

Haptotherapy and high-level sport performance

Bob Boot, MSc, private practice Amstelveen, the Netherlands, expertise group Haptotherapy and high-level performance. E-mail: bobboot@kpnmail.nl

Sjoerd van Daalen, BSc, private practice Hilversum, the Netherlands, expertise group Haptotherapy and high-level performance.

Abstract

Haptotherapy is a well appreciated, but still not widespread, discipline in the field of cure and care for high-level athletes. Top-level athletes can and need to develop themselves as autonomous, self-confident and responsible persons in order to perform at their best without choking or burning out, also in the long term. Such an adequate personal development is not possible without emotional development. A major aspect in personal growth is a subtle sense of feeling and body awareness. In haptotherapy, athletes are confronted with their body and its emotional expressions.

Keywords: haptotherapy, personal development, emotional growth, touch, body awareness, physical and mental resilience

1. Introduction

In the past, a few high performance athletes in the Netherlands, like soccer players Ruud Gullit and Marco van Basten, and speed skaters Hein Vergeer and Yvonne van Gennip, claimed that their magnificent results were at least partly due to the haptonomical coaching and guidance they received during their active sports careers. However, the role of haptotherapists in athletes' sports performances has not widely been discussed. What could

be the added value of haptotherapy with regard to health and performance of top athletes? The main goal of this article is to reflect and discuss this question.

Haptotherapy is a type of therapy that involves the use of touch to achieve a state of adequate self-consciousness and body- and mind awareness as well as interventions, such as talking and counseling, to assist individuals in getting in touch with their feelings. The aim of haptotherapy is leading the way to an adequate mental, emotional and physical being under all circumstances of life. It is based on haptonomy referred to as a science that combines thoughts, feelings, and words through a 'psycho-tactile' contact.

A former top athlete (cyclist) once said in an interview: *'The combination of haptotherapy and high level sport performance is a story about limits, achievements, durability, feelings ... It takes time for people in general and specifically for athletes to learn about and recognize these human capabilities and to make it part of their (sport)life and (sport)living. The world of sports is a world of effectiveness and efficiency, of anatomy, physiology, and scientific knowledge. A world where affect (feelings and emotions) is underestimated to my opinion. Feelings and emotions are considered disturbing instead of, as became crystal clear to me at the end of my sports career, helpful to stay connected to yourself in order to make the right decisions.'*

Athletes who have developed a sufficient amount of self-awareness, inner security and self-confidence show physical and mental resilience and flexibility to cope with and survive in the hard and demanding sports environment. They can handle their emotions adequately which results in getting the best out of themselves. Even under very aggravating circumstances, such as stress and internal and external pressure to achieve, high expectations and increasing influence from outsiders, athletes should keep in mind how they are as a person and they should live their life just the way they want. If athletes do not live like that, they often feel that it is hard to train accurately, targets will not be met and their achievements will decrease (Bakker & Oudejans, 2012). It will have a negative effect on the physical and mental shape of the athletes or it could cause repetitive or chronic injuries. In those circumstances a haptotherapist could be consulted. Haptotherapy is a form of treatment in which a person learns to open himself for his inner feelings and towards the contact with

other people and his environment. 'Living behind walls' leads to an inflexible state of body and mind. Haptotherapy is thereby a form of therapy aiming to increase self-consciousness, self-awareness, self-realization, body awareness and the ability to feel in order to help athletes to feel comfortable with themselves, creating a basic state of security with a great deal of resilience to manage the forces that are implicit in high performance sport life.

2. Benefits and pressures

Very few athletes start a sport with the idea to reach the top. Most of the time high performance athletes started their career with 'just' the need to move and to have fun in playing and competing: intrinsic motivation. As a kid they enjoyed a sport and they were not specifically aware of how exactly to use their bodies. When an athlete showed that he or she performed above average, the athlete became selected for representative teams. The interests for both the athlete and external parties increased, extrinsic motivation, whereby the pressure to achieve increased as well (Bakker & Oudejans, 2012). These changes can have a strong impact on the so-called self-perception of the athlete. The fear of not being able to achieve at their best often leads to a need to control all the technical aspects of the body.

The way athletes perceive their body and bodily signs and feelings can become more and more instrumental over time. The athletes will start to see their body as a machine, like an instrument that is needed to achieve targets and goals and not as a body that gives information about feelings and desires and wishes.

A quote from an athlete during therapy: 'When people ask me how I am, I often answer them in terms of my blood values, how my training results are and how and what I eat. As a result of this therapy I became aware of myself and of my feelings. Now I can feel what I really need and want and that real contact with others is essential for a optimal state of being.'

If athletes perform at a high level, internal and external interests increase. Athletes may experience high pressure. The athlete's financial situation, level of coaching, medical and psychological support and possibilities depend on their achievements. External parties, such

as sponsors, media, parents and others also depend on the athlete's performance. The pressure can get so high, that it eventually can have a considerable influence on the mental state of the athlete. An extreme example of the negative influences of internal and external pressure is shown by recent cases of doping in professional cycling. For many cyclists it was almost impossible not to get involved in doping situations, due to the fact that almost every cyclist was involved (Donovan, 2002). This resulted in stronger competitors and a need to match up to their opponents. Financial loss was another drive to use doping. (Wiefferink et al., 2005). Another example of external pressure can be found in match fixing scandals in (soccer) competitions all over the world. Often these forms of pressure influence the athletes in a negative way in their performance and in some athletes it results in drugs or alcohol abuse or eating disorders.

Handling these forms of pressure adequately and being capable of functioning in the adequate and appropriate mental and physical tension, even under high pressure circumstances is possible only if an athlete knows who he or she essentially is, what he or she feels, when he or she is aware of his or her desires, and when he or she is self-confident. An athlete shows self-awareness if he makes right situational decisions in daily life and as an athlete. This state of being will help athletes to achieve optimum body and mind performance. This does not mean that top athletes will never stretch their physical limit, overloading their body. Every haptotherapist working in this field knows that overloading sometimes is necessary to gain physical and mental improvement and to perform at high levels. Pushing the limits is actually an essential and distinguishing mark of high-level athletes in high-level sports. This combined with being responsibly in control of your body is critical for an athlete's success.

3. Impending alienation

With growing possibilities in training and medical guidance, athletes increasingly rely on external and objective test results for bodily information. If these forms of information are

overemphasized, the athlete loses a sense of feeling for himself as a person and for his body. They lose the ability to trust themselves and know how their body feels. In addition, athletes are no longer able to accurately understand their desires, needs and physical and mental limits. Overreliance on external measurements and tests causes a physical and mental disconnection in the athlete. No longer are they able to trust their own feelings and desires. As a result they neglect the red flags as a sign for risks, physical, psychological and emotional. The human body is not only a technical instrument that should work accurately with training, healthy eating habits, medical help and other facilities, but it does also give a human being information on wellbeing, needs, limits, intuition and emotions. Examples of these are the need for rest in case of overloading, the need to withdraw when press or sponsors are asking too much, awareness of anger or anxiety, and in general the balance between load and endurance.

Athletes can link this kind of sensitive information (what they feel) to rational information (what they think), which enables them to know what is right for themselves in order to train and compete accurately to achieve their best. In other words, they are then able to be loyal to their own identity in a world totally focused on effectiveness, efficiency and maximum achievements. Only then will they be fully appreciated allowing for their talents and possibilities to flourish.

4. Haptotherapy

The primary aim of haptotherapeutic guidance is to make athletes aware of feeling and sensing, improving body awareness and self-consciousness. The awareness of feelings and emotions and understanding the role that they play in human life offer depth and weight to personal growth and development. It sheds light on the way the individual athlete is living his life, his patterns and beliefs. It provides clear insight into patterns of behavior, communication style, and the way to cooperate with others. This insight can lead to an increasing notion of basic trust, self-esteem and self-confidence. Being trusted by oneself and the people around them, the athlete is then able to understand his possibilities and

limitations. Next to that, he is able to cope with the joys and sorrows of high performance sport life. He can be true to himself and perform at his best without being blocked and tensed. He can then dare to feel what affects him in life. From there he can express these feelings in order to experience trust in himself to integrate his feelings in how he thinks and acts. Living this way leads to physical and emotional resilience, an adequate coping strategy for living and performing under high pressure.

5. The guidance

Haptotherapy aims to lead athletes the way to how they relate to themselves. It contributes to the understanding the way that athletes are aware of their body, bodily signs and bodily signals. The haptotherapist confronts his patient with the story his body tells by listening to it. Not only in physiological terms but also based on emotional sense. When you look at the body as a machine, the focus is merely on physiological and somatic signs. The physical approach, the physical contact of the therapist confronts the patient with the fact that he can feel and what he can feel in his body in a psychological emotional sense. These aspects transcend muscle growth, flexibility and endurance as well as psychological skills such as focusing and visualization. In haptotherapy, athletes learn to bring together all aspects of their life. In trustful and confirming physical contact someone experiences himself in his individuality and personal identity. This leads to inner peace of body and mind, which opens the possibility for personal growth. This bringing together is not meant to create an anatomical and physiological machine, but is focused more on the personal growth of the unique individual, who can feel, think and act under high pressure situations in a world of effectiveness and external benefits.

6. The body and body awareness

A primary characteristic of athletes in good shape is that they feel totally comfortable with their body and that they feel connected to it, to their teammates and to their environment. In that case we do not speak of the physical body, the body one has, but we speak of the

body one *is* (the emotional, mental and the felt body). Everyone lives his or her life with a physical appearance and bodily presence in the world. A popular statement captures this best: close to yourself and loyal to whom you essentially are. Under circumstances like this, achievements seem to come without effort and stress, even though it is clear that it takes many hours of intensive training to reach the top. In that mental and physical state athletes do exactly what it takes to reach excellence without being cramped and without relying on cognitive control. Sometimes this is called 'flow' or 'the athlete has the right feeling'. They seem to make the right decisions at the right time and the right pace and they act just in the right way. They do not have to act differently than whom they basically are and they are able to make choices and decisions as free persons. In this state athletes are not influenced by external pressure. They are emotionally independent of the influence from outside and are not negatively led by forces from their environment. It is then possible to train optimally and compete at their best because they are mentally and physically aware of themselves.

A high-level volleyball player told during a therapy session: *'I often compare that feeling with dancing. When you keep thinking about the steps you should make, because you are afraid to make mistakes, especially when you know that people are looking at you, the dance will remain clumsy and rigid. On the other hand, when I trust myself and the lessons learned and can resist the pressure from the outside world, just let the music in, the dancing is fluently and gracious. It seems to be without effort.'*

7. The essence

Persons who feel uncomfortable because of fear, anxiety, insecurity, irritation, internal or external forms of pressure or pain, typically withdraw into themselves. In this state they are often separated from their feelings and to the input of others. Entrenching, hardening and cramping will be the result. In some cases it is useful to draw back, for instance when you cannot stand the external input when you are too tired or when you are emotional instable. The person himself temporarily and deliberately chooses this state. It is not an unconscious pattern. If it is an unconscious pattern the result will be that physical and psychological

tension will increase and the possibility to trust on inner feelings adequately will decrease. The athlete will mostly rely on cognitive information and not on what he feels or can feel. These patterns are hard to break open. An individual who is mostly relying on cognitive information and does not use the information of the body is always thinking and analyzing. Facing repellent or displeasing feelings give the opportunity to deal adequately with it. It leads to mental and physical flexibility.

Blocking feelings and emotions can lead to physical and/or emotional inflexibility and rigidity. Through neurophysiological changes this may lead to the loss of flexibility and resilience in movement and skills. If this situation is longer lasting the result will be decreasing fitness and an inability to train and compete effectively. Self-esteem is under pressure, irritation will increase and feelings of gloom will occur. These will all increase the possible occurrence of injuries and as a result achievements will decrease.

If athletes are able to face their feelings they offer themselves the possibility to adequately cope with difficult or unpleasant situations.

8. Touch

An important characteristic of haptotherapeutic treatment is the approach of the person by the body. This approach is based on the physically felt contact between an athlete and a therapist. It is not a massage but another form of touch. It is a form of contact through which the athlete is becoming aware of his body and what he can feel in his body, because the therapist is approaching him as a human being, as a person connected to his body and aware of the impact of this connection. One becomes aware of his body when another person confronts him with his body by touching him in a prudent way. It is a confrontation with what can be felt and the way one responds to those feelings and emotions. For example: the athlete who is lying on the massage table feels his own reaction towards pressure when the therapist literally puts pressure on his body. When the athlete experiences fear, anger or sorrow, he is aware of his own way to deal with these emotions. The therapist lets the athlete feel when he is mentally or physically blocking his emotions. A

therapist can guide him to deal with these emotions adequately by confronting the patient with his body and the signals it gives and the story it tells. In haptotherapy, the person's body, the individual, will never be touched as if it is a machine that needs fixing, but as a human being who lives his life by his body and bodily presence. It is an approach in which the other person feels that he literally is seen, respected and confirmed in who he is.

Sometimes, exercises will be done to initiate experiences where the athlete can learn to be aware of his behavioral patterns, the way he acts on different situations. For example: standing in front of the patient walking slowly towards him, this patient can feel in his body what distance is the right one. His body clearly gives information about how it feels at that moment with that person. Does he listen to that signal or does he ignore it? These experiences show that daily situations have certain impacts on a person and these exercises also show the patterns of reaction of the individual. Most of the time however the athlete is asked to lie down on the massage table while the therapist is sitting or standing beside the table initiating the connection. Every experience is food for thought and verbal analyses can offer insights into behavioral patterns and survival mechanisms.

9. In and out of contact

In the above-mentioned example, athletes develop the possibility of being aware of what they feel and how they deal with their emotions and feelings. Athletes especially learn to feel when they are drawing back or making contact with their own feelings or with the people they come in contact with. A team member in a squad should be aware of his own position on the field and his position and connection with respect to his teammates and even to his opponents. Off the field or arena the athlete relates to press, public, sponsors and other external forces. In these cases it is important that athletes act accurately, not by drawing back and getting stressed, but by feeling what way suits best. When can you open up and when should you draw back? That is the major question.

10. Materials

We do not only differentiate between the sense of the body and the self-awareness of athletes, but athletes can also experience a sense for the materials they use and a sense for the environment, the space they are acting in (the field, the goal, his competitors). For example it is important for tennis players to extend their body with the racket in such a way that they feel as if the racket is part of their body. A human being is able to lengthen his body or the sense of his body with the object he uses (Merleau-Ponty, 1945). It can be compared with working with a drilling machine. One has to feel the wall through the machine in order to feel the hardness of it and to adjust the power and the pressure to adequately drill a good hole. Top athletes 'know' this sense; they unconsciously use this skill all the time in sports activities. However, sometimes they lose that feeling under the pressure and influence of competition stress or pressure to achieve.

A professional rowing athlete said: 'I was not in good shape mentally. My head was full of thoughts and I couldn't get rid of them. I was catastrophizing all the time. In an instant I realized that my paddle, which was so familiar to me, became an obstacle, a strange thing that didn't belong to me. It became so strange that it was almost my enemy. I was fighting with the material that used to give me pleasure, power and strength.'

11. Haptotherapy as a discipline

The haptotherapeutic view on humanity and people had its starting point in the notion that feeling, thinking and acting are inextricably connected. A human being functions as a whole, not just mentally or physically. Haptotherapeutic guidance offers a different view on help for top athletes in order for them to achieve and to stay healthy, mentally, emotionally, as well as physically. It differs from sports medicine, sports physical therapy and sports psychology in the way that its focus is not on only one of the specific aspects of these disciplines. It is an integrative form of therapy where the athlete is approached as a person of flesh and blood, complete with feelings, emotions and moods. Its focus is on the way athletes are aware of their body, how they connect to it and how they use their body, but also on emotions and

how they cope with their behavioral patterns. Haptotherapy is not primarily focused on short-term goals, but on a solid developmental process. These aspects will occur also in physical therapy as well as in psychological support, but for haptotherapists it is core business. Haptotherapy has its own place in the field of medical and psychological help for high-level athletes.

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