeable improvements in their performance.

The word meditation even throws off athletes. Meditation is simply this: taking the time to practice clearing your mind and focusing on the way you want to perform. It can have various focus points, just like any other type of practice or training.

For example, your meditation practice can focus on:

- Relaxation
- Clearing your mind of distractions
- Performing your sport with intensity
- Technical skill development
- Developing concentration

I suggest you add meditation practice to your regular workout or training routine. You can do it anywhere - you don't have to sit with your legs crossed and your wrists gently placed on your knees, holding your

thumb and middle finger together!

Simply find a place where you will not be easily disturbed, where you can sit or lie (e.g., your room, a park, even the library!). It doesn't have to take a long time. Begin with a few minutes (say 3-5 minutes every other day), then increase the time and frequency to suit your routine.

Meditation: The how-to

Clear your mind. Sit or lie comfortably. Close your eyes and focus on breathing gently, in through your nose and gently out through your mouth. Relax your muscles, starting with your hands and working your way up to your head. Then, shift your focus to your feet and work your way up to your shoulders. With each breath in you draw in positive energy and with each exhalation you release any tension or tightness in the muscles.

Meditation focus. Once you've cleared your mind, the next step is to focus on a specific thought. For example, let's say you want to improve your digs. Begin by thinking of the key features of a good dig.

Then, see and feel yourself performing them.

Or, let's say you simply want to release tension and stress when things get a little hectic in training or in competition. Focus on your breath, as above, then imagine yourself in a relaxed environment. I call it my 'happy place.' For me, it's a beach bathed in sunshine, with a nice breeze blowing and waters calmly lapping the shore.

Meditation is a form of visualization and relaxation all wrapped into one. It can be a very powerful tool, but there's no one-size-fits-all approach. You have to find what works best for you. Try it out, try different focus points, and try different locations.

When you are relaxed, energy flows more smoothly through the nervous system, which contributes to improved performance. Isn't that what every athlete wants?

Go on, be Zen-like!

(Natascha is a Mental Performance Consultant reachable at www.elitemindperformance.com)