



Heady Lifting

Why top trainers believe that meditation before a workout can help make you a better athlete. **by ASHLEY MATEO**

YOU'VE GOT an hour at the gym, but instead of focusing on reps, your brain is grinding on that big work project or a tiff with your partner. Your inclination may be to pick a workout so hard that the discomfort will drown out the noise. But there's another antidote: meditation and mindfulness.

These practices aren't new to sports. "Pro athletes know the power of pregame routines," says Corey Phelps, a Washington, D.C.-based trainer who does meditation with clients. Phil Jackson led team meditations as L.A. Lakers coach in 2009; coach Pete Carroll employed it in 2015 when his Seattle Seahawks won the Super Bowl; and U.S. Women's National Soccer team members Carli Lloyd, Alex Morgan, Christen Press, and Kelley O'Hara all credit meditation techniques for their success.

Tons of research touts meditation, and some specifically center on athletics. A study involving junior elites in Norway found that after 12 weeks of consistent mindfulness practices, athletes had better focus, performance, and recovery. And University of Miami football players who meditated 12 minutes a day for a month had improved concentration. Plus, distance runners doing a mindfulness regime showed higher self-confidence and lower anxiety before a big race, a study in the *Journal of Clinical Sports Psychology* finds.

For the average gymgoer, mindful meditation—a practice to focus on the present with no judgment—is a way to become more engaged during workouts, stay focused longer, and push harder. "In every workout, we're faced with moments of physical discomfort when the brain tells the body to quit," Phelps says.

It's something that New York City-based Nike trainer Ariel Foxie does with his athletes. "Demanding workouts place stress on the body, and that can be on top of emotional stress people bring into a session," he says. Depending on how someone is feeling that day, Foxie may have them do a visualization of the workout or breathing exercises. Then they warm up with repetitive cardio—like jump rope or a treadmill jog—which becomes a moving meditation to get them to focus on the present and get out of their heads. To him, the point is to use the training to build mental strength and slow the brain from grinding on other issues.

Try it out for yourself. Find a quiet corner of the gym, throw on noise-canceling headphones, and take a seat. A simple technique is square breathing: 3-second inhale, 3-second pause, 3-second exhale, 3-second pause. Or kneel in child's pose and take long, slow breaths for 2 minutes, which helps turn off the fight-or-flight mode you may have come in with. And it doesn't just work at the gym. You can do this before that big work presentation, too. ■