Soft Tissue Management – A Key to Improving Athletic Performance

By Dr. Brian Abelson DC.

About ART

Active Release Technique (ART) was developed by Dr Michael Leahy a Doctor of Chiropractic based in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

Dr. Leahy formulated a unique and effective approach for dealing with soft tissue injuries, now known as ART.

Active Release Technique (ART) is a highly effective technique for resolving a wide variety of soft tissue injuries. In fact, ART has proven to be so effective that Ironman Organizers have now requested the presence of ART practitioners at all upcoming Ironman Triathlon events.

ART has provided a wake-up call for me. Practicing ART takes individuals out of their comfort zones, (because they come to realize how important soft tissue work is to effective healing) but helps them to grow in their practice.

For more information about ART, available courses, and certification for practicing ART, please visit their website at www.activerelease.com

As Chiropractors, we can have a tremendous impact on injury prevention, increasing athletic performance, and ensuring effective and rapid resolution of soft tissue injuries.

In fact, I believe that we, as Chiropractors, could come to dominate the field of manual medicine if we could first break free from the self-imposed limitations of our own treatment paradigms. It is time to wake up to the reality, that although the Chiropractic adjustment is a very powerful tool, it is ***not*** the only tool we need to use when we work with patients suffering from Soft Tissue Injuries.

I speak from personal experience. For the last 20 years I have been involved in both the running and triathlon communities, participated in a broad variety of other sports, and taught exercise classes. And like many athletes, I have suffered through my share of injuries.

In addition, I have had the privilege of assisting world class athletes in their recovery from injuries both at my clinic, and at Ironman Triathlon events. My involvement as both an athlete and as a practitioner has provided a wonderful basis to experience, first hand, which treatment techniques work and which are only partially effective. I would like to share some of these experiences with you.

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About Ironman Triathlons

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Swimmers at the start of the Penticton 2001 Ironman

The Ironman Triathlon is seen by many to represent one of the most challenging endurance events known.

In an Ironman race, competitors must:

- Swim 2.4 miles
- Cycle 112 miles
- Run a full 26.2-mile marathon.

Participants range in age from 18 to 80 years, come from over 50 countries around the world, and vary greatly in shape, size, and levels of fitness.

The race itself is always challenging in its course, terrain, and environment. Athletes, in addition to carrying out what must be one of the greatest athletic feats, must also be able to endure and perform in extremes of terrain and weather. The race is a challenge to both the body and the spirit.

One of the great thing about working at these events is the opportunity to treat professional, Olympic, and world-class athletes.

2001 Ironman Triathlons

During the 2001 year, I had the pleasure of working with the ART Ironman Team at both the Penticton Canadian Ironman Championship and at the Kona Hawaii World Championship. The *ART Ironman Teams* consisted of ART practitioners from the fields of Chiropractic, Physiotherapy, Medicine, Massage, and Sports Training.

Hawaii – DSC00747
Dr. Joe Bradley and Dr. Brian Abelson working on of the 100's of athletes who attended the ART Clinic at the Kona Ironman Championships.

At each Triathlon, we had many remarkable athletes attend our outdoor clinics to receive ART treatments, and witnessed many amazing recoveries.

As an example, I would like to review a case from one of the Ironman Triathlons, where I worked with the ART Ironman Team.

A 27 year old woman from California (we will call her Sandy for this story), had trained for 6 years to be at this Ironman.

Two weeks prior to the Ironman she began to experience severe low back and hip pain on her right side. She had seen her MD and Chiropractor prior to coming to the Triathlon, without any improvement. In fact her condition had been getting worse.

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ART and Triathlons

Art practitioners have conducted ART clinics at a number of Ironman competitions, and will soon be present at every Ironman competition. At the Kona Ironman Championships, ART practitioners treated over 1000 athletes over a period of 5 days.

After the completion of the Kona Triathlon, I had the opportunity to speak with the Ironman Race Director. He had some very interesting facts to share about the 2001 championship:

- The 2001 Ironman Championship Race was run under some of the worst conditions. The winds were so severe that numerous contestant were actually blow off of their bikes or forced to walk their bikes.
- Temperatures were very high, with the bike and running path passing through black and brown lava fields.
- This years event had the highest number of finishers of any Ironman event to this date. Almost 93% completed.
- The Race Director contributed this high success rated to the over 1000 treatments ART provided to athletes prior to the race.

She came to see us at the Ironman ART Clinic *two days* before the Ironman event. She was in extreme pain, and barely able to walk without limping. Despite this, she was determined to at least start the race and do her best, to justify her six years of preparation.

Under normal circumstances, using traditional methods, I would have treated with Chiropractic adjustments, then recommended ice, and rest.

Sandy had a history of ankle sprains, shin splints, knee trouble and occasional back pain. She underwent maintenance Chiropractic care for these conditions, which never resolved the problems, but did keep them under control between visits. Due to ongoing pain during training, she had attended regular Chiropractic treatments for over 6 years.

I conducted gait analysis and performed orthopedic assessments to note the following:

- Restrictions of the right SI joint with a positive straight leg test at 45 degrees
- All other orthopedic and neurological tests were within normal limits.
- Vertebral restriction was at L5, and T8 with a hyperlordotic curve.
- An anterior talus on the right foot.
- Gait observation showed that she was slightly bent into flexion and appeared to be dragging her right leg.
- There was very little rotation in her lumbar spine.
- Her right patella was pointing laterally and her right foot was flopping.

Our Treatment…

I performed a Chiropractic adjustment on her feet, knees, hips, SI joints, lumbar and thoracic spine. I then had her walk back and forth to observe her gait. She felt slightly better, so I had her start to jog. Jogging caused her to have severe pain after only 10-15 steps. Besides having more motion in her SI joints and lumbar spine, all initially noted postural distortions were still present.

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Dr. Abelson and Dr. Rennick applying ART to resolve hip and low back problems.

At this point, we began to use the ART Soft Tissue techniques to work the kinetic chain up from the foot, to break up restricted structures and to restore function. (There are many soft tissue procedures available, ART is the one I have found to be most effective.)

- We started with the Tibialis anterior and Peroneus Longus muscles, which are often involved in ankle sprains. Both of these muscles act as stabilizing for the ankle, and are often injured during inversion sprains.
- The posterior of the knee was extremely tender to palpation over the Popliteus muscle. This muscle is involved in the rotational stabilization of the knee. After working this muscle I noted her right knee was now in alignment with her foot.
- We then worked the iliotibial band, Gluteus Medius, and Minimus. These structures are often involved in hip pain and low back pain.
- Finally we focused on the hip flexors the psoas and iliacus. Almost immediately after working on the psoas and iliacus, our patient noted a drastic relief in pain.

Our Results…

We then repeated our gait analysis. The difference was incredible – in fact - it was difficult to believe we were looking at the same patient. There was no deviation of the lower extremity, she had straight knees, fluid motion through the hips and SI joints, and a noticeable reduction in her hyperlordotic curve. We then had Sandy run down to the end of the field and back. She did so with only minor discomfort.

Next day, Sandy returned to the clinic with a very big smile. She had no pain for the first time in 6 years of maintenance care. We repeated the ART procedures and saw even more improvement.

During the Ironman Triathlon, I had the great pleasure of watching Sandy cross the finish line after her 140.6 mile ordeal. And most profoundly rewarding, after crossing the line in a state of exhaustion, Sandy took the time to walk up to me to thank me for helping her get there!

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Our Opportunity…

Sports, Chiropractic, and soft tissue management provides an ideal combination of treatment protocols. I have achieved phenomenal results at my own practice since I incorporated ART into our treatment methodologies. Due to ART's effectiveness, I have been able to move over 80% of my patients from a maintenance category to the resolution stage.

This has resulted in extremely happy patients, an increased patient referral rate, and rapid growth of our practice. As a practitioner, I have found great satisfaction in resolving many difficult cases quickly, and shared joy in my patients new found state of health.

All the best in health
Dr. Brian Abelson DC.

References:

1. Active Release Techniques – Lower extremity and Spine Manuals, Dr. Michael Leahy.
2. Ironalive.com – Historical archive www.ironmanalive.com
3. Ironman Canada – www.ironman.ca

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Dr. Abelson regularly teaches courses in nutrition and alternative and complementary medicine for the Calgary Board of Education, Massage Schools, various health organizations, and to other health care practitioners. Dr. Abelson is the host of the award winning, popular web site "Ask Dr. Abelson" at www.drabelson.com.

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