

HEALTH & FITNESS

The Pro Treatment

These health-care specialists keep tennis stars playing at their peak.

BY ALYSSA SHAFFER

For every five-set marathon match, give credit not just to the players holding the racquets, but also to the health and fitness pros who help them achieve peak performance. "The behind-the-scenes professionals—from the sports nutritionist who recommends the right foods to the conditioning coach and physiotherapist who keep players strong and healthy—are big reasons we see the amazing level of play on court today," says Todd Ellenbecker, director of medical services for the ATP tour and chair of the USTA Sport Science Committee. Here's a look at some of the health-care pros who help your favorite players stay on top.

Trainer

While some players probably spent last Christmas at home sipping eggnog, Fernando Verdasco was in Las Vegas working on his conditioning with trainer Gil Reyes. His efforts paid off at the Australian Open, as Verdasco went shot for shot with Rafael Nadal in a five-set semifinal that was the longest match in the tournament's history. "Building up that kind of endurance is crucial," says Reyes, who trained Andre Agassi. "The game today has changed, and it's come down to who is the best-prepared player holding the racquet."

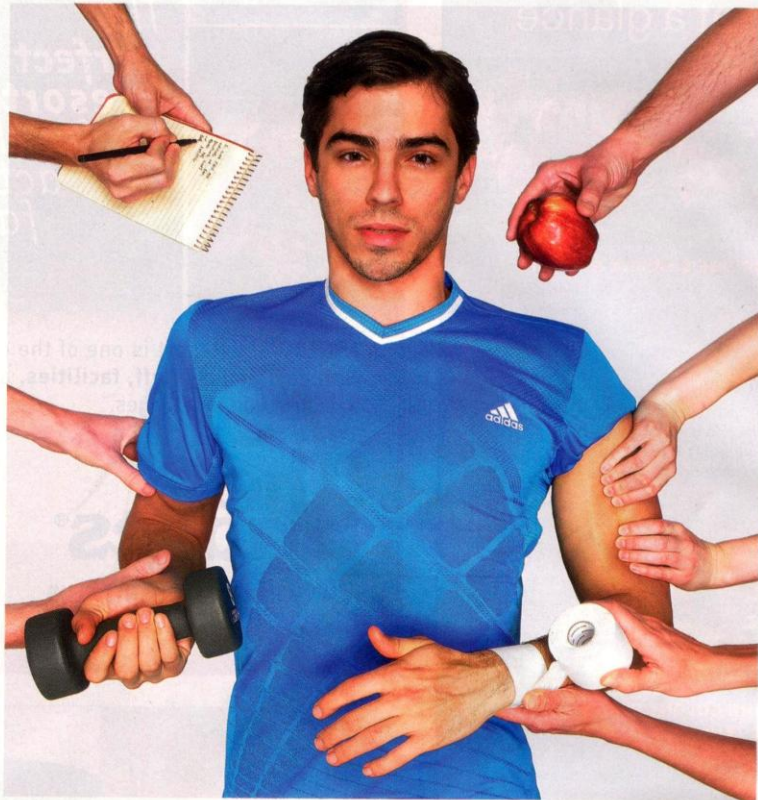
Reyes preps players by focusing on leg strength. "When your legs are tired, it affects your shot selection," he says. In a two-hour workout, a player might spend 90 minutes doing lower-body strengthening exercises, followed by 30 minutes of upper-

body conditioning. Reyes' clients, who have included Sam Querrey and Sabine Lisicki, quickly notice the difference. "After two weeks [with Reyes], I realized how I can be a harder player [to beat]," Verdasco said in Melbourne. "I'm feeling physically and mentally stronger than last year." Reyes no longer travels with players, but he'll design a workout for them to follow on the road. "The athleticism out there has been raised," Reyes says. "You have to keep up to compete."

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60 TENNIS.COM MAY 2009



Physical therapist

Whether a player is cramping on court or shaking off an ankle sprain, the first person to come to his or her aid is usually a physical therapist. As the primary health-care providers on tour, physios are crucial to helping players compete safely. "We do preventive care, treat acute pain and get them started on a rehab program," says Lisa Chase, director of athlete care for the WTA tour.

Both the WTA and ATP have physical therapists who travel to tournaments around the world. But the emergency care you see on the sidelines is only part of the job. Physios also educate players on everything from how to stay hydrated to getting through flu season. At each tournament, therapists set up training areas where players prepare for matches and get assistance with injuries. "It can get pretty crazy, especially early in a tournament or during a rain delay," Chase says.

Once a year, physical therapists on both tours conduct player screenings with sports-medicine doctors, placing an emphasis on prevention rather than treatment. "Everyone comes to see us at

one point or another," Chase says, "even if their own health-care practitioners are treating them."

Nutritionist

Few things affect performance as immediately as diet. The wrong pre- or post-match meal can make a big difference when you're out there for a long time. But sports nutritionists do more than provide basic diet advice. They also identify poor eating patterns and potential health concerns and recommend supplements.

"Outside the Top 30 or so, many athletes haven't had a lot of interaction with dietitians," says Page Love, M.S., R.D., who consults for the USTA and at WTA tournaments. "We're able to educate them about healthy eating and how to maximize their performance." Issues like how to gain or lose weight appropriately often come into play. Supplements, customized to meet anti-doping standards for the WTA by USANA Health Sciences, a tour sponsor, are a big draw, with players receiving free nutritional consultations and products.

Given the multinational demographics of the tours, eating habits are diverse.

Europeans usually gravitate toward pasta and olive oil, Asians veer toward stir-fry, and Americans are “all over the board,” Love says. Who needs the most nutritional advice? “Americans usually have the most issues,” Love says. “Many players are affected by the culture of fad diets in the U.S. There’s a lot of misinformation out there, and it’s our job to help them sort through it all.”

Sports psychologist

It’s said that tennis is primarily a mental game. No wonder, then, that sports psychology can play a crucial role in helping players perform at their best. “It’s our job to help athletes not only mentally prepare for the game, but also deal with issues like handling the pressure of high expectations,” says Daniel Gould, Ph.D., director of the Institute for the Study of Youth Sports at Michigan State University and a member of the USTA Sport Science Committee.

Take, for example, a 20-something who has skyrocketed to fame, or a phenom who can’t shake an overprotective parent. “We help provide perspective, and also play a role as a neutral party. Hopefully, we can offer actionable advice,” Gould says. Suggestions might range from coping skills to counter negativity in a match to handling the onslaught of media attention when one high-profile player dates another.

Although most sports psychologists don’t travel as part of a player’s entourage, they consult on a regular basis. “Part of our job is to ask good questions,” Gould says. “Often they have all this other stuff built up and no one to talk to—it’s kind of like flushing the toilet to get things out.”

Massage therapist

Massages are common at tournaments, but they’re not exactly like a trip to the spa. “Our job is to get players on the court and ready for their next match,” explains Steve Jurch, director of massage therapy for the WTA.

“The biggest benefit [of massage] is that it helps reduce delayed-onset muscle soreness, the muscular pain that often comes on about 12 to 24 hours after a match,” Jurch says. Massage increases circulation, helping remove muscle toxins while keeping muscles pliable and improving range of motion. Massage therapists also work closely with physios, helping treat sore muscles and contain injuries. Such was the case when Elena Dementieva won the 2008 Fortis Championships in Luxembourg. “After each match and on her off days she would get massage therapy, especially on her legs,” Jurch says. “It definitely seemed to help her stay on the court longer.”

FROM LEFT, RAJNEE BEHRENS; KEN KARP

WORKOUT OF THE MONTH

Upper-Body Builders

Gain strength by doing variations on the push-up

Have you seen Andy Murray’s biceps lately? The days of the slope-shouldered, skinny tennis pro are over. Players can’t get by on athleticism alone. They need to train. “Strength training is extremely important to take your game to the next level,” says Diane Vives, a certified strength and conditioning specialist and owner of Vives Training Systems and Fit4Austin in Austin, Texas. When it comes to the upper body, that doesn’t mean arm curls and triceps extensions. Isolating muscles will help you bulk up, but you need multi-tasking movements to really build strength. The following variations on the push-up will strengthen your chest, upper back and shoulders while building core stability. If they’re too challenging, try the first three exercises from your knees. Do 2–3 sets of 12–15 repetitions.



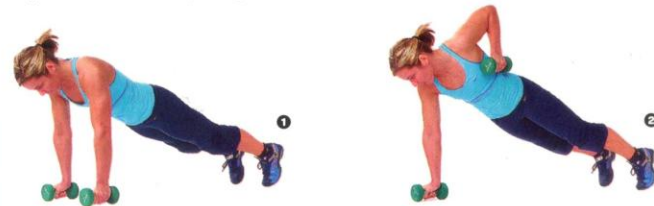
FOUR-COUNT PUSH-UPS

Strengthen the arms and chest. (1) Get in a push-up position with your hands directly below your shoulders. Keeping your body in a straight line and your core tight, (2) lower yourself into a push-up while counting one-two-three-four. Push yourself straight back up and repeat. “Lowering yourself slowly will help you decelerate,” Vives says, so you can hit more powerfully and control quick movements. “That’s going to allow you to gain strength quicker than doing something fast.”



UPPER-BODY STEPS

Strengthen the chest and shoulders and build conditioning. Start in a push-up position with your arms straddling a workout step. With your back straight and core tight, (1) put your right hand on top of the step, (2) then the left, so both hands are on the platform. Now move your right hand back down, followed by the left. Repeat.



PRONE PULL

Strengthens the upper back and shoulders. (1) Get in a push-up position with a 5–10-pound dumbbell in each hand. Keep your body straight and your core tight. Supporting your weight on your toes and right hand, (2) pull your left elbow up into a single-arm row. Squeeze your shoulder blades together. Return to the starting position and repeat with your right arm. “The pulling motion works the muscles around the shoulder,” Vives says, “the ones that decelerate powerful serves and forward swings.”

ROTATIONAL PUSH-UPS

Build shoulder strength and stability. Start in a push-up position. With your body in line and your core tight, lower yourself into a push-up. As you push up, rotate your body to the left so that you’re supporting yourself on your right hand and the sides of your feet (the outside of your right foot and the inside of your left foot). Put your left hand straight up in the air so your shoulders are stacked and your arms form a line that’s perpendicular to the floor. When you’ve finished the movement and feel balanced, return to the starting position. Repeat to the other side.—SARAH UNKE

