Big Game, Little Needles: Acupuncture in Professional Football

Football is the most internationally recognised sport of our era with the FIFA World Cup one of the most watched events worldwide, reaching a global in-home television audience of 3.2 billion in 2014. Due to the strenuous, repetitive movements and physical contact they endure on a regular basis professional footballers are rarely short on injuries needing treatment. Given the detrimental effect on training and results, the concern of prevention and treatment for such injuries needs to be a focus for clubs to ensure success. Acupuncture is being increasingly employed by professional football teams to treat musculoskeletal injuries and long term conditions. It is used both on its own and in conjunction with other therapies such as physiotherapy.

One team that has utilised acupuncture to support its players is Notts County FC who recently let the Acupuncture Association of Chartered Physiotherapists (AACP) film inside their treatment room. Click here to see the full video. Head of Sports Medicine Johnny Wilson advocates giving players autonomy of care and as such will always give his players the option of acupuncture, many of whom have seen benefits to their fitness and performance. Wilson sees the value of acupuncture as being one part of a multi-model approach to footballer’s physiotherapy and often uses it as an augment to methods the players are already engaged in. Wilson states “We have three aspects to our philosophy; reduce their risk of injury, improve their athletic performance and help them tolerate the demands of the game . . . we look at how we can enable the players to run economically and efficiently”.

Notts County Player-Manager Kevin Nolan highlights acupuncture’s role within professional football “Acupuncture has become a part of everyday modern football. You see it used often, there wouldn’t be a day go by that I wouldn’t see the needles come out. It’s something, if we’re going to be moving forward as a medical department, that we need to study and know about and make sure we don’t get left behind and we can give our athletes the best possible rehab.”

Notts County Midfielder Curtis Thomson, who receives acupuncture within the video, comments that as a midfielder he amounts a lot of running time during matches and training which causes his back and legs to cease up “I find that the acupuncture helps release [the tension] and gives me more mobility on the pitch”. Within the video we see Wilson acupuncture three points to treat Curtis’s acute hamstring pain alongside the exercise and stretches that make up the holistic approach championed at the club.

There are many proposed theories of how acupuncture works. One western medical theory discussed by Wilson within the video puts forward that acupuncture modulates spinal signal transmission and the brains perception of pain. Wilson summarises how Acupuncture does this in a three-fold effect:
Local tissue – the inserted needle provides the initial stimulus which creates a local trauma around the needle. This causes a release of calcitonin gene peptides (thought to play a role in the transmission of pain) and histamines which causes a local inflammatory response around the needle.

Spinal segmental approach – following the initial response from the insertion of the needle delta fibres are excited, they in turn excite beta endorphins and encephalons. These neurotransmitters work to decrease the input of pain by asking the brain to attend to the needle rather than the pain that the patient was originally experiencing.

Supraspinal – cells within the spinal cord communicate with specific areas of the brain, in response further neurotransmitters are released which help block the sensation and perception of pain.

Wilson concludes “you’re almost taking your own painkillers.”

Ex-England Striker Alan Smith also credits acupuncture for a quick recovery before a Champion’s League quarter finale against Deportivo de La Coruña. “The Saturday before the Tuesday evening game I had a bad effusion on my right calf . . . I got to Tuesday mid-afternoon and I was still struggling to make any progress. The physio said to me do you want to try acupuncture. That was my first experience and with great results . . . it just dispersed of all the hematoma that I had around that area, the initial reaction was great, I managed to play a full game. I was probably a major doubt for the game beforehand.”

The AACP represents over 6,000 members making it the largest professional body for acupuncture in the UK. AACP members are all qualified and chartered physiotherapists who have successfully completed acupuncture training at a postgraduate level. Acupuncture combined with physiotherapy is widely accepted within both the National Health Service (NHS) and private practice. Your local AACP acupuncture-physiotherapist can be found by visiting aacp.org.uk

Full references on file at the AACP.