For greatness on the gridiron, NFL teams turn to mindfulness

By Jen Christensen, CNN

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Some of the world's top athletes are adding mindfulness to their workouts

A study with college football players found the practice increased attention, emotional well-being

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Gervais used such training to help daredevil skydiver Felix Baumgartner in 2012, when he wanted to make a free-fall from 23 miles up. Physically, Baumgartner knew he could do it, and he wasn’t afraid of the jump itself; what scared him was the pressurized suit it required, which made him feel claustrophobic.

Gervais, a former military parachutist who has himself done jumps off Petronas Towers in Malaysia and Taipei 101 skyscraper, says he gave Baumgartner the mental training he needed to conquer that fear.

Gervais taught Baumgartner "combat breathing," or deep breathing to calm himself. He also created a positive self-talk practice, getting Baumgartner to choose his words carefully when talking to himself and others about his jump.

Baumgartner went on to make the jump and has set several world records since.

Gervais, who was on-site for Baumgartner’s jump in 2012, explained at the time why mindfulness training worked: "When we are in a high-stakes or intense situation, it’s not uncommon for our minds to jump forward, going to the next moment and worrying about what happens when this moment doesn’t go well. What happens is, we give 50% to something that doesn’t exist yet and 50 to this moment."

For NFL players, Gervais tailors mental exercises to fit their particular needs.

Seahawks coach Pete Carroll doesn’t make the training mandatory -- there is no group meditation as a team, for example -- but Gervais said Carroll talks about the value of mindfulness training during practice.

Gervais also creates bespoke training for individual players, which could come in the form of unique audio files he creates to help them through a kind of guided meditation.

Other players get mindfulness exercises on more of an intermittent basis. Some Seahawks don’t do any mindfulness practice at all. It’s really up to the individual.

The players who are interested, Gervais said, most often ask how they can get better at being in the present moment.

"A concrete example is thinking that leads them to tighten up," he said. "They aren’t getting to the signal or the present moment because these thoughts are getting in the way. They want to access the present more." And to do that, he said, you have to train your mind.

He and Carroll have seen players respond so well to individual mindfulness training that they’ve gone into business together, running Compete to Create, a high-performance mindset training and coaching program that uses digital platforms and individual training to help athletes and business and community leaders do more focused work.

Gervais hopes anyone he trains will use the practice to become their best selves on and off the field.

"These are alpha competitors working in an intense environment," he said. "Mindfulness can be that spark, that ability to be fully present and to be invested in what's going on now and see the vibrancy about themselves. When players connect with this kind of high-level, peak performance, this is the kind of performance when they can be at the top of their game at all times."

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Even if you are not earning millions in the NFL, you can put the practice to work, Gervais said. He suggests simple exercises like he did with Baumgartner, spending time thinking positively about what you are trying to accomplish and using those positive words when other people ask what you are up to.

"Self-talk is considered one of the most powerful mental skills," Gervais said. "Self-talk is the foundation for self-confidence and self-esteem."

The Seahawks aren't the only team finding success with mental discipline training. The Indianapolis Colts, the San Francisco 49ers and the Atlanta Falcons, who made it to the Super Bowl in 2016, have included some form of this training as a part of their programs.

Retired NFL player and CNN Sports anchor and correspondent Coy Wire, who played for the Falcons, said the team has long emphasized the mental game as key to team success. The team now uses a mindfulness app called Vision Pursue, which offers meditation exercises and mindfulness training to help players practice the mental skills they've learned. It's not mandatory that they use it, but many players do.

On the website, the first endorsement comes from Falcons head coach Dan Quinn, who is quoted as saying that it "dramatically improves leadership and performance."

Quinn "understands the importance of having a centered, cleared mind to perform optimally," Wire said, and some of the best players he worked with knew that mental preparation was as key to training as physical preparation. Virtual-reality devices have been a huge help with additional mental training.

"There's a huge benefit, especially the way the NFL cut down on practice time. It gives players extra reps without having the physical risk of being on the practice field," Wire said. He thinks even more teams will embrace mental training. "I think the tide will turn, and I think mindfulness and other mental training will become the new norm, especially when coaches see the benefit of it."

Practice may be key to making mindfulness work, as Amishi Jha and her team discovered when they conducted a mindfulness training study on the University of Miami's football team. Jha is an associate professor of psychology and director of contemplative neuroscience and the Mindfulness Research and Practice Initiative at the university.

In the study, some of the college players met with a mindfulness instructor one day a week and had MP3 players with mindfulness exercises to use at the end of weight training three times a week. Others took a general well-being class.

Those who did the mindfulness training showed improved sustained attention, meaning their minds wandered less; they were focused on the tasks at hand and had better emotional well-being overall. However, when they stopped practicing the mindfulness exercises after the study period and were re-tested, the improvement was no longer there.

"What this study demonstrates is that the improvement in emotional memory by using this site, you agree to the Privacy Policy and Terms of Service.
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Jha and Gervais think mindfulness practice will grow as athletes realize its benefits.

She would like to see whether it may even help players recover from concussions, since part of recovery involves sitting still and doing nothing. "Top athletes aren’t good at that, really. Not many of us are good at that," Jha said.

Gervais reminds teams that mindfulness is not a magic bullet. The Seahawks and the Falcons have had successful seasons since they have been doing the mindfulness training, though it’s hard to determine what effect mindfulness has had on that success and scientific research at the pro level is nonexistent.

On the other hand, the Colts and 49ers have not had great seasons.

To have a great team, you still need to have the right kind of physical training, good nutrition, coaching and scouting, and healthy players, and all of it needs to be knit together. Mental discipline could be one tool that can give an edge on the competition.

"Think about it: If you make a mental mistake, there can be some real serious physical consequences," Gervais said. "Mindfulness training can keep a player in the moment and heighten their ability to make plays and adapt quickly to an environment as it unfolds. It helps people to be themselves and to be present, and that’s always a good thing."

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