

The zen athlete

Submitted by Dr. Natascha Wesch, PhD

When most people think of athletes, words like 'tough', 'strong' and 'zoned-in' come to mind. Many people, though, would say 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. Meditation simply means this: taking the time to practice clearing your mind and focusing on the way you want to perform. It can have various focus points, including: Relaxation; Clearing your mind of distractions; Performing your sport with intensity; Technical skill development; or developing concentration.

The start of any new season brings the challenges of juggling school, work, sport, and everything in between that comes with



being an athlete. But an athlete who is able to relax and focus his/her energy in the right place at the right time will be more successful.

I suggest that you include meditation practice to your regular workout or training routine. You can do it anywhere - 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), and then increase the time and frequency to suit your routine.

Meditation 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, draw in positive energy. With each exhalation, release any tension or tightness in the muscles.



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Meditation focus

Once you've cleared your mind, the next step is to focus on a specific thought. For example, as a swimmer, let's say you want to improve your pacing. Begin by thinking of the key features of good pacing. Then, see and feel yourself performing them. Alternatively, 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, and then imagine yourself in a relaxed environment.

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. And isn't that what every athlete wants?

Go on, be zen-like!

Dr. Natascha Wesch is a mental performance consultant who works with athletes, coaches, and teams of all sport backgrounds. To learn more and to contact her, visit her website www.elitemindperformance.com