5 Ways Meditation Helps Athletes Perform Better

You've mastered the body, now it's time to master the mind
While you may have the toughest, fastest, or the strongest body, if your mind isn’t in control, you will make mistakes. When you’re an athlete the difference between winning and losing is minute. Even a little slip of the mind can keep you from winning.

Therefore, mental strength plays an equally important role in the making of an athlete. It helps them to cope with a tough training schedule, stay focused during races or games and avoid being ruffled by competition.

As an athlete, those around you have probably worked as hard or harder than you to get where they are. They’ve honed their skills over thousands of hours of practice. Few, however, have taken the time to face the real demons which reside inside them.

These demons are fears, doubts, anger, stress, setbacks, hardships, etc. Navigating through these challenges is what gives an athlete his edge.
When I used to play for my high school basketball team, I’d had this tremendous fear of going against taller players. This led me to work extensively on my jump shots and never improve my lay-ups because I was too scared of being blocked. Another emotion I had to tackle was anger towards the competing team that often led to mistakes and poor performance.

It’s things like this we need to control that spur up regardless of how much physical training one goes through.

Countless top performers in various sports have used one tool to solve all these problems — **meditation**. LeBron James, Kobe Bryant, Derek Jeter, The Seattle Seahawks, Michael Jordan are just a few of the names that come to mind.

Here are 5 reasons why meditation helps athletes perform better.

**Stress Reduction and Resilience**

Exercise is a form of stress. It requires our bodies to respond and adapt. The greater the intensity of the exercise relative to our current fitness, the greater the level of stress it generates.

Much of this strain is physical, but some of it also involves the mind, says Amishi Jha, an associate professor of psychology at the University of Miami in Florida, who led a study on the effects of meditation on athletes.

Prolonged, strenuous training “requires attention,” she says, and a stern focus on continuing to exercise when it might be more pleasant to stop. This process can drain **mental resources** just as physical labor tires the body.

To find out if meditation will help in this regard, she turned to Division I football players. Dr. Jha and her colleagues asked each player to complete a computerized test of his ability to focus and rapidly respond to various combinations of numbers flashing on the screen. The players also filled out questionnaires about their current mood and sense of well-being.
Then the athletes were divided into two groups of 50 each. One began a program of supervised relaxation training, during which they listened to calming music and learned to systematically relax their muscles. The other group was taught mindfulness meditation, which involves paying close attention to breathing and to the present moment.

At the end of four weeks of the intense preseason, the players repeated the original tests of their attention and happiness.

The results showed that those in the meditation group showed considerable mental resilience with higher scores than the other athletes. Mindfulness meditation was also far more effective than simple relaxation exercises.

By meditating regularly, your body learns how to relax at will even during stressful situations. This clears the mind and allows it to focus on the game instead of being distracted by the stress you’re facing.

**Improved Sleep and Recovery**

Recovering from the strenuous routine that athletes go through is crucial to build strength and improve their game. A study published in the Journal of Sleep showed that athletes who didn't get enough sleep faced negative consequences like weight gain, moods, anxiety, and depression, decreased motor control, and lower levels of concentration.

**Relaxation is both a prerequisite and a benefit of meditation.** As we sit to meditate, we relax our bodies to be able to focus our minds on the present moment. As we continue practicing meditation, our breath slows down, our heartbeat lowers, and the internal organs also come to a rest. This trains our minds and bodies to relax at will.

Since most people can’t stop their minds from running wild, they’re not able to relax deeply. Relaxation, then, is an all-important skill that meditation helps you cultivate.

As you learn to relax better, you can be calm in the face of stressful situations and get better sleep as well.
Moreover, meditation also helps improve the immune system so you don’t catch colds or get sick. This again helps you focus on the game and not worry about your health.

Researchers from the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Health found that those who practice meditation experience fewer acute respiratory infections, as well as a shortened duration and severity of symptoms from the common cold.

**Increased Awareness of the Body and the Self**

A study in the Journal of Health Psychology recently found that athletes who practice mindful meditation techniques are far more motivated to exercise regularly and more satisfied with their workouts.

The more you meditate, the more you build an unprecedented connection with your body. You become aware of each muscle as you train it and sense injuries even before they arise. As you get to know your body better, you can work with it to ensure optimum performance.

Meditation also helps you to discover your identity, increase self-confidence, and have healthy coping mechanisms. All this makes it easy to handle setbacks and failures which are part and parcel of the life of an athlete.

**Ability to Focus Better**

Athletes need to focus on the goal and be able to fight distractions to develop their physical capabilities. Those who succeed at this are far more likely to follow the training plan, stay consistent, and get better results.

Those who lack self-control are likely to:

- Think about something else during sessions
- Spend more time talking (or using social media) than training
• Do something that interferes with the quality of training (poor sleep quality, unhealthy diet, staying out late, and partying)

• Skip sessions altogether

This is why we see many kids starting to leave sports during their teen years. Distractions take them away and they lose their consistency and discipline.

Meditation helps to strengthen this self-control which allows one to remain true to his life and mission. Over time, the brain gets better at recognizing distractions and quietening them. The more you practice, the easier it becomes to stay mindfully present and focus on the task at hand.

**Entering The Flow State**

In positive psychology, a flow state, also known colloquially as “being in the zone”, is the mental state in which a person performing some activity is fully immersed in a feeling of energized focus, full involvement, and enjoyment in the process of the activity.

This flow state is not achieved by someone who’s easily distracted. Hundreds of things are fighting for our attention when we play — weather conditions, equipment malfunction, other competitors, referees’ decisions, bad-mouthing, etc.

It takes consistent mental training to be able to focus only on your game and avoid all these distractions that are not in your control.

But once you learn to do that, you enter the state of flow. This is a highly pleasurable and focused state of mind where all you think of is your goal and nothing else. It’s as if you enter into your own world where you’re already the winner.

In this state, there are no doubts, fears, or anxieties in your mind. You simply give your best and let everything else take care of itself.

All this becomes much easier with meditation, which alone can give you the mental ability to focus intensely.
Final Thoughts

Meditation is becoming increasingly popular amongst athletes simply because it’s one of the few tools that can help unleash the true potential of your mind and body.

Here are the few apparent benefits that it gives (real benefits are much deeper and subtler; let’s save them for another conversation):

- Reduces stress and increases resilience
- Improves sleep and recovery
- Increases awareness of the body and Self
- Gives the ability to focus better
- Helps enter the flow state quicker and easily

Meditation gives athletes an edge that almost no other practice provides. And when it comes to excelling at your sport, every little edge counts.

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