

## Science in Action

# Russian Sports Massage

by Oleg Bouimer

**A**s massage therapists, we look for new ways to grow our business and broaden our areas of expertise. Russian sports massage is one modality that offers beneficial substance to retain clients. It is the oldest and perhaps most advanced system of sports massage in the world.

Russian sports massage was regarded as an integral part of sports training and competition in the former Soviet Union and contributed greatly to the overwhelming dominance of that nation's

athletes at the Olympic Games over several decades, where massage therapists shared the spotlight with sports-medicine doctors and coaches.

### Russian use of massage

A brief recounting of Russian sports massage provides some idea of the seriousness with which this type of massage therapy was regarded in its homeland.

Since 1876, massage has been a mandatory subject of study in all medical schools in Russia. In 1888, an institute of massage and gymnastics was founded in Moscow, and the first book on sports massage was published in 1906 by a Russian physician. In 1924, sports-massage education became mandatory in all physical education institutions. From 1924 to 1930, I.M. Sarkisov-Sirasini, M.D., who is considered to be



PHOTOS BY THINKSTOCK



the father of modern sports massage, formulated basic concepts for Russian sports massage and began teaching it at the Central Institute of Physical Therapy in Moscow. And from 1950 to 1970, research studies in the field of sports massage gained speed and depth under the communist regime in the former USSR. Massage therapists were regarded so highly that they received a medal of achievement from the government along with the athletes they worked with.

In the U.S., Russian medical-and-sports massage were promoted and popularized largely by educator and former Soviet Olympic Team massage therapist Zhenya Kurashova Wine (1959-2011), who left her home country and moved to Ohio in 1980.

## Russian vs. Swedish

There are certain attributes of modern Russian sports massage that make it stand apart from Swedish massage:

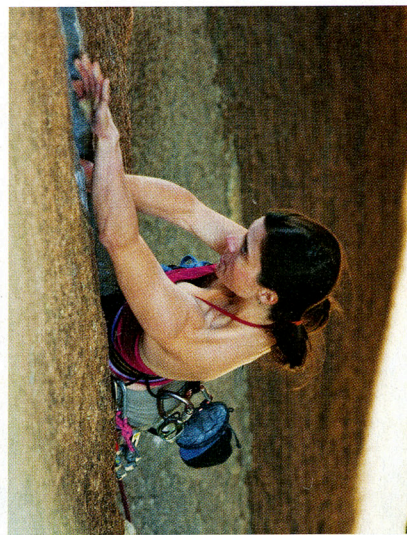
- Russian sports massage is based on scientifically developed protocols, assuring predictable outcomes of each session.
- The speed of massage strokes during Russian sports massage application is significantly greater (around 120 to 140 strokes per minute) than that used for Swedish massage.
- Russian sports massage uses a wide range of kneading techniques (between 12 to 15 learned and five to six mastered) in addition to its unique friction-kneading techniques.

Let us consider each of these points individually.

First, knowledge based on the body of scientific research is vital to all sports-massage therapists in order to better assess the effectiveness of their work while earning more respect and recognition for themselves and the profession. So even though some sports-massage therapists have become successful in their work with professional athletes and fitness enthusiasts, understanding and utilizing the scientifically developed protocols of Russian sports massage will allow the sports-massage therapist to work within a proven container of beneficial outcomes.

For example, for years, removal of lactic acid was one of the main goals of post-event massage; however, it has been scientifically proven that lactic acid is not a cause of muscle soreness after physical exertion. Now, based on this scientific finding, we know there are four equally important components of post-event sports massage: time of treatment, duration of treatment, techniques and pressure. Failure to follow one of these would alter the outcome of the session.

Second, developing a much faster speed of strokes—of course, only in the direction of lymph and venous blood flow—is necessary in order to generate a massive flow of action potential to the brain and receive a desirable response from the central nervous system in the shortest amount of time. Another important factor is that speed could change, but in Russian sports massage, the rhythm of massage strokes has to stay constant. Finding a proper



# Russian sports massage is a scientifically designed, evidence-based system of massage, developed over 100 years.

rhythm is the key in dealing with a physical overload of skeletal muscles.

Clearly, many modalities of massage have been successfully used post-events and as a part of the training process; however, pre-event sports massage is most unique, and requires a specific combination of strokes.

For example, based on the emotional state of an athlete, a practitioner of Russian sports massage would use fast friction, kneading and shaking in the case of apathy; or effleurage, slow friction and kneading in the case of stress, while refraining from percussion or manual vibration. In comparison, during an event, the Russian sports-massage therapist would choose this set of techniques: 35 percent effleurage, 20 percent light shaking and 45 percent passive stretching.

Thus, developing a massage therapist's ability to combine the right techniques, speed and pressure is one

of the goals of Russian sports-massage training. Speed is still one of the most strikingly visual attributes of Russian sports massage. Of course, the main techniques used to speed up the massage are friction and friction-kneading, a complex technique that combines both elements. Once again, when used correctly, 10 minutes of sports massage to fatigued muscles increases their work capacity five to seven times, while a proper protocol of training massage could replace a training session and allow athletes to stay at the peak of performance for up to 12 days.

Third, in Russian sports massage, kneading is the main massage stroke when it comes to skeletal muscles. In general, a massage therapist should spend at least 50 percent of the massage session on kneading. Many massage therapists avoid this because they believe it puts too much stress on their fingers, especially their thumbs.



Here is the secret to saving your thumbs: Learn additional kneading techniques and correct body mechanics, when the weight of your body is a critical component in unloading hands and ensuring fluidity of each kneading technique.

The variety of kneading techniques is needed, based on their specific application. In other words, there are different sports, different body types, different sizes and shapes of skeletal muscles, different sizes of practitioners' hands—and each of them requires a different type of kneading technique rather than fit the same two or three techniques into every protocol. We should also be mindful of the phenomenon of adaptation, when we have to alternate techniques we use in order to avoid having proprioceptors stop responding to our sensory stimulation.

Therefore, there is a justifiable need for learning 12 to 15 kneading techniques, while making the right selection of five to six to include in every session.

Plus, some specific components in kneading techniques, like lifting and stretching, allow us to selectively communicate with proprioceptors in the skeletal muscles. The lifting component activates Golgi tendon organs, followed by a reduction in muscle tone, while the stretching component activates muscle spindle receptors, followed by a slight increase in muscle tone. Hence, alternating lifting and stretching in some kneading techniques serves as passive exercise for the skeletal muscles and maintains a proper muscle tone, even while athletes recover.

In addition to some clear technical differences, Russian sports massage and Swedish massage are designed to serve different purposes: Swedish massage is used oftentimes for stress relief, increased flexibility and relaxation, while Russian sports massage is designed specifically to address pre-, post- and training needs of professional athletes. The benefits of Russian sports massage may naturally be extended to fitness enthusiasts.

## Rules of engagement

Here we come to another key concept: the working conditions of

Russian sports-massage therapists that set them apart professionally. Russian sports massage is a scientifically designed, evidence-based system of massage, developed over 100 years, endorsed by medical doctors. Trained sports-massage therapists in Russia experience having their work treated as an integral part of the training process in sports. They can also experience equal professional input with coaches and athletic trainers in coordinating mandatory massage sessions along with training sessions for athletes.

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# Russian sports massage has the potential to create a highly recognized and respected community of sports-massage experts.

The experience of giving and receiving massage is taken to a whole new level.

Clearly, at that level of recognition, the rules of engagement are changed: The massage therapist decides when sessions should be given, how often, how long, and what the clients or athletes need to do in between sessions as an essential component in the whole process. This optimizes the clients' performance and is different from the working conditions experienced by many massage therapists practicing Swedish-based sports massage.

## Training in the technique

Massage therapists may find a variety of Russian sports-massage seminars, DVDs and other educational material offered online.

You can build a successful practice as a sports-massage therapist. Sports massage has its own powerful application.

It is my sincere hope that sports-massage therapists would choose to learn this evidence-based system of sports massage, with its benefits for both professional athletes and fitness enthusiasts.

Russian sports massage has a great history and an impressive body of scientific research behind it—and the potential to create a highly recognized and respected community of sports-massage experts united by this system.

Oleg Bouimer is director of advanced studies at Southern California Health Institute and a former professional athlete from the Ukraine. He has been a rehabilitation specialist, researcher and educator for more than two decades. He is also executive director of the Global Wellness Institute ([www.owellnessglobal.com](http://www.owellnessglobal.com)), a nonprofit organization focused on massage therapy research. 

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