

Acupuncture for Sports Performance Enhancement

By: [Carl Hangee-Bauer, ND, L.Ac.](#)

At the 1993 Chinese National Games, nine Chinese women runners broke nine world records. In the 10,000 meter race, the previous record was broken by 42 seconds, an unbelievable time. The new 1500 meter record holder had been 73rd at the same distance the year before. Journalists and other athletes around the world took notice and accused the team of using steroids, even though the runners all passed steroid tests and there were no other indications of steroid use, such as acne or highly defined muscles. A press conference was held where Ma Jun Ren, the team coach, enraged by these accusations, held up a box of Chinese herbs he credited with his team's performance. It was derived from *cordyceps*, a traditional Chinese herb used for generations as a lung Qi tonic.



At the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona, American pole vaulter Kory Tarpenning took two Chinese herb formulas, one containing deer antler which is rich in natural testosterone-like molecules and the other containing nine different types of ginseng. He did this to prevent pre-event jitters that had previously hampered his performance while at the same time avoid feeling sedated. He finished in 4th place and attributed his improved performance to the use of these herbs.

Based upon these as well as other experiences, many professional and amateur athletes use both acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicines as a part of their training and conditioning program.

Acupuncture for Athletes

Acupuncture is used in the treatment of injuries and musculoskeletal and constitutional imbalances, and is often effective for relieving muscle pain and spasm and improving circulation to tense or injured tissues. In my clinic I commonly find acupuncture especially effective for tendon and ligament sprain/strains and chronic injuries which have been poorly responsive to other types of treatment.

According to basic Traditional Chinese Medical (TCM) theory, health is viewed as a balance between opposing forces (e.g. yin and yang) in the body. Forces that disrupt this balance are seen to move the body away from health and toward disease and poor function. Herbal medicines, diet, acupuncture, and exercise are all seen as ways to balance these forces to promote health and in the case of athletes, to improve performance.

As a member of the National Sports Acupuncture Association, I've studied a number of methods to help both weekend warriors and more competitive athletes improve their performance and prevent injuries. When I work with people to improve their sports performance, I typically use a three-pronged approach. The most important is what I think of as the Yin aspect, which uses TCM methods to support the body during training to build muscles, promote liver glycogen storage, and prepare the body for bursts of energy needed during performance. The Yang aspect is to stimulate output at the time of the performance. Finally, the third prong of the approach is individualizing the treatment, taking into account relatively strong versus weaker systems, past history of injuries or recurrent injuries, and other important health issues, which could impact training and performance. With this approach, I am able to provide customized herbal formulas and acupuncture to assist in both training and competitive activities.

Herbal Medicine and Nutritional Support

Herbal medicine and nutritional support provide important aspects in the TCM approach to performance enhancement. By way of example, here are three of my favorite herb choices for improving sports performance:

The first is easily **Siberian Ginseng** (*Eleutherococcus senticosus*), one of my favorite herbal medicines. It is a gentle herb appropriate for long-term use without side effects. Herbalists consider Siberian Ginseng to be adaptogenic, that is, it helps the body find balance and adapt to stresses. It does this primarily by nourishing the adrenal glands. Effects of Siberian Ginseng include immune support, blood sugar regulation, and improvement in energy levels. It has been shown in studies to enhance athletic performance in all but the most elite athletes (probably because they are so well trained, a gentle herb like Siberian Ginseng is not enough to produce significant further improvements). I prefer a standardized extract in doses of 250-500 mg per day for one to two months followed by a break from use.

Cordyceps (*C. sinensis*) is also a very safe and gentle tonic. It is a very unusual herb, as it's a moth larva which has been infected with a fungus and then dried. In Traditional Chinese Medicine it is considered to be a lung tonic and has a long history of use in asthma treatment due to its effects of improving "the breath" and decreasing inflammation. Cordyceps has been shown to enhance the immune system, relax spasms of the heart, bronchi and intestines, improve sexual function, and invigorate energy levels while keeping one relaxed. I use cordyceps most often for people with exercise-induced asthma and those with weakness of lung function.

Finally, **Ginseng** (*Panax Ginseng*) is a fundamental herb for improving energy levels in general and for sports performance in particular; it is one of the best known herbs in TCM. It has been shown to have many positive effects for the athlete, including: shortens the latency period of and strengthens conditioned reflexes, speeds transmission of nerve impulses, promotes relaxation while restoring alertness, dilates coronary arteries and sustains proper cardiac rhythm, increases synthesis of proteins and nucleic acids, helps maintain adequate blood sugar levels, and supports adrenal, spleen, thyroid and thymus function. I could go on as this herb has been extensively studied. In my practice, I prefer to use high quality preparations of panax ginseng for relatively short periods of time to avoid overuse of this powerful and important herb.

Acupuncture and Oriental medicine is an art and a science that takes years to master. Look for an acupuncturist with experience in the treatment of Sports Medicine and Performance Enhancement on www.Acufinder.com

About the Author

Carl Hangee-Bauer, ND, L.Ac., is trained as both a naturopathic doctor, graduating from Bastyr University in 1984, and as a licensed acupuncturist.