

Rolling for recovery

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The best kept secret to maximising your performance is simple: “Recover better” according to tennis performance trainer Allistair McCaw. In this article Alistair explains his views on the potential benefits of using a simple piece of foam to optimise recovery and recommends eight specific foam-rolling exercises for players of all standards.

How fast your body recovers from the previous match or training session can ultimately determine your next performance, because if your body has not been able to repair and regenerate sufficiently, you simply will not perform to your maximum potential.

I am a firm believer in the saying “Your next performance is only as good as your recovery from the last”. With this in mind, recovery and regeneration are treated with as much importance in the programmes I set for my athletes as movement, nutrition and mindset.

Recovery is probably one of the most overlooked aspects in an athletes’ program

Tennis is a physically demanding sport. Players can experience muscle restriction (feeling stiff), which can alter joint motion and lead to poor movement patterns, a faster rate of fatigue and injury.

As a sports performance trainer working in tennis, I have discovered that the primary focus of many coaches and players is on training and competing, whilst recovery is often forgotten or given less attention. I often see athletes who put time and tremendous effort into their workouts, only to quickly rush through their cool down and stretching routines. They are missing one of the most important aspects of their pre-habilitation (preparing the body against injury) post performance body maintenance.

Having a programme that incorporates good post training/match recovery techniques is critical for a player’s overall development and performance. It enables the player to perform the next time with less fatigue and in doing so, adapt to workloads faster.

The better your recovery the faster your progress will be

The most common techniques used by players today are sports massage, aquatic therapy (pool running, movement exercises etc.), yoga and stretching. These all definitely contribute to the healing process, but the problem is the time that lapses between the end of the training session and when the massage, aquatic therapy or yoga happens. So what would be the best way to bridge this important gap between training and taking care of the recovery? One suggestion is to have your athletes rolling on a foam roller the minute they finish their workout.

Why foam rolling?

Hard exercise may lead to increased tension of our muscles and joints. Self-massage exercises (self-myofascial release) on this simple piece of foam can immediately reduce soft-tissue tension and speed up the recovery process. Using a foam roller can also provide similar benefits as a deep-tissue massage. By increasing flexibility and decreasing muscle tension, it can help to prevent injury, decrease muscle pain and improve function and performance. Your muscle resembles a rubber band and the further you stretch it, the further it will launch when you let it go. If you can increase the elasticity in the muscle by improving your flexibility, the result will be increased power and improved performance.

I believe that the foam roller is one of the most effective, all-around self-maintenance tools you will find, as it not only releases chronic muscular tension and pain (caused by playing or performing movement), but can actually restructure your skeletal system so that it aligns more positively with gravity. It is simple to use as you use your own body weight to roll on the round foam roll, massaging away restrictions to normal soft-tissue extensibility. Foam rolling is like getting a massage without the expense of a massage therapist. In fact it's like having your own physical therapist, chiropractor, and masseuse at your beck and call. However, I definitely do not condone the services these practitioners offer as a good massage is always recommended.

There are many potential benefits of foam rolling - it

- can prevent joint stiffness and possibly reduce injury risk
- increases flexibility and joint function
- speeds up the recovery process
- is portable, light (weighs less than 500grams) and easy to travel with
- limits the costs of a regular massage

Your turn!

I have put eight exercises together specifically for tennis players. These exercises cover all the major muscle groups involved in the game. Make these exercises part of your regular cool-down routine.

Perform them directly after your training session or match (after a cool-down jog or spin on bike, but before stretching) to maximize their recovery time!

Place your body on the roller and slowly roll up and down (for about 30-45 seconds) along the muscle group you are targeting. I have a basic rule: If it hurts, it needs more attention. So if you find a particularly tight area, pause on that spot. Putting pressure on a tight area can help release the tissue.

Exercise 1. Iliotibial band

Position yourself side lying on foam roll. Bottom leg is raised slightly off floor. Maintain head in 'neutral', with ears aligned with shoulders. Roll just below hip joint down the lateral thigh to the knee.

Exercise 2. Gluteal muscles

Begin in position as shown with foot crossed to opposite knee. Roll on the posterior hip area. Increase the stretch by pulling the knee toward the opposite shoulder.

Exercise 3. Hamstrings

Place hamstring on the roll with hips unsupported. Opposite leg is bent to support this position. Roll from knee towards posterior hip while keeping quadriceps tightened.

Exercise 4. Quadriceps

Body is positioned prone with quadriceps on foam roll. It is very important to maintain proper core control (abdominal drawn-in position and tight gluteal muscles) to prevent low back compensations. Roll from pelvic bone to knee, emphasizing the lateral thigh.

Exercise 5. Calves

Place calf on the roll with hips supported. Have other knee bent to support a balanced position. Roll from below knee to Achilles tendon.

Exercise 6. Adductors

Extend the thigh and place foam roll in the groin region with body prone on the floor. Be cautious when rolling near the adductor complex origins at the pelvis.

Exercise 7. Latissimus dorsi

Position yourself side lying with arm outstretched and foam roll placed in axillary area. Thumb is pointed up to pre-stretch the latissimus dorsi muscle. Movement during this technique is minimal.

Exercise 8. Upper back.

Cross arms to the opposite shoulder to clear the shoulder blades across the thoracic wall. While maintaining abdominal drawn-in position, raise hips until unsupported. Also stabilize the head in 'neutral'. Roll mid-back area on the foam.

Summary

Whatever your level, foam rolling should be an integral part of your daily routine. It will aid injury prevention and recovery, and is one of the easiest and cheapest ways to improve recovery, alleviate aches and pains and improve flexibility. Use the roller directly after your workout prior to your cool-down stretch and remember that areas that hurt need more attention. A quicker recovery translates to a better performance the next time you play!