

The Healing ARTs

ACTIVE RELEASE TECHNIQUES MAKE ME HURT SO GOOD

MY HAMSTRINGS and quadriceps are bruised and slightly tender to the touch. In some spots the bruising is a dark red, but in others it is blue, green and brown. Was I kicked by a horse? Trampled by a wild boar? Attacked by a band of ruffians? No, no, and no. The truth is that I paid someone to inflict these injuries upon me.

But let me start at the beginning. In early 2004, I injured my Achilles tendon doing a track workout two days after a fast half marathon. With the Olympic trials on the line, I was willing to do just about anything to coax it to heal. I ran in the water, stretched my hamstrings, iced my injured tendon, wore a special boot, got fitted for orthotics, and even bought an ultrasound/electro stimulation machine. I also spent hundreds of dollars on massage, chiropractic visits, physical therapy, and acupuncture. Despite my efforts, an MRI revealed that my Achilles had microscopic tears that put it at risk of rupturing, and so I decided to skip the trials.

For the next year, the injury persisted. It abated for a while, but by the spring of 2005 it was flaring up so badly that at moments I was literally frozen in pain. One night I was

recounting my Achilles woes to a friend, and she recommended that I see Dan Selstad, a Del Mar, Calif., sports therapist specializing in Active Release Techniques (ART). I'd never heard of ART before, but I figured I

would give it a try.

When I arrived at Dan's office, I was pessimistic, to say the least. After spending thousands of dollars trying to heal my Achilles, I did not think that anyone or anything could help me. But after one session with Dan's magic hands, my injury had noticeably improved. It turned out that it wasn't my Achilles that was causing the flare-ups, but my Achilles bursa and my flexor hallucis longus (big toe muscle). Dan treated those, and I was able to run without any pain.

So what exactly is ART? "ART is a type of myofascial release that uses active motion to help break down scar tissue in overused or injured muscles," Dan says. "It's different than massage because you're using active motion to help break down scar tissue. You're not gliding over the skin like massage does; you're holding a fixed point while the muscle is actually moving underneath your contact." Dan uses ART to treat such athletic greats as eight-time Ironman champion Paula Newby-Fraser and 2006 Ironman champion and 2000 Olympic silver medalist Michellie Jones.

"I see Dan once a week and sometimes twice a week," Jones says. "There's no way I could get away with not seeing him that much. That's how important ART is. I've gone in with torn calves or a hip or hamstring issue, and Dan stays on top of stuff for me. It's part of my training program to see him at least once a week."

Yet as effective as ART is, it also really hurts. Once I was getting ART on my IT bands, and I told Dan it wasn't that bad: just a seven on a scale of one to 10. "Oh, I'm just buttering the bread," Dan said, as he dug his hands into my legs, making me scream.

Most ART therapists seem to have an incredibly positive disposition — almost as if they like inflicting pain. Dan is always friendly and upbeat, and so is Lynn Schankliess, the physical therapist I see in the San Francisco Bay area. Lynn is equally sunny but significantly more retro. By retro, I mean Middle Ages. Although she does regular ART, she has also mastered a technique called "Graston," which involves using various metal instruments that must have debuted in torture chambers of medieval Europe.

Lynn's favorite is about the size of a butter knife, but she also has one that is long and thin, allowing her to grip it with both hands. She rubs the instrument back and forth to break up adhesions in my muscles. She does it for about 10 seconds on each spot, and the pain is so intense that I feel like screaming/biting/kicking and pummeling her all at once. It's no surprise that, when Lynn worked at the University of California, Berkeley, one of the offensive linemen called her "Spawn of Satan" (or the more affectionate "Spawn").

Lynn also uses an Eastern technique called Gua Sha, which uses a small, guitar pick-shaped instrument that's made of bone, polycarbonate, or horn to help release toxins. It has a different feel than Graston, a lighter sweeping motion, but like Graston, it allows Lynn to get to the tissue she can't get to with her hands.

Lynn has helped me get over an Achilles injury (in the other leg), a calf injury, and a recalcitrant hamstring injury. Her savagery breaks up the scar tissue and helps my muscles to flow, allowing me to do what I love: run.

I have another appointment scheduled with Lynn for this Wednesday 11:00 a.m. I have no illusions about what it will be like: 60 minutes of discomfort and pain. But I also know that it works, and despite the unsightly bruises, I'll definitely be back again. ■



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