



Reach Peak Performance by Being Relaxed and Toned

By Linda Thomsen

Today's athlete faces a myriad of challenges – from training and preparation for grueling competitions, to maintaining peak performance through a long season, to recovering from various forms of injury. The fields of sports medicine and sports psychology have become quite popular in recent years in assisting athletes to maximize their abilities both physically and mentally.

But is there another, simpler way for an athlete to reach peak performance, one that involves the integration of mind and body for a more relaxed state of being? The *Trager*[®] Approach provides a means of body-mind integration that has proven to be beneficial for athletes from a number of different sports, including cycling, short and long-distance running, swimming, tennis, golf, and Ironman triathlon competitions.

The *Trager* Approach is unique because it has two aspects that can be used to benefit the athlete. *Mentastics*[®] are simple, effortless self-care movements that a *Trager* practitioner can teach the athlete to maintain a sense of balance and lightness. These movements can also be practiced at home or in training, and are a way of “re-educating” the body to move more efficiently. In addition, the *Trager* Approach involves work on a padded table. The athlete's body is supported and gently moved within its pain-free range and natural rhythm. The practitioner and client work together in tandem, so that the client has the feeling of moving effortlessly and freely. As a result,

tensions disappear and new movement patterns become possible.

Athletes have different demands on their muscles depending upon the sport – sprinters and tennis players need to have energy available in short, intense bursts, whereas long distance runners use repetitive motion for long periods of time. The movements used in the *Trager* Approach, however, can benefit all athletes regardless of the demands on their body. One important goal of the movement education offered by *Trager* is to promote intelligent muscle use so that energy is not expended on anything but that which is necessary for the performance. Nancy Cassel, a runner, states, “I've become much more aware of unnecessarily using muscles when exercising such as tensing feet, legs and facial muscles. Noticing these unnecessary movements has helped me relax and focus on the muscle being worked. Opening the spaces between my upper and lower teeth and relaxing my jaw muscles has provided a softer look and feel to my face, has reduced my overall body tension and has made me feel lighter and yet more grounded and centered at the same time. As a result, my chronic low back pain at the SI joint primarily on the right side has virtually disappeared.”

Rest and recovery is a critical but often missing ingredient to the athlete's training regimen. Athletes may feel as if they don't want to be “too relaxed” before an event because they will be limp or unable to expend muscle energy. However, the type of relaxation offered to the athlete in a *Trager* session is such that instead of being limp, the muscles are toned and ready, and the mind is

clear and focused. The depth of relaxation offered by the *Trager* Approach also greatly enhances the quality of sleep, another imperative but often overlooked aspect of an athlete's training regimen.

"*Trager* is brilliant work," describes Lynette Brannon, a *Trager* practitioner who has worked with John Percy, one of Austin's top running coaches. "Relaxation is essential for an athlete because the relaxed muscle is toned and flexible, has better biomechanics, recovers more quickly from the muscle tears that occur in workout, and minimizes the risk of injury. It also promotes the release of lactic acid, promotes muscle growth, decreases adrenal stress and helps to maintain insulin balance."

Trager is unique in that it offers integration of body and mind. Those who train constantly often experience stale performances and burnout. Using *Trager* as part of a training regimen, however, can provide the athlete with inner balance, emotional control, resilience to overcome obstacles, and the mental focus needed to compete. Jann Girard, an Ironman triathlete, used *Trager* to help keep her performances fresh. She moved from the concept of "more is better", to "train smarter, not harder". Lynette Brannon states, "*Trager* reaches the mind. It adds lightness and light-heartedness to the training process, which allows the athlete to continue. It anchors the athlete in how their body feels, and increases their self-confidence. Patterns in the unconscious mind are trained to notice what's longer, what's looser. Because it changes the template in the brain, then strong, efficient movements in the body can follow."

The athlete can benefit from *Trager* throughout training and competition. The *Trager* practitioner can be a valued part of the athlete's training staff to work together to maintain balance between a strict training regimen and rest and relaxation. The athlete can also practice *Mentastics* at home. Many practitioners recommend giving the athlete a *Trager* session right before a performance, in order to get the athlete "in the zone" both mentally and physically. *Trager* moves can also refresh the athlete during pauses in a performance or athletic event. For example, *Trager* muscle "shimmers" helped one power lifter when he was stuck in his dead lift because of contracted leg muscles. The Olympic runner Carl Lewis would often take his foot out of the starting block and "toss" his muscles in a *Trager*-like fashion to loosen them before a sprint.

Many athletes have achieved "personal bests" after including *Trager* as part of their regimen. Zoe Alexi, a *Trager* practitioner from Massachusetts, worked with one 43-year old marathoner, who "...not only qualified for the Olympic trials in marathon running, but also went on to win the Cape Cod Marathon only three weeks later. That is simply unheard of for any marathoner, regardless of age or experience. But rather than feeling stressed out, she was loose and light, and described her experience as 'going with the flow.'" Or, in the words of another runner who has integrated *Trager* into his practice, "I felt like I could fly!"

To locate a practitioner, go to the *Trager*[®] website www.tragerus.org or call the United States *Trager* Association at 440-834-0308.

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