

# The world's third-best masseur lives, works in Lafayette

**Editor's note:** *An earlier version of this story should have referred to Jonathan Grassi as a masseur, as he is male. The story below and its headline have been corrected.*

The atmosphere was tense as Jonathan Grassi bent and lifted and stretched under the watchful gaze of the judges. The eastern Europeans had been sending out heavy Cobra Kai vibes since the start of the competition. A contingent of Romanians were walking around in T-shirts that said “World Champions, 2018” intimidating the field with their cool confidence.

It would have been easy to get swept up in the fervor of the day. But Grassi stayed laser focused on the task at hand, calming himself with deep breaths until the world around him receded. Drawing on his decade-plus of training, Grassi performed his complex maneuvers rhythmically and flawlessly.

The judges took notice, and in the end, Grassi — who lives and works in Lafayette — went home with a bronze medal and a title. He was now officially the world's third-best freestyle masseur.

Massage and competition don't sit easily together in the mind. One conjures images of relaxation, calm, serenity; the other of opposition, winners and losers and screaming crowds. But the founders of the event and local massage therapists who participate in it view the World Massage Championship as a way to bring attention and acclaim to the ancient art of massage — and Boulder's role in advancing it.

“This is the mecca,” Grassi said. “All these masters are here. I came to Boulder because I heard the call.”

## American style

The World Massage Championship was established in 2017 by the International Massage Association, a six-person governing group whose aim is to “develop and promote the various massage techniques which are practiced ... worldwide,” Jeppe Tengbjerg, CEO of the Denmark-based organization, said via email.

“A competition is the best way to bring so many nationalities together,” Tengbjerg said. The 2018 contest drew 127 practitioners from 37 countries.

There is no qualifying for the World Massage Championships: any licensed therapist can enter, so long as they pay the 200 Euro entrance fee. (Roughly \$228, as of this writing.)

There are five categories: Swedish massage, Asian massage, wellness massage, chair massage and freestyle, which has been split into two distinct categories for the 2019 competition based on its roots in either Eastern or Western tradition.

In the early rounds, competitors work on one another; judges merely observe. It's not

until the category champions compete for best-in-show that the top judges actually receive 65-minute massages. Points are awarded at each stage; the highest point-getter is crowned World's Best Masseur.

Competitors must wear shoes (except in Thai yoga massage) according to the official rules, posted online.

Massage therapists are evaluated according to six criteria: technique, ergonomics, flow, client contact, recipient feedback, and innovation and development of new methods.

A student of the Boulder College of Massage Therapy, Grassi studied phenomenal touch, an [invention of Boulder-based practitioner Leslie Bruder](#). Phenomenal touch is a three-dimensional approach to massage, one in which the client does not remain lying flat but has various body parts held, pushed and pulled in a range of motions.

“You’re lifting (them) off the table, you’re rocking them, you’re undulating them — there’s one move where the whole body comes off the table,” Grassi said. The client is “the flower, so to speak. This is (their) unfolding. I’m just nurturing that.”

This maverick style is indicative of how American masseurs are viewed on the world stage, Grassi said. Many types of massage date back thousands of years and, as such, are somewhat constrained by “cultural ancient limitations” and traditions of what massage can and can’t look like.

“American massage,” Grassi said, “is more, like, what could be.”

## **The mecca**

Massage is still gaining ground as an accepted practice in America. Though it has been around in some form for centuries, a professional organization — originally the 29-member Chicago American Association of Masseurs, today the American Massage Therapy Association — wasn’t formed until 1943, and most states didn’t put formal regulations in place until the 2000s.

Colorado adopted more stringent standards only recently, in 2014, but the state has long been a leader in an industry that flourished outside of the mainstream. The industry group Associated Bodywork & Massage Professionals is based in Golden, and the Boulder College of Massage Therapy was the second such institution of learning established in the United States.

Founded in 1975, Boulder College [ran out of cash and closed in 2013](#); Boulder’s resident Buddhist university, Naropa, [purchased the name and intellectual property](#) two years later. While it was operational, the institution was known as the Harvard of massage schools; today, many of its graduates operate practices in the area.

“The therapists who came out of that school are some of the most excellent in the country,” said Jill Berkana, a Boulder College alumnus who now owns Berkana Institute of Massage Therapy in Longmont.

Berkana next summer will travel to Denmark to serve as a judge in the 2019 World Championships. She has long thought an “Olympics of massage” would be a great boost to the industry as a way to introduce styles from around the world to therapists eager to expand their practices.

“Even in the U.S., massage therapy is completely different from state to state and region to region,” Berkana said. A national competition would be “an amazing opportunity to learn about different techniques and modalities.”

There aren't any plans to host a U.S. Massage Championship, said Leslie Young of Associated Bodywork & Massage Professionals— at least not that she's aware of. The organization also is holding off on sponsoring therapists to attend the World Championships in Denmark, or otherwise promoting participation.

“That's a real expensive gig for a massage therapists when you consider that most (practitioners) work part time,” Young said. Fewer than a dozen American therapists competed in 2018, according to Grassi.

Young also admitted that the idea of a massage competition seemed “a little antithetical” when she first heard of it. “It did take me a little while to understand. But the more I've learned, it's really about showcasing the breadth and depth of massage around the world.”

Berkana is hoping that, by participating, she can help others jump any hurdles they might have in considering “massage” and “competition” in the same vein.

“I'm hoping that my participation is going to wake people up a bit,” she said. “Hopefully we'll get some more people in the U.S. to compete.”

## **Culture of touch**

One person who will be notably absent from the 2019 contest is Grassi. He initially planned to return and go for the gold, but now he sees a different path.

“I want to step into this larger role of training other therapists in Bodywork for Liberation,” his own personal practice. “As good as our massage schools are, we're not teaching these deeper aspects of body work and holding space, of energy and sensitivity and how to deal with trauma.”

Grassi hopes to have courses set up by the new year, starting in Boulder and then teaching throughout the country. Therapists are already “flying in from all over” to learn; he has plans to fly to Hollywood soon and work on a group that may include an unnamed celebrity.

His own practice has been booming in the six months since taking bronze in Denmark. There is a two-month waiting list to get in. The experience is worth the hype, said long-time client Kate Wright, who has been seeing Grassi for eight years.

She started going when her mother was diagnosed with late-stage breast cancer, she said. “It was not what I expected. Even from the beginning, his difference was clear to me.”

It was more than the physical ways he moved her body — all over the place. The magic extended beyond the technique, which in itself was enough to turn her “into a puddle of goo” on the table.

“I really give Jonathan a lot of credit for helping me to have a felt sense of experience of the wisdom of my own body,” Wright said. “I left more rejuvenated, more in contact with my own needs. That's not a small thing.”

Wright was inspired by Grassi to pursue study of healing arts on her own, a departure from her career as an engineer. That sort of outcome is exactly what Grassi is after: to further advance the embrace of ancient remedies in the modern world — the reason he competed in the World Championships in the first place.

“Touch in general is a wounded place” in American culture, he said. “There’s a real fear around it. Massage hold thousands of years of lineage. It’s one of the oldest medicines. It’s as deep as food, as deep as songs, as deep as myths. Touch is as deep as any of those things. To have a culture of educated touch (would be) so revolutionary.”

*Shay Castle: 303-473-1626, [castles@dailycamera.com](mailto:castles@dailycamera.com) or [twitter.com/shayshinecastle](https://twitter.com/shayshinecastle)*