

JACK MEAGHER

SCORED THE FIRST GOAL FOR SPORTS MASSAGE

by Vanessa Craft

JACK MEAGHER HAS HAD MORE INFLUENCE on the massage therapy profession than many people realize. His 1980 book, *Sportsmassage*, gave inspiration to a fledgling group of young massage therapists working with athletes, and he developed the Meagher Method of massage to improve athletic performance. But to see Meagher (pronounced “Mar”) only as the innovator of sports massage would be myopic indeed, since his influence extends well beyond athletes and athletic massage.



“I don’t know any massage therapist that could say Jack’s book didn’t have an influence on their technique,” said Dan Ulrich, president of the Sun Coast Center for Natural Health in Tampa, Florida, and founder of the International Sports Massage Conference.

Meagher’s book helped provide the physiological foundation massage therapy needed to gain acceptance by members of the medical profession.

“*Sportsmassage* was one of the most clinically important books of the last two decades,” said Robert King, a past national president of the American Massage Therapy Association (AMTA) and founder and director of the Chicago School of Massage Therapy.

But Meagher, 76, is more than just an important historical figure. A new book, *Power of Sports Massage for Horses and Humans*, shows how sports massage can increase athletic performance (Meagher is currently negotiating with a publisher). And he still performs massage—on both humans and horses.

“Every day, I have my routine,” Meagher said. “In my human business, my same people own their same times every week, some

for up to 25 years. And its getting to be the same with the horses.”

The acceptance of Meagher’s work—and sports massage in general—was a long time coming. When he graduated from the Nyvall School of Swedish Massage in 1942, the focus of massage was on stress-reduction and relaxation. But Meagher was interested in movement and sports, and wanted to help athletes.

During World War II Meagher served as a medic in combat, in Germany. His interest in massage and his love of sports led him to a German POW who gave him his first insight into how a therapist’s trained hands could improve athletic performance. The German soldier massaged Meagher prior to camp football games, using strokes that were quite different from those he had learned in school. More importantly, Meagher discovered that the pre-game massages allowed him to move more freely while playing.

After the war Meagher embarked on a career as a professional baseball pitcher, but his stint with the minor-league Boston Braves was cut

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short because of a wartime shoulder injury. Frustrated by his inability to find relief for the nagging injury, he enrolled in the Connecticut School of Viennese Massage, from which he graduated in 1946. He then entered the Massachusetts School of Physiotherapy, graduating in 1948. Meagher worked as a physical therapist for a brief period, but found the work cold and impersonal.

"In those days, you'd just follow the prescription the doctor laid out," he said. "But massage is a very personal thing."

STRESS-POINT PHILOSOPHY

With his knowledge of anatomy, his interest in athletics and his keen eye for motion, Meagher began to develop a massage philosophy based on helping athletes improve their performance and athletic longevity by increasing their freedom of motion. He believed that freedom, or ease, of motion is a basic physiological requirement for muscles—and athletes—to per-

form their best. Any restriction that inhibits motion not only diminishes performance, it can lead to injury. By eliminating these restrictions, Meagher reasoned, massage can both improve an athlete's performance

and reduce the risk of injury.

Meagher's philosophy was elegant in its simplicity, but complex in its implementation. To enable an athlete to move freely, he had to figure out which muscles were used during any particular movement. He succeeded at this monumental mission through years of careful observation.

Meagher set up his table at a YMCA and at a country club to ensure he got an athletic clientele (and to be respectable in an era of massage parlors). He carefully observed his clients' movement both before and after massage.

During massage sessions he paid close attention to what he felt with his hands. With careful palpation he could find knots within muscles and assess their state. Meagher began to understand not only which muscles were used in particular movements, but that certain areas of the muscles were more stressed than others. He realized that the muscles' origin and inser-

tion points are more stressed than the muscle belly. Meagher called these junctions "stress points" and focused his massage work on these areas.

THREE STROKES

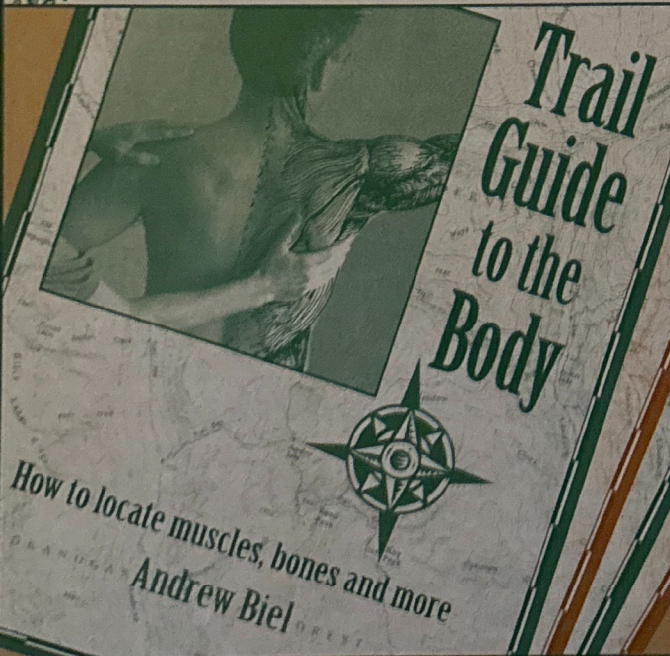
To work on specific stress points, Meagher decided he needed to use strokes that were different from the ones he learned in school.

"I threw away all the superficial movements and stuck to three things," he said. Those three things were direct pressure, cross-fiber friction and compression. Direct pressure and cross-fiber friction were adaptations from strokes he had learned as a physical therapist.

Meagher applied direct pressure to a stress point in spasm to increase circulation to that point and to soften the underlying muscle. The muscle fibers were then prepared for cross-fiber friction, which spread and separated them so they could once again extend and contract normally. Once the fibers at the stress point were released from their spasm, Meagher applied compressions along the entire length of the muscle to spread the fibers and increase circulation to the entire muscle.

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Meagher worked on just about every kind of athlete at one time or another.

Hoping to prove his therapy worked, Meagher conducted tests on runners, swimmers and weight lifters.

"I found that when I finished with somebody, that person was always able to do more after massage than they could before," he said.

But doctors and athletic trainers were skeptical. They believed that any massage benefit was purely psychological, and if anything could be done to give an athlete greater freedom of motion, it could be done through proper training methods.

Determined to prove the value of sports massage, Meagher decided to try the technique on horses. "Nobody could say I psych-ed a horse," he reasoned. So after 20 years of massaging human athletes, Meagher began massaging athletes of the equine variety, though he admits to being terrified of the powerful animals. He soon realized that the stress points on horses were in the same strategic locations as those on humans. He was ecstatic. "I did every horse that someone would let me near," he recalled.

In 1975 Meagher approached Jack LeGoff, coach of the United States Equestrian Team, about massaging the team's horses. After seeing how the massage technique helped a horse with an old shoulder injury, LeGoff asked Meagher to work on the team horses in preparation for the 1976 Olympics in Montreal. One of Meagher's equine clients, Bally Cor, carried Tad Coffin to a gold medal. In August 1976, a *Sports Illustrated* article described Meagher's work with the team and credited him with helping Bally Cor win. In 1978 Meagher worked at a three-day equestrian world championship in Lexington, Kentucky. A story in *The Courier-Journal*, a

Louisville newspaper, followed. Suddenly, people began to pay attention: If Meagher

could help the horses perform better, surely he could help human athletes.

"If it wasn't for the horses, there probably wouldn't be a sports massage for people," he said.

PROS TESTIFY

The majority of Meagher's human clients were runners, partly because they have a high incidence of the repetitive strain injuries the Meagher Method is so successful at treating. For instance, Peter Pfitzinger, an Olympic marathoner, initially sought Meagher's help to fix a recurrent plantar fascia strain. Pfitzinger then continued the therapy, and credits this with helping him win the Olympic trials to qualify for the 1984 Olympic games.

In addition to his running clientele, Meagher worked on just about every kind of athlete at one time or another. For a while he was under contract with Professional Sports Management, which manages athletes. The company would send their clients, including pro football players, to Meagher prior to a tryout. "Any kind of increase in speed would amount to a little better contract," Meagher recalled.

And then there are the stories of injured athletes returning to successful careers after Meagher got his hands on them. Fred Steinfort credits Meagher with permitting him to return to a kicking career with the Denver Broncos after a severe groin pull threatened to sideline him for good. And Jean Rabelle of the Boston Bruins hockey team credits Meagher with getting him back into the game after a low-back injury had kept him off the ice for months.

Meagher also worked with Ted Hewitt, a professional doubles tennis player; professional football player Jim Nance; and an assortment of other professional and amateur athletes.

TAKING IT PUBLIC

Sensing that people were ready to believe in the benefits of sports massage, Meagher decided to write *Sportsmassage* to explain his technique and why it worked. Young massage therapists who wanted to learn more soon took notice.

Ulrich recalls that had been massaging athletes for five years when he discovered Meagher's technique. While he'd heard reports of a fellow in New England who massaged horses, he knew nothing of the specific technique. *Sportsmassage* opened up a new world to him.

"Jack's work for me, and I think [for] many others, is and was the foundation on which we built," Ulrich said. "Jack brought together all the pieces and filled in the missing ones and made me an effective sports massage therapist."

Other young sports massage therapists were similarly inspired by Meagher's work, and helped push sports massage into the public domain.

One of those therapists was Gail Davidson. She remembers reading *Sportsmassage* around the time she was completing massage school. About a year later she invited Meagher to come to New York to train a group of massage therapists to work at the 1983 Mighty Hamptons triathlon event. Meagher trained the therapists and conducted an educational forum for the athletes, the race directors and the medical directors in town for the event. The sessions were so successful, Davidson asked Meagher to do several more seminars and training sessions.

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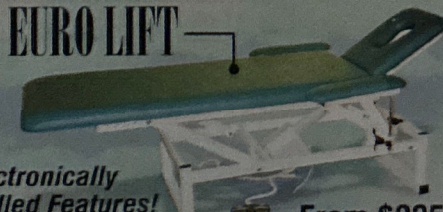
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Jack Meagher with fellow sports massage pioneers, in 1985. From left: Meagher, Benny Vaughn, Robert King and Dan Ulrich.

Educational events allowed more massage therapists to learn the Meagher Method, and the medical community began to accept sports massage. Soon, therapists were working at every major sporting event in the country, including marathons, triathlons and the 1984 Olympics. Sports massage's high profile was a valuable marketing tool for the massage profession in the 1980s.

Public acceptance of sports massage encouraged officers within the AMTA to

look seriously at this branch of massage. In the summer of 1985, Robert King, then the AMTA's education director, Ulrich, Davidson, Meagher and Benny Vaughn, another sports massage innovator, met at the Sun Coast Center for Natural Health to discuss a sports massage certification exam. Later that year the AMTA administered the first exam, with Meagher, Vaughn and Carol Kresky serving as consultants.

With sports massage gaining widespread acceptance, Meagher stepped back from the fray and retreated to his clients in New England. A dislike of travel—he still doesn't fly in airplanes—and of large gatherings has kept Meagher close to home. But he has always been willing for therapists to learn from him, and many have—some for a few days, some for a few years.

What Meagher is happiest about now is that more than 50 years after he began developing the Meagher Method, two long-time students have started a school devoted solely to teaching his technique. Robert Altman and Jo-Ann Wilson are co-directors of The Jack Meagher Institute of Sportstherapy, which opened in Boxboro, Massachusetts, in 1996.

They hope that they can live up to Meagher's expectations—and extend his legacy to another generation of therapists. *M*

Vanessa Craft is a free-lance writer specializing in medicine and biology. She first met Jack Meagher in the early 1990s when Meagher massaged her horse, Santana. She sees massage as an indispensable aid for preventing injuries and improving the performance of her horses and of herself as a rider.

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