

ONE HOT DAY IN 1972, MY FAMILY SAT SPELLBOUND AROUND OUR MAGNAVOX television. Wide-eyed on that cool linoleum floor, we watched Olga Korbut, the spritely Belarusian gymnast, strike a poised position to begin her floor exercise routine. It was the Summer Olympics and this ambassador of goodwill with the remarkable athletic ability was smiling broadly and captivating the crowd. The music began, and I stared enraptured at her muscled physique as she ran fast, then flipped, twirled, and danced, performing seemingly impossible feats before ending triumphantly. At that moment, I remember the distinct thought: *I want to be in the Olympics!*

I want to be in the

Homeopathy gives elite athletes an extra edge

by AMY ROTHENBERG, ND, DHANP



Of course, only a select handful of athletes make it to that elite level. The rest of us, at best, enjoy the friendly competition of a pick-up game of basketball or a swim in the lake, or perhaps we drag ourselves to the gym to get on the treadmill. Although I never realized my childhood vision of becoming an Olympian, little did I know that 36 years later, I would be privileged to work with some high-level athletes who devote most of their waking hours to perfecting their sport. I find it gratifying to use my homeopathy and natural medicine know-how to help these athletes recover from workouts and injuries more quickly, eat optimally, and avoid or get over acute illnesses more effectively. I also enjoy offer-

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e Olympics!

ing support with regard to the mental part of their pursuit, as they strive to reach personal and professional goals.

Young athletes

Interestingly enough, many of these athletes are children. In my own family with three teenaged athletes competing at high levels, I've watched them work hard to make breakthroughs and rise to positions of leadership on teams. I've seen them compete with athletes from other backgrounds and cultures, watched differences melt away when the common goals are spelled out, and seen deep friendships forged. I've noticed sports analogies creep into college essays and the lessons taken from athletic pursuits trickle into academic, emotional, and spiritual realms. Certainly the positive effects that athletics have on young people are many.

But some young athletes over train, burn out, and set themselves up for life-long problems with their physical health. They may sustain injuries from lack of appropriate protective gear or from being put in harm's way by overzealous coaches. I have seen kids destroyed by the competition or by being cut from a team. I've seen harsh coaching affect self-esteem and parents push kids to the point of exhaustion. Unfortunately, eating disorders also seem to go hand in hand with certain sports

(e.g., wrestling, gymnastics, cross country running), and some teachers, trainers, and coaches reinforce unhealthy body images.

Kids at all levels of athletic participation can feel the pressure. Many have been robbed of the fun and spontaneity of outdoor play, pickup games, and finding their own way in sports, as adults have stepped in to organize almost every waking hour of children's lives.

The cream of the crop

Yet through it all, certain individuals emerge into the world of the elite athlete by a confluence of events: physical ability, access to training and coaching, a particular determination, at least a modicum of luck, and the ability to either sidestep injury or heal completely. In working with these athletes, I have typically found them to be incredibly dedicated to their efforts, single-minded in pursuit of improving their performance, and able to clearly and directly tell me what they need help with. Some come to see me for physical problems, while others ask for help with their mental game or the emotional roller coaster of competing at very high levels. Here are a few of their stories.

Clay pigeon sharpshooter

An Olympic markswoman in her 30s made an appointment to see me for help

with severe migraine headaches. Olivia had come to the sport in her twenties and had quickly risen to the top of her field. But the headaches, which began a few years into her training, were driving her mad. She would lose days at a time to the pain, the nausea, and her utter need to go to bed in a darkened room.

Married without children, this sharpshooter was now devoting her entire life to the sport. Her steady arm and sharp eye suited the endeavor. With a high premium on precision, Olivia would commonly hit 99 out of 100 clay shots. And that one she missed would kill her! She was a perfectionist in many aspects of her life but most especially with regard to her training and equipment care. She would not miss a day of shooting and would let nothing interfere with her concentration. She kept her equipment in tip-top shape, and only she herself could prepare her tools of the trade. Her appearance, too, was very tidy—nothing extra or decorative, but rather plain and clean. Her husband, also a marksman, was her only coach, and theirs was an insular and quiet world—except for the sound of the rifles! She did wear protective devices for her ears and had had advice about her posture and shooting stance. It was certainly possible that the impact of the recoil coupled with the ear-shattering noise had put her at risk for headaches, but her avocation was not something she would entertain giving up.

Olivia's conscientiousness, her reserved nature, her photophobia that was exacerbated during the headaches, as well as chronic cold sores in and around her mouth all pointed to the remedy *Natrum muriaticum*. Over the course of a year of treatment with this remedy, Olivia's migraines disappeared. Without the distraction of headaches, she has continued to excel in her field. She has since sent me a number of her colleagues for help with various health issues. I have even been invited to try my hand at shooting, but to date have not accepted the offer!

Gymnast on the edge

Lydia, a nationally ranked gymnast, came to see me for help with frequent bouts of vertigo. Clearly that sport, really any sport, would not allow for someone to be dizzy!



But some young athletes over train, burn out, and set themselves up for lifelong problems with their physical health.

This headstrong and determined 16-year-old had already seen many specialists and undergone numerous treatments using conventional medicines and various postural procedures, but to no avail. Each month before her menstrual period, she could count on losing a few days to the vertigo, and she had begun to dread her monthly cycle. The vertigo was wreaking

gymnasts, dancers, wrestlers, and jockeys, she was strongly encouraged to keep an eye on her weight. That, combined with two working parents, late nights at the gym, and sheer fatigue, often meant that her diet suffered.

Lydia had experienced chronic earaches since she was a child and was accustomed to being on antibiotics several

havoc on her competition schedule, and her parents, desperate for help, brought Lydia to see me.

I went about taking Lydia's case, as I do all cases, eventually coming to a broad sweeping review of bodily systems. As it turned out, Lydia also struggled with constipation, probably due to her poor and insufficient diet. Like many

times a year. Sometimes the ear infection was discovered by her pediatrician without Lydia having notable symptoms; other times she would have tremendous pain and high fevers. The earaches could be on either side, without discharge. It may be that these chronic earaches had predisposed her to vertigo, but the ear specialist she visited did not think so.

Lydia was a thoughtful, quiet, almost shy girl, who enjoyed her gymnastics team and the other girls in her gym community. She was not as good as some of her teammates, but she kept at it with a kind of dogged determination. It might take her longer to learn certain elements of a routine, but once she had them, she would never forget.

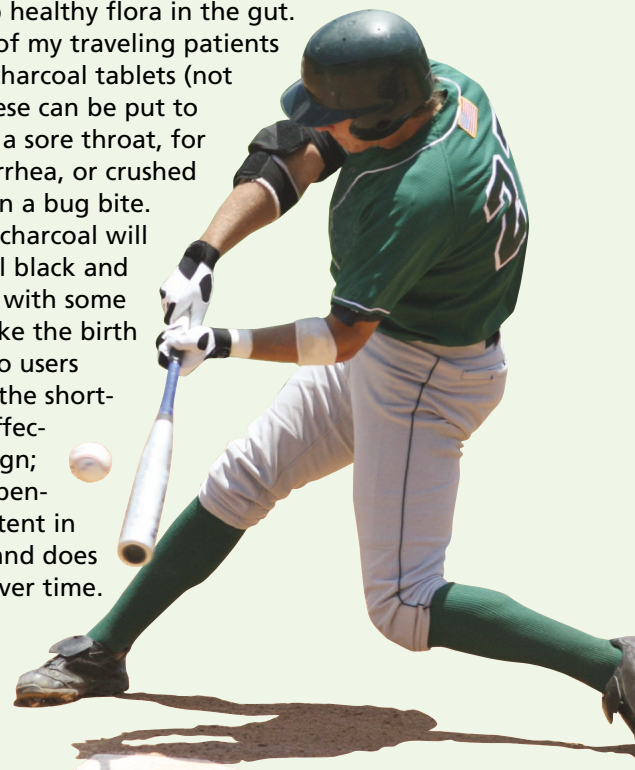
Lydia's general temperament (slower, thoughtful, even plodding) and her physical general symptoms (chilliness, easy perspiration, and tendency for earaches and constipation) led me to the remedy *Calcarea carbonica*. Over the course of three months, Lydia had two doses of *Calcarea*

Natural Medicine Advice for Athletes

I rarely see a serious athlete for homeopathic treatment without also broaching the subject of other natural medicine approaches. For example, I frequently work with them to optimize their nutrition by creating an appropriate, individualized diet and supplement regimen. Elite, privately coached individuals often have already had nutritional advice from other professionals, but a surprising number of athletes have not. Many athletes overlook the need for healthy protein to build and maintain strong muscles. Especially for those who are vegetarian or vegan, I will review good sources of easy-to-have-on-hand protein that are not all soy-based, such as nuts and other legumes (e.g., garbanzo and kidney beans).

I am also happy to recommend natural medicine protocols to prevent injuries, decrease lactic acid build-up after strenuous exercise, and promote healing, especially after a big event. Bromelain, the enzyme derived from pineapple, along with Vitamin C should be in every athlete's gym bag. Both will help to reduce inflammation and adhesion formation and act as gentle anti-inflammatory agents to help with tissue repair. I refer patients to massage therapists, cranial osteopaths, yoga teachers, chiropractors, and other physicians. If an athlete seems open, I may suggest psychological work such as mindfulness meditation or sports psychology therapy, or recommend particular books (see "In the Zone" on page 27).

Staying healthy before and during competitions, especially when athletes are on the road, is another important concern. For example, if there is a tendency for constipation, I recommend bringing along a fiber supplement. If the water supply is not known to be reliable, beyond recommending bottled water, I suggest acidophilus to help build up healthy flora in the gut. I have many of my traveling patients bring along charcoal tablets (not capsules). These can be put to good use for a sore throat, for traveler's diarrhea, or crushed up and put on a bug bite. Taken orally, charcoal will turn the stool black and can interfere with some medication like the birth control pill, so users beware! But the short-term use is effective and benign; and it is inexpensive, stays potent in all weather, and does not go bad over time.



carbonica 200c, which put a stop to her premenstrual vertigo for good. Now back on a full competition schedule, she has been disappointed by her performance this last year, but she vows to keep at it, with her eyes on the 2012 Olympic Summer games.

Outfielder out of commission

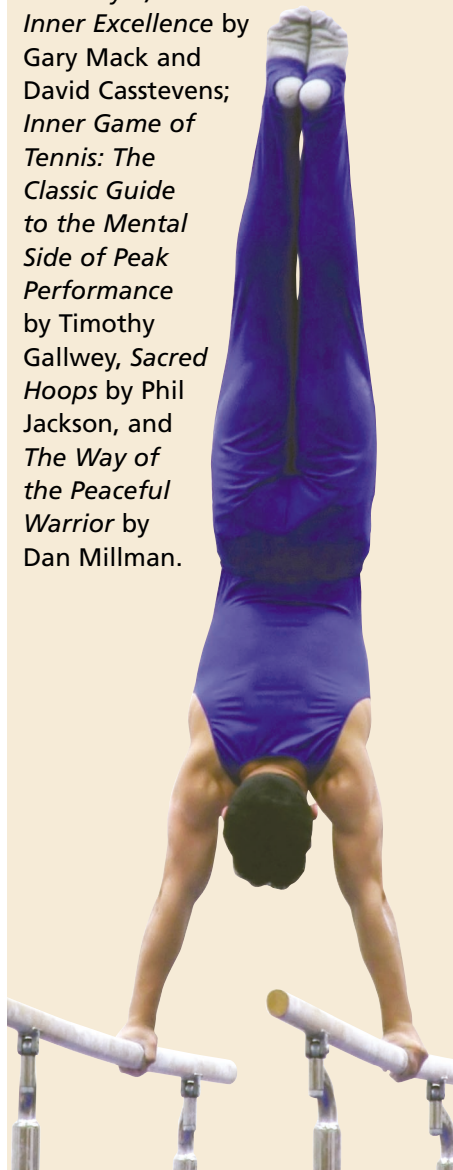
A major league baseball player in his 30s came to see me primarily for physical complaints but also for help with emotional issues. This strapping utility outfielder, who had been in the big leagues for over a decade, was having trouble with a chronically pulled groin muscle. It had been injured off the field while horsing around with his kids. He had tried anti-inflammatory medications but did not tolerate them well. Although he had followed his trainer's advice for physical therapy and stretching, at the time of our visit, many months after the original injury, he was seemingly no better. It felt worse in the morning and again in the late afternoon. This injury made it difficult for him to hit, field, and run, and he was at his wit's end. He felt that his manager was getting impatient, which made him more and more anxious.

The nervousness did not help this man's irritable bowel syndrome. He was chronically gassy and had unpredictable bowels. Being on the road a lot and eating at restaurants just made things worse. He always traveled with a fiber supplement, which did offer some relief. He also suffered from insomnia related to the anxiety. He worried constantly about losing his spot on the team and letting down his family. When I made a comment about how awesome it was that he had gotten as far as he had, he quickly dismissed it, focusing instead on all he had to lose. He depended greatly on his supportive and loving wife, who traveled with him most of the time with their small children.

I suggested private yoga instruction for him; for those with particular injuries where conscientious efforts at physical therapy have failed, sometimes yoga does the trick. We also discussed dietary changes and ideas for eating on the road that might help to support healthier digestion. I recommended that he stop eating by a certain time each evening, perhaps 7:00 p.m., until the following morning at

In the Zone

Perhaps the single most important element for an athlete to excel among other successful athletes is a tough mental game enabling them to "get and stay in the zone," to get over losses quickly, to take feedback, to integrate that advice with grace, and to stay focused regardless of what the surrounding environment might throw their way (e.g., weather, court conditions, equipment issues, the crowd, judges, and referees). There are many books to help athletes work on their inner or mind game. A few of my current favorites, highly recommended by my own children are: *Mind Gym, An Athlete's Guide to Inner Excellence* by Gary Mack and David Casstevens; *Inner Game of Tennis: The Classic Guide to the Mental Side of Peak Performance* by Timothy Gallwey, *Sacred Hoops* by Phil Jackson, and *The Way of the Peaceful Warrior* by Dan Millman.



breakfast, since many with sensitive digestive systems do well with a good 12-hour fast on a daily basis.

Based on this lovely, if self-effacing man's right-sided groin complaint, his digestive difficulties, and his chronic and heightened insecurity, I prescribed the remedy *Lycopodium* over the course of several months. I am happy to say that he experienced steady improvement; his groin area healed completely and his playing is back on track. With his physical complaints on the mend, he was better able to focus on his game and play well; all of which helped his emotional world, too. With less to be stressed about, he was able to enjoy his work and his family. I am sad to say that I have not treated other major league baseball players yet—I hope he will send a few my way!

Pint-sized, water wonder

One of my favorite elite athletes in my practice was Penny, a pint-sized sixth grader and state champion swimmer. Diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Penny was almost totally unable to focus in school, and her report card was filled with Ds and Fs. She had frequent angry outbursts, mostly at home, where she would lose her temper, becoming inconsolable and irrational, throwing things, yelling outrageously, screaming, kicking, and winding up in a heap of tears. Penny's mother was beside herself trying to help. In fact, each of the four kids in Penny's family seemed to have some major issue that overwhelmed the parents. This caused tremendous stress in the household for Penny and the entire family.

Beyond the swimming, there was little else this diminutive whirlwind had going for her. Sometimes, likely due to the chaotic nature of the household, Penny did not even want to attend a practice or a meet, but as soon as she got there, she was like a single-minded torpedo. Her body was perfect for swimming, and once she stood on the starting block or was in the water, her mind was clear, her goals obvious. Penny had broken records left and right, and was sought after by coaches in the state.

On the physical side, I learned that Penny had chronic loose stools, frequent sinus headaches, and recurring fevers

(unrelated to the headaches). The fevers came perhaps two or three times a year. She would get very red in the face, glassy-eyed, and droopy, but she had no other symptoms. Her mother had tried treating the fevers with conventional anti-fever medicines, but that hadn't seemed to help, so now they just waited them out, usually a day or two. Penny had had all manner of lab work to rule out more serious conditions.

Penny's emotional outbursts and inability to control her temper were affecting most aspects of her life, and that is what her mother wanted help with. It was hard to imagine this strong, athletic pixie being difficult, but her mother described some horrific scenarios, way out of proportion to whatever started the situation. For example, a simple, "No, we cannot go to the store right now," might ignite World War III.

All that said, when I first met Penny, I fell in love with her. She was bright and spritely with a dazzling twinkle in her eye and an endearing lisp. I never witnessed any of the shenanigans described by her mother, but Penny and her brothers and sisters were roughing it up in the waiting room the first time I saw her.

I chose the remedy *Belladonna* for Penny because it fit her few physical issues, mostly related to fever and inflammation (i.e., red face, glassy eyes, high fever, and chronic loose stools). But I also chose it because it fit her behavioral issues. *Belladonna* is on the short list for helping children with poor impulse control, hot tempers that easily flare, and violent outbursts (also consider *Veratrum album*, *Medorrhinum*, and *Nux vomica*). That said, those who need *Belladonna* can be amazingly charming and bright, so that even when they are driving the parent or teacher crazy, they somehow endear themselves to the caregiver at the same time.

In the first year after starting the *Belladonna*, Penny did not have any fevers, and her sinus headaches greatly improved. Her stools firmed up to a more typical one time a day. And to her mother's delight, Penny became much calmer at home. A year or so after our first visit, this water



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wonder finally got into a better school for her, one for children with learning differences. She was not unintelligent, but testing had unearthed a severe auditory processing problem. I believe that with proper teaching geared at the ways she *does* learn, she will continue to improve. She is still an intense kid, and her swimming is still excellent, but she is now much calmer with better control over her impulses. Penny has her eyes on the Olympics in 2012 or 2016, and I hope she makes it! It will be interesting to see if she sustains her interest and dedication to the sport, and can stay healthy, uninjured, and motivated with her heavy training schedule.

Homeopath "in the zone"

Although it is a far cry from an athletic field, court, or track, sometimes when I am in the clinic all day seeing patients, my work takes on the feeling of an athletic pursuit. Listening to patients' stories one after another for many hours requires endurance. Like an athlete, I need to be comfortable in my own body, undistracted by the surroundings; I need to be "in the zone." For a homeopath, this means knowing the rudiments of case taking. It's equivalent to being able to dribble a basketball

without looking, a skill practiced over time to make it seamlessly second nature. It means being open, using all the senses to observe/perceive the patient, just as an athlete develops court or field sense, and instantly reacting with small and large adjustments to the case-taking strategy. It means basing clinical decisions on hard-earned study, practice, and experience, informed by the current environment and patient, and aiming for a successful outcome all the way around.

When I am in the zone at the clinic, the hours spin right off the clock and the day zips by. Asking the right question at the right time—which may seem easy to students watching a case being taken—is actually an outgrowth of honed perception skills and being acutely attuned to the patient before you. Asking those correct questions allows the case to unfold easily and the patient to receive a helpful remedy. Like an athlete, I put a lot of effort into getting into the zone with patients and creating ways to have predictable and easy access to it, day in day out.

Finding that place and keeping easy channels to it will be different for each practitioner. For me, it stems from the ability to quiet my mind and close out other distracting thoughts or needs. I do that by being well-rested, well-exercised, and well-fed! I make lists in the morning, that I add to during the day, of things I need to accomplish, so I don't worry I will forget the minutiae that make up being a doctor, mother, wife, community member, etc. I also keep in mind that this patient, whichever patient it is, has come to me for help. They are suffering in some way, and it is my job to try my hardest, without distraction, to help them. It is really my only job at that moment. I put a high premium on being focused—pulling my personal resources together to that moment in time and place, in order to understand and support my patient.

In some ways, this process is very liberating as it's my *only* job at that moment, and though I "multi-task" in the case taking itself—by being observant, letting my

observations inform my questions, being aware of interactions within the room, etc.—it is still *much* easier than, say, running a household with three teenagers! So, part of what I do in my teaching is to just bring these ideas about “getting into the zone” out into the open. In this way, I can help other homeopaths start thinking about their own skills and strengths in this regard and help future homeopaths be better able to assist their patients.

Homeopathy perfect for elite athletes

I love working with athletes, as they are determined, disciplined, and compliant, wanting to optimize their performance. That said, high-level athletics do put a strain on the patient’s physical, mental, and emotional worlds. Stressors, even the good ones, cause patients to develop symptoms in reaction to the stress. And those symptoms tend to arise in predictable and patterned ways, depending largely on the constitutional type of the

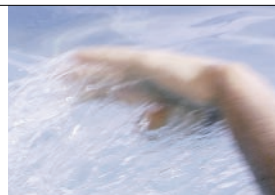
person. That’s where homeopathy comes in! Treat the whole person, support the body’s inborn abilities to strike balance and find health, and you will help the athletes in your life or practice immeasurably.

The world of sports and athletics offers so much physically, psychologically, emotionally, and even spiritually. We providers of natural medicine should do whatever we can to help athletes optimize performance, reduce the chance of injury, heal injuries that occur, and add to the positive mental game. Homeopathy—with its safe, effective remedies that will not turn up on a drug test—is the perfect thing to offer elite athletes. As I say to my now grown kids: Play hard, play fair!



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amy Rothenberg, a licensed naturopathic physician in Enfield, Connecticut, teaches and writes widely on topics in natural medicine. For information about the New England School of Homeopathy Two-Year Course beginning in January 2009 and for free articles and information, visit www.nesh.com.



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