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Fitness

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Recover Like a Champ: The Post-Workout Ritual Every Pro Depends On

Athletes from every sport swear by ice baths to reduce muscle soreness. But do they work for regular guys? Our man plunges in and emerges a believer

→ After Usain Bolt won three gold medals at the track-and-field world championships this August, he Instagrammed a video. "I'm about to do one of the hardest things I've ever done in my life," he said. Then he sat in a bathtub filled with ice water, calling out to God as it reached his nether regions.

Pretty much every professional jock these days concludes his workouts with a pulse-racing, ball-shriveling ice bath. And guess what: It's

every bit as effective for us weekend warriors, arguably the fastest way to undo the damage of a pickup ball game, a Tough Mudder, or a vigorous session on the Wii. But most amateurs think they can get by with a couple of Advils and a bag of frozen peas.

"Sure, you can use an ice pack over your knee," says Aaron Nelson, head of the Phoenix Suns' vaunted athletic-training team. "But if you have overall body soreness, an ice bath is the only

way to go." The science is solid: Cold reduces joint inflammation and constricts your blood vessels, which then dilate when the body warms up post-bath. That's when your muscles get a rush of blood, which flushes out lactic acid—the stuff that's causing your next-day aches.

I didn't fully realize the benefits until I trained for my first marathon. A much faster, far more serious runner friend recommended the bath to soothe my sore knees and balky hamstrings. So after a miserable twenty-mile jaunt, I hobbled to my corner store and bought two bags of ice.

I dumped the ice in the tub, filled it with water, and stared into the abyss. When

I finally summoned the courage to get in, the sound I made was equal parts shriek and primal scream. And yes, there were George Costanza levels of shrinkage. Like a frightened turtle!

The glacial water felt like a thousand tiny needles poking my skin. But when I ran the next day, my legs were surprisingly fresh. My creaky knees and calf cramps? Gone. That tight-as-a-rope hamstring? Couldn't feel it.

Since then, I've developed strategies to distract myself from the wintry water temps. Sometimes I'll enjoy my ice bath with a refreshing beer and a blaring mixtape. Or I'll listen to ball games on the radio and yell at the play-by-play guy, to my girlfriend's amusement.

Basically, I'll do whatever it takes to soak for twelve to fifteen minutes; anything less isn't worth the trouble. "It takes somewhere between three and five minutes for the body to get used to that biting and stinging feeling," Nelson says. "But if you jump out in that window, you've defeated what you tried to accomplish." —BILL BRADLEY

◀ Be a total hard-ass like Dutch adventurer Wim Hof: Pretend not to notice the chill.



Three (Warmer) Ways to Beat Muscle Soreness

Less Pain



Let Those Muscles Breathe

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