Thirty years ago when I set out in my career as an athletic trainer, there was no such concept of athletic recovery (or at least I wasn’t aware of its existence). Three-a-day football practices for 2 to 3 weeks straight in the preseason were the norm, basketball coaches running “suicide drills” the day before a game until players succumbed to fatigue was commonplace, and track coaches pushing the athletes to their limits days before big meets was to be expected. This was the mindset of coaches in those days, and student athletes who performed knew no better!

Times have changed. In their latest collective bargaining agreement (CBA), the National Basketball Association (better known as the NBA—or if you’re an ESPN fanatic, “The Association”) agreed to end “back-to-back” games in an attempt to allow players more rest. The current trend is for some teams to rest star players when these back-to-back games occur in their schedule, despite backlash from the paying fans who dole out their hard-earned cash to see the stars play.

Basketball isn’t the only sport where players are using their union contract agreements to leverage for more rest and recovery time. Prominent Seattle Seahawks defensive back Richard Sherman was quoted as saying that Thursday night NFL contests are an “absolute poopfest,” referring to the fact that after playing in a Sunday afternoon contest the week before, the players’ already fatigued and beaten bodies have to try and recover in just a few short days to do it all over again on Thursday night. Perhaps this will become a bargaining issue when the two sides meet again to discuss the NFL contract in 2020. In fact, the current CBA already has provisions that limit practice time and full-contact practices, and provide more days off for players. In addition, off-season conditioning programs have been reduced.

The amateur athlete scene has also joined the discussions, as a cadre of NCAA Division I men’s soccer coaches have banded together and proposed a bold measure that would lengthen the traditional fall soccer season into one that spans the entire academic year. Although the obvious monetary and logistical consequences of such a move render it “dead on arrival,” the primary impetus behind the move is player safety and recovery and would eliminate mid-week soccer matches. Traditional soccer match schedules entrenched in most European country soccer leagues have only weekend match schedules. Intuitively, this all makes sense—and as a
certified athletic trainer, why not get behind something that may prevent injuries and improve player safety? Dictionary.com defines recovery as a restoration or return to health from sickness. The topic of athlete recovery has taken center stage during the past 5 to 10 years. It is amazing how much this new generation of coaches, strength and conditioning professionals, and sports health care clinicians have embraced the concept that is so simple it makes you stop and think: “Why haven’t we been doing this from the beginning?” Traditional concepts and ways of doing things are always hard to break from, but I’m happy to see this shift in mindset all for the benefit of player safety!

To my surprise, there is not a great deal of literature or evidence available on the topic of athlete recovery. In my research for this editorial, I came across an excellent review article by Bishop et al.,¹ who write that “recovery from training is one of the most important aspects of improving athletic performance.” They are quick to point out the lack of efficacy studies to support the concept of athlete recovery and the need for additional research on the topic. It appears that recovery strategies geared toward individual athletes may be of greater benefit than those developed to encompass an entire team or program. Bishop et al. defined recovery as the ability to meet or exceed performance in a particular activity.¹ This dispels the long-held notion and belief that increased training was the ultimate prescription for improved performance. The bottom line is that if recovery rates can be improved, greater training volumes can be accomplished and performance output soars.

The American College of Sports Medicine has also published a special communication on the topic titled The Team Physician and Strength and Conditioning of Athletes for Sports: a Consensus Statement² that is worth the read. This document provides a basic overview of many modern day strength and conditioning principles, including a section on “Active Rest and Recovery.” I encourage our readers to look carefully at this document for greater insight and information to aid their own clinical practice. Many more questions than answers about athlete recovery remain. However, it is a topic that will pervade sports health care conversations for many years to come.

Our free-market society has enabled entrepreneurs to take advantage of the “athlete recovery” phenomenon and market products meant to improve, enhance, and support athlete recovery. As clinicians, it is important that due diligence is undertaken to separate the good from the bad and the effective from the ineffective products and practices. One such commercial that caught my attention on the television screen was an ad for “The Recovery Sock” (http://www.recoverysock.com/the-recovery-sock.html), which is a sock purported to aid in recovery (such as long-distance) after workouts. I’m a natural skeptic, so I was curious whether the website claims of “tested and proven by World Class athletes” was accurate. My perusal of the evidence-based literature finds conflicting evidence as to whether the claims of circulatory efficacy and improved recovery are indeed true.³⁴

Additional commercial products currently available as tools to assist the rate and quality of recovery include a line of equipment referred to as sequential intermittent pneumatic compression devices. Perhaps best known is the Normatec (https://www.normatecrecovery.com/how-compression-works/how-and-science/). So what does the science say about such devices? They most likely do not slow the recovery process or significantly enhance recovery after strength training or with endurance athletes, but they do feel good (http://news.meyerpt.com/physical-therapists/no-pain-more-gain-exploring-active-recovery/).

A product that I’m most intrigued by is one that primarily serves to benefit the diabetic community but has some promise with regard to the athlete recovery market, and that is The Footbeat (http://footbeat.com/). This is an innovative device that works to enhance the body’s own circulation system through cyclic pressure impulses at the bottom of the feet. This concept is especially important to individuals who are bedridden or forced off their feet by injury or illness, such as diabetic patients. Conceptually, the device takes the place of the normal circulatory process that is performed with every step during walking. From an athlete recovery standpoint, enhancing circulation while athletes are off their feet immediately following competition/activity may prove hugely beneficial. Stay tuned, because the product is set to launch in early 2017!

I’m convinced that the concept of athlete recovery is here to stay. It makes sense that preventing injuries that result from overtraining is an important first step in improving player safety, from both a physiological and mental health
standpoint. The recovered and rested athlete should prove to be the better performer. As clinicians, we also need to be vigilant in wading through the litany of commercial products and claims that our athletes/patients will undoubtedly discover and be certain that we do the necessary background and safety checks into their ability to deliver as advertised. The fuss is warranted, we just need to be able to deliver what’s best for our constituents.

REFERENCES


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