

Sex and the Athlete

DOES ABSTINENCE REALLY IMPROVE PERFORMANCE?

BY GREGORY UCHACZ

TO HAVE SEX or not to have sex; that is the question. We've all heard the myth that for athletes to perform well, abstinence the night before competition is a must. The theory goes, sexual frustration leads to increased aggression and the act of ejaculation lowers testosterone levels. Is this true? Is there science behind the theory? In short, the answer is a resounding *no ... probably!*

WILL PERFORMANCE IN THE SACK SPOIL PERFORMANCE ON THE TRACK?

Certainly, the abstinence myth is well grounded in the athlete world. It is particularly strong in such sports as boxing and football, where aggression is paramount. Muhammad Ali, for one, reportedly wouldn't make love for six weeks before a fight. In professional football, several teams, including the Indianapolis Colts, Carolina Panthers, and Pittsburgh Steelers, require players to check into hotels, away from wives or partners, the night before home games. Room checks insure no distractions are present! And many athletes are staunch supporters of the concept purporting that sex makes you too relaxed and in too good a mood.

"You don't want to feel relaxed, weak, and laid back before a football game. You want to be jumpy and excited," reports Shaun Smith, defensive tackle for the Cincinnati Bengals. Former American track star Marty Liquori, says relaxation is

precisely what he tries to avoid. "You have to be angry and aggressive to run a 3:47 mile," he explains. "If you've had sex the night before, you'll be in a satisfied state and feel like smoking a cigarette."

Is there science to support this ritual? In 2000, the *Clinical Journal of Sport Medicine* published a comprehensive review of the topic titled "Does Sex the Night Before Competition Decrease Performance?" Author and friend, Ian Shrier, a professor of epidemiology and family medicine at McGill University in Montreal, reviewed thirty-one articles and studies that examined a full spectrum of physiological parameters of performance. The review rebuffed many widespread beliefs, including the notion that sex leads to muscle weakness. In fact, studies reveal no loss of strength or aerobic power, VO_2 max, etc. Further, the review dismissed the frequently cited concern that sex the night before competition will tire out an athlete.

In truth, sex is not a very demanding exercise. In general, sexual intercourse expends only twenty-five to fifty calories, about the energy it takes to walk up two flights of stairs. Even the most aggressive of lovemakers expends only 250 calories per hour, or four calories per minute.

In general, scientists dismiss the idea that sex the night before competition has a tiring effect on the athlete or that it could weaken the athlete's muscles. In fact, many purported benefits have been claimed. Studies found sexual activity has a powerful analgesic effect in women and can markedly increase a woman's tolerance for pain. It was discovered that sexual stimulation inhibits the release of Substance P, a neuropeptide involved in the transmission of pain impulses. This effect may continue for up to twenty-four hours.

Further, one very interesting study concluded regular sexual activity may boost levels of testosterone! A 2004 study found that ninety-seven men who were successfully treated for erectile dysfunction and began to engage in regular sexual activity experienced marked gains in testosterone levels. Other studies in healthy men and women support this physiological response. Finally, examining this response from a different perspective, there is strong evidence that after three months without sex, which is not so uncommon for some athletes, testosterone dramatically drops to levels close to children's levels. It appears that abstinence does not exactly "boost" testosterone and aggression.

Sports psychologists say the relaxation associated with sex can also help deal with the stress of competition, and many athletes suggest it "takes the edge off." Trainers who study peak athletic performance say that relaxation is especially crucial in sports that require fine muscle coordination and helps their athletes focus on the task at hand.

Current physiological evidence offers no support for the ritual of abstinence—and some even suggest sex could help an athlete. Perhaps Casey Stengel, former manager of the New York Yankees, was right when he said, "It's not sex that wrecks these guys, it's staying up all night looking for it." ■

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