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Keeping NBA Players Healthy

NBA trainers share thoughts on how to keep the players on the court.

by Kyle Stack / @KyleStack

Recognition of a job well done is all relative in the NBA. Basketball fans can watch players play and observe coaches coach, thus determining for themselves how well those people are doing their jobs. But there's another layer to a team which they can't detect. It's one which perhaps only players can truly appreciate, for they are the direct beneficiaries—the role of an athletic trainer.

It's largely a thankless job. Trainers are supposed to get or keep players in shape, then, if they get hurt, treat their injuries well enough to get them back on the court expeditiously. If they do, then they're perceived as simply doing their job. If not, then they catch heat. In this upcoming NBA season, they'll be depended upon as much as ever.

The three-week training camp and preseason period has moved as rapidly as expected. The regular season will keep up that pace, as teams prepare to play 66 games in 124 days. (Give or take a couple days for teams which don't start December 25, the first scheduled day of games, or April 26, the last one.)

SLAMonline spoke with three NBA team trainers to discover what different factors they face in this lockout-affected season from the typical 82-game slate.

Wally Blase, the head athletic trainer for the Atlanta Hawks, noted that optimizing a player's recovery period after a practice or a game is more essential than ever.

"From planning your travel schedule around the most optimal way to get the players rest postgame and in between games to taking the extra time for warmups and post-practice stretching," Blase said. "We are using time we used to spend [weight] lifting to do more biomechanics, stretching and yoga to keep their muscles more flexible and to decrease muscle soreness."

Blase also noted that the team is traveling with a massage therapist, as many squads do. The goal there is to give players a convenient way to have their aches and pains massaged away, no matter where their travel schedule takes them.

The Indiana Pacers' head physical therapist and athletic trainer, Josh Corbeil, echoed that sentiment.

"We have a full-time massage therapist, and he is getting more usage early in the season compared with prior seasons as players are trying to be proactive," Corbeil said.

Jordan Farmer of the New Jersey Nets explained massage is only one part of an injury prevention regimen that encapsulates virtually every phase of health and fitness. Sleep, ice, nutrition, stretching and hydration will all be necessary components for he and other NBA players to maintain a healthy status this season.

"Things are gonna be tough on a lot of people's bodies, playing back-to-back-to-back and every other night," Farmer said. "Teams whose benches will be successful and healthy to contribute and take some of the wear-and-tear off the guys playing the heavy minutes [is important]."



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Players typically fall back on stretching as a go-to injury prevention method, although they should be careful not to overdo it, said Brent Callaway, a speed and strength coach at [Athletes' Performance](#) in Los Angeles. He stated that long-hold stretches, those of 30 seconds or longer, are detrimental to developing power in one's muscles. He likened it to over-stretching a rubber band.

"If you take a rubber band and you stretch it out for a very long time, then the structural integrity of that band is going to weaken," Callaway said. "While I hold it at that point, the band will become a miniscule amount longer because of the weakening of the structural integrity of that band. Whenever it rebounds, it will rebound with a little bit less velocity than previously."



Aside from stretching, strength training is often mentioned by athletes as a preferred way to get through any kind of physically-demanding time frame.

Weight lifting is a top priority for Jared Jeffries and Bill Walker, both of the New York Knicks. Walker was particularly emphatic about that form of fitness by noting it's the only shot a player has to remain healthy. (He later admitted later other areas, such as nutrition, are equally important.) Jeffries said stretching and riding exercise bikes are integral but that pumping iron is ultimately the way to go.

"You gotta stay in the weight room," Jeffries said.

That's a misnomer, according to Cassidy Phillips, founder of [Trigger Point Performance Therapy](#) in Austin, Tex. Weight lifting should be a secondary focus to maintaining muscle pliability, which permits range of motion. That, in turn, allows the body's joints, such as the shoulders and knees, to move more efficiently.

Under Phillips, a biomechanics expert, Trigger Point emphasizes building muscle tissue in the body, particularly in the feet. And that is accomplished, in one way or another, by making sure the body is hydrated. Athletic performance is a cycle begun by hydration, which is noted in [visual form](#) on Trigger Point's website.

Trigger Point is used regularly by the Denver Nuggets, although their massage, or self-myofascial, products are used by numerous other NBA teams. That includes the Knicks, whose locker room contained a pair of Trigger Point foam rollers called The Grid prior to their home preseason game versus the Nets.

"We use the foam rolls every day," said the Knicks' Devin Green. "It's kind of a cheap massage. [Laughs] It's just to get your muscles warmed up and to get your blood circulating."

Another recovery and injury prevention method is compression gear, which players wear to promote blood flow, improve oxygen circulation and to reduce swelling.

Steve Hess, the Nuggets' strength and conditioning coach, said that he has his players travel in Under Armour recharge suits. The suits push out water that accumulates in muscle fibers, according to UA's [website](#), which touts the suits as helping athletes experience 50 percent less fatigue and soreness and 30 percent more power following a workout or a game.

Blase said his Hawks will sport compression tights underneath their clothes after games. That presumably will take on added importance after road games, when the team heads from the locker room to the plane to fly to the next city. Without much time to settle down before reaching the plane, players must do what they can after a game to ease their burdened muscles.

For Corbeil, compression garments are incorporated into a health regimen which includes a comprehensive study of each player's movement.

"We screen everyone from a movement standpoint when we acquire the player and then again prior to each season, looking for abnormal movement patterns that will contribute to overuse injuries, such as tendonitis and plantar fasciitis," Corbeil said.

Pacers are scheduled daily for manual treatments, which brings about a culture in which players are stressed to reveal any nicked-up body parts. Corbeil stated that unlike other campaigns in which players may attempt to play through injuries, this season the Pacers training staff has told them to report anything and everything that bothers them.

For any injury that a player conceals is one that can become unusually exacerbated given the frequency of games in this upcoming season.

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