4 Questions: Is your breathing slowing down your athletic performance?

By Don Gordon, Master Breathing Instructor

For many, the idea that breathing can improve athletic performance is startling. Most say they breathe just fine. Internet and magazine articles along with coaches and yoga teachers all talk about how to breathe during exercise but are they correct based on the science of breathing?

To help understand if your breathing is impacting your exercise, training and race results, I invite you to take the following test. If you answer YES to any of these four questions, chances are good your breathing is holding back your athletic performance and breathing training can help.

Question #1: When exercising at maximum effort, does your muscle strength or breathing hold you back?

Over the years I've asked this question to a lot of athletes. In a formal survey, 85% of the athletes said their breathing was holding them back. Many said their muscles were fine and they felt they could push harder if not for their breath.

I'll work with these athletes to improve their breathing. First, we work on breathing mechanics and resolve any breathing pattern disorders. From there, breathing techniques are applied that train the breathing center of the brain to keep breathing under control even during high-intensity training.

I see many athletes that consciously increase the intensity of their breathing as their arms and legs go faster. They think they need more air.

The use of a pulse-oximeter quickly shows they're getting more than enough oxygen. Strong breathing is just a habit holding their performance back. I show them how to separate the breath from the exercise, keeping the breath slow, calm and relaxed while their arms and legs go faster.

It's not unusual to see an athlete's breathing change dramatically in a few days to a few weeks. Suddenly, the athlete finds their performance limits are governed by active muscle strength, not the breath.

Question #2: Do you become breathless while exercising?

Breathlessness is the primary reason recreational and competitive athletes come see me. Actually, there are many elite athletes as well. These folks are easily gassed as exercise intensity increases.

Conventional wisdom says they can't get enough oxygen when actually they have more than enough.

I work with them to understand and then overcome the real issue. It's the build up of carbon dioxide in their body from exercise. They can't get rid of it fast enough even with their mouths wide open and breathing strongly.

My breathing work with the athlete starts with helping them understand they can't get rid of all the excess carbon dioxide. They must to learn to tolerate it.

As with other aspects of athletic training, adaptations to the body can be made. For example, acid buffering can be improved through regular high-intensity training, exposing the body to higher levels of lactic acid. The same is true with carbon dioxide.

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During breathing training, the athlete is taught breathing techniques that intentionally increase body carbon dioxide levels. In parallel, another breathing technique is used to train the breathing center of the brain to tolerate more carbon dioxide.

Within a week or two, the athlete is tolerating more and more carbon dioxide. The onset of breathlessness is delayed and their maximum tolerance of carbon dioxide is pushed out. Many athletes find they can go to max heart rate without becoming breathless.

Question #3: Do you experience asthma-like symptoms, have allergies, get frequent colds and/or struggle with sleep quality?

The science of breathing is clear. These health issues are indicators of a breathing pattern disorder. The way the athlete breathes is most likely the source of their health issue.

Breathing training has been used since 1952 to relieve these types of health concerns. I changed my breathing in 2004 and my asthma, exercise-induced asthma, allergies and regular bouts of bronchitis were relieved within weeks. Since 2011, I've helped hundreds do the same.

In the initial assessment of an athlete's breathing, I look for breathing pattern disorders. Within minutes, I can usually tell what's going on just by watching the athlete breathe.

These health issues in athletes are usually fairly mild to moderate and the symptoms can be relieved within a few weeks of starting breathing training. Severe cases take longer.

Athletes are reluctant to try breathing training at first. The medical paradigm is strong and who would think breathing could resolve so many common health problems? Eventually they enjoy being less sick and the extra training time.

Question #4: When you exercise, do you breathe through the mouth?

Despite conventional wisdom and popular training techniques, scientific studies confirm mouth breathing slows athletes down.

The nose is for bringing air into the body, not the mouth, and nose breathing supplies enough air to support exercise. The nose performs 30 functions, making the lungs more efficient and improving the body's overall running economy.

Oxygen uptake in the lungs is actually better when breathing through the nose. Studies show oxygen uptake increases by 10% - 20% with nasal breathing.

I work with athletes starting day one to master nasal breathing during exercise and all day long, especially during sleep. For many, mouth breathing is a bad habit. For others, there's something wrong with the nose.

Assuming there's no damage to the nose, breathing techniques usually work well. There's one breathing technique that can open a completely blocked nose in minutes.

Summary

For many athletes, breathing shouldn't be a limiting factor to their athletic performance. Breathing training my just be the trick that helps you do better on your next training day or race.

Drop me a note at don@TheBreathingGuy.com to learn more or discuss how your breathing may be impacting your athletic performance.