

The sports world was skeptical when New York Knicks shooting guard Allan Houston announced that he was receiving sports acupuncture treatments for an ankle injury (a common sports injury).

Then he started playing better, and doubt turned into a mixture of surprise and curiosity.

However, according to Matt Callison, a faculty member at Pacific College of Oriental Medicine and licensed acupuncturist in San Diego , Calif. , traditional Chinese medicine has been an extremely helpful and growing trend in athletics for quite a while. San Francisco 49ers Steve Young and Jerry Rice have been treated with sports acupuncture , and Canadian speed skater Kevin Overland received sports acupuncture to help him earn a bronze medal in the 1998 Olympics.

As a sports acupuncturist, Callison has been treating athletes for 11 years. Three of those years were spent with the Minnesota Vikings during their playoff run, and he now treats many of the San Diego Chargers.

“It all started with one guy - Martin Bayless - and then he ended up referring some more players, and it has snowballed from there,” Callison explained.

Because of these referrals and his affiliation with AcuSport Health Center in San Diego , Callison said that about half of his current patients are involved in professional sports.

Started in 2000, AcuSport was created to offer a unique blend of Eastern and Western approaches to orthopedic and internal medicine. By integrating multiple healing techniques, AcuSport is one of the first holistic medical facilities of its kind.

Callison also works in conjunction with student interns from Pacific College of Oriental Medicine to treat athletes from the University of California San Diego (UCSD). At UCSD's RIMAC Arena athletes receive sports acupuncture treatments in addition to care from athletic trainers and

physical therapists. Pacific College interns use acupuncture to help rehabilitate post-operative injuries, sports injuries and athletic performance by increasing range of motion, muscle strength and tissue healing potential. This partnership with UCSD and Pacific College of Oriental Medicine allows Callison to share his unique combination of Sports Medicine , Chinese Medicine and Kinesiology with students and athletes alike.

Callison reported that the most common injuries he treats athletes for are muscle contusions and tendinitis, as well as over-use injuries involving the lower back, shoulder, knee and ankle, all examples of common sports injury areas. These injuries typically require two sports acupuncture treatments a week, with a varied recovery time depending on the injury .

Callison said that he treats "any and all injuries" with the same philosophy: by combining traditional Chinese medicine and sports medicine . The result is a unique blend of sports acupuncture and exercises that Callison said has a quick rehabilitation time.

Marcellus Wiley, a defensive end for the San Diego Chargers, is one patient who noticed how quickly he felt the benefit of acupuncture .

"I responded quickly and favorably to the treatment," Wiley said. "It was refreshing to receive therapy that allowed me to sustain my health for the duration of a season and physically grueling career."

According to Callison, both Oriental medicine and sports medicine techniques focus on proprioception, which he defines as the muscles' awareness communicating to the central nervous system. According to Callison, injury can disrupt this communication, thus hindering balance.

"Acupuncture is one of the quickest ways to restore muscle balance," Callison said. "When acupuncture is used at specific sites, the muscle spindles are reset, and then that balance is reawakened."

Baltimore Ravens safety Will Demps regards sports acupuncture as a definite asset to his

training.

"In my extensive off-season workouts, I have noticed a difference in my balance and agility since receiving treatments at AcuSport Health Center ," Demps said. "I feel my muscles have been 'turned on' and are firing on all cylinders."

Though traditional sports medicine can also help with proprioception by doing exercises, Callison is quick to point out that the results are greatly enhanced when sports acupuncture is applied prior to therapeutic exercise.

"When you insert an sports acupuncture needle to a motor point region, it changes the awareness that the muscle reports to the central nervous system, and that is completely different," Callison said.

Sports acupuncture consists of the gentle insertion and stimulation of thin, disposable sterile needles at strategic points near the surface of the body. Over 2,000 sports acupuncture points on the human body connect with 14 major pathways, called meridians. Chinese medicine practitioners believe that these meridians conduct *qi* , or energy, between the surface of the body and internal organs. It is qi that regulates spiritual, emotional, mental and physical balance. When the flow of qi is disrupted through poor health habits or other circumstances, pain and/or disease can result. Sports acupuncture helps to keep the normal flow of this energy unblocked and "fine-tune the bio-electric system," as Callison says.

Callison also said this ability to fine-tune and restore the body's balance makes sports acupuncture and traditional Chinese medicine a viable preventative therapy that greatly enhances sports medicine exercises.

"Many players come to see me for injury prevention by way of balancing their opposing muscle groups," Callison said. Especially to work on common sports injury points.

Brian Russell, a safety for the Minnesota Vikings, is one of those players.

"As a professional athlete, my career is dependent on my ability to stay healthy," Russell said. "Matt has prevented and treated injuries that may otherwise have shortened my career in the NFL. Matt is a fundamental part of my program, and I intend to see him for the remainder of my career and beyond."

While Callison has been using Oriental medicine with athletes for many years, it's undeniable that most people are unaware of what a strong athletic trend sports acupuncture is becoming.

"Combining sports medicine with traditional Chinese medicine is still in its infant stage," Callison said. "It's actually very popular, but many athletes may not be telling the media or their trainers that they're getting it."

Physician and Sports Medicine reported that a study conducted in 1993 revealed that 72 percent of athletes used some type of holistic unconventional therapy and did not tell their physicians that they had done so.

One exception to this rule is the San Diego Spirit soccer team, which has been officially affiliated with AcuSport Health Center since 2002. Ken Luke, a licensed acupuncturist, Pacific College of Oriental Medicine graduate, and a certified athletic trainer since 1990, has been working with the team for two years.

"I do the acupuncture exclusively, and then the team's athletic trainer and I share the other things, like orthopedic rehabilitation and muscle stretching," Luke said. "It's very similar to what Matt does."

According to San Diego Spirit head athletic trainer Tony Ontiveros, using sports acupuncture in conjunction with Western medical practices has been a positive experience.

"I'm definitely open to trying different techniques," said Ontiveros, who has been working with Luke for four years. "I consider Ken a valuable member of our sports

medicine family."

The San Diego Spirit players have also noticed the benefit of acupuncture .

"My attitude towards any kind of therapy is that it can't hurt," said goalkeeper Jaime Pagliarulo. "It's really made a difference. We're really fortunate to have [acupuncture treatments] because we didn't have them before the last two years."

Pagliarulo said that her teammates feel the same way.

According to Pagliarulo, defensive player Kim Pickup says she craves the sports acupuncture treatments every week.

"She always says her muscles are craving it," Pagliarulo said.

Ontiveros has also seen how much the players enjoy and feel the benefit of acupuncture sessions they receive once a week on average.

"I notice that the ladies enjoy the treatments," he said. "I think Ken and I wouldn't have a relationship if this thing hadn't been successful from the start."

Despite Ontiveros' positive attitude towards sports acupuncture , Callison said that many trainers and sports administrations don't like the idea of their players receiving sports acupuncture because of its untraditional nature.

" Acupuncture is still taboo amongst many Western medical professionals, mostly because they are unaware of its efficacy," Callison said.

While many patients are wary of sports acupuncture because of the needles involved, Callison maintains that there are no side effects of acupuncture treatments when provided by a fully trained and licensed acupuncturist.

In 1993, the National Institutes of Health Consensus Conference on acupuncture released a similar affirmation: "The data in support of acupuncture are as strong as those for many accepted Western medical therapies. One of the advantages of acupuncture is that the incidence of adverse side effects is substantially lower than that of many drugs or other medical procedures used for the same conditions."

Yet Callison is also quick to note that he doesn't think sports acupuncture is superior to traditional sports medicine techniques. Rather, they act to complement each other, one filling in the gap where the other may be lacking.

"It's another slice of the pie," he said. "One athlete may respond to traditional sports medicine and another may respond really well to TCM. The method used may depend on the stage of healing the injury is in."

Callison went on to note that it is important to take individual differences between both injuries and people into account before choosing a recovery technique.

"It all depends on the circumstances," Callison said. "Combining the two medicines can be another adjunct to use where one medicine may not cover most aspects of the injury. Every human being is different and will react to an injury individually. What modality is used [East and West] is up to the practitioner, who can utilize them the best way in order to help the patient."

In the end, Callison hopes that more athletes will try sports acupuncture.

"Athletes especially need to be balanced and take care of their bodies," Callison

said. "That is what acupuncture does. Every athlete can benefit from it in that respect."