

# Napping is part of a winning strategy

## A little extra sleep can help athletes - both physically and mentally

by: Jill Barker

It's a common occurrence: a night spent tossing and turning before an important game or competition, with sleep seemingly a long way off. Knowing that rest primes the body to do its best work, the idea that you're going to be off your game only adds to the stress of trying to grab some much-needed shuteye.

But it's not just the physical side of athletic performance that suffers when sleep is elusive. Decision-making is slower, reaction time is off and it's likely that the mental toughness needed to tackle the challenges ahead is also diminished. So how do you overcome sleep deficit in time to get your mind and body up to speed? Use the strategy practised by overtired toddlers and overworked parents: take a nap.

You might be surprised to know that beyond the endorsement of its biggest fans, there's a science behind napping. Turns out midday naps are the most effective, as they correspond with the time of day when the body naturally feels more sluggish. Studies suggest breaking up the day with a nap restores alertness and helps with memory consolidation, learning and emotional processing.

As for how long a nap should last, it depends on how soon you want to feel the benefits. Short naps of five to 20 minutes offer an immediate boost in energy that extends for several hours after waking. Naps of 30-plus minutes are restorative, but can mean waking up feeling groggy - a sensation that takes up to 30 minutes to disappear.

How does all this relate to physical performance? A group of Tunisian researchers decided to test the effects of a 30-minute nap on physical and mental performance after a night of sleeplessness. They recruited 14 physically active males who were divided into two groups. Alternating between nights of normal sleep and disrupted sleep and nap and no-nap days, they performed a series of cognitive tests as well as a shuttle-run test, designed to evaluate mood, attentiveness, reaction time and short-duration, high-intensity repetitive exercise. A full night's sleep lasted from 10 p.m. to 6 a.m., disrupted sleep was from 10 p.m. to 3 a.m. and the 30-minute nap took place from 1 to 1:30 p.m.

The shuttle-run test consisted of sprinting to a mark five metres from the starting line and back again, then sprinting to a second mark 10 metres from the starting line and back. The whole sequence continued for 30 seconds and was followed by 35 seconds of rest. The sprint and recovery intervals were repeated six times. Statistics collected included peak distance (longest distance covered during a single 30-second interval), total distance (total aggregate distance covered over all six intervals) and fatigue index, which was calculated based on the difference in distance covered between the first and last 30-second interval.

Turns out total and peak distance during the shuttle-run test were higher and the fatigue index lower for those who took a nap versus those who didn't, including those who had a good night's sleep. The nappers also aced the cognitive tests when compared to those who didn't indulge in a midday snooze.

"The results of the present study showed that a 30-minute nap opportunity improved cognitive and physical performances, as well as mood states both after disturbed sleep and normal sleep," said the researchers.

The results jive with several other studies that reported short midday naps reduce anxiety and fatigue while improving alertness, reaction time, energy and cognitive performance. And since activities ranging from team sports to running a marathon demand a combination of physical and mental toughness and acuity, catching a nap pregame is a winning strategy.

What about games that start earlier in the day? The good news is that sleep experts suggest even naps as short as 10 minutes can reduce sleeplessness and improve performance. So if you can carve out

some quiet space and shut your eyes for a few minutes before you pull on your athletic gear, you'll likely be better prepared.

Just remember: if you want to nap, you're going to need to create an atmosphere conducive to rest. Turn off your phone and all digital reminders. Dampen noise with earbuds, or listen to quiet music or white noise to create a soothing background. And try to get your nap in before 3 p.m. Late-day naps can disrupt your evening sleep, which runs contrary to your goal.

Finally, make napping a habit, especially on days when sleep has been less than optimal or when you need to be at your competitive best. A well-rested body is part of the winning conditions needed to achieve personal bests.

© 2020 Postmedia Network Inc. All rights reserved