

MINDFUL OF THEIR MISSION



TRAINING: University of Miami wide receiver Stephen Sweeney, front, and others attend a mindfulness session at Hecht Athletic Center.

Researchers are giving the UM football team 'mindfulness' training to help players on the field and want to do the same with soldiers going into combat

BY KITTY DUMAS
Special to the Miami Herald

It looked as incongruous as it sounds, like gladiators in repose. Minus the armor, or in this case, numbered uniforms and protective gear, members of the University of Miami Hurricanes football team were preparing for the season — with their eyes closed.

Last month, players wedged into theater-style seating in an out-of-the-way room in the

Hecht Athletic Center to participate in their fourth straight week of "mindfulness" training. In addition to training players' bodies, head coach Al Golden is partnering with an internationally recognized neuroscientist, Amishi Jha, to train players' minds.

As they entered the room, each player was handed a 5-by-7-inch card. On the front,

above a photo of the team racing onto the field through a dry ice fog, were the words, "One Breath ... One Mind ... One Heartbeat." On the flip side was the day's lesson and an image of a bowed man carrying the world on his shoulders.

"Lower or close your eyes, bringing your attention if you will to the inbreath... then the outbreath... aware that you're breathing in, aware that you're breathing out, bringing awareness, something that you haven't recruited [in the lesson] so far..."

The players closed their

• TURN TO MINDFULNESS, 14A

"As a player, you're not going to go to battle [like a soldier], but ... it's going to feel like life or death even if it's not literally life and death."

— Amishi Jha, neuroscientist



TOP PHOTO: PATRICK FARRELL/MIAMI HERALD STAFF
BOTTOM PHOTO: AL DIAZ/MIAMI HERALD FILE

STRATEGY: The Hurricanes, with a strong football tradition, are adding 'mindfulness' to the mix.

UM FOOTBALL



PATRICK FARRELL/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

IN CLASS: University of Miami football players attend a mindfulness training session at the Hecht Athletic Center with Scott Rogers, who is the founder and director of the Mindfulness in Law Program at UM Law School.

UM lessons in 'mindfulness'

• MINDFULNESS, FROM 1A

eyes, breathed in and out seemingly in unison as directed by Scott Rogers, co-founder of UMindfulness and founder and director of the Mindfulness in Law Program at the UM Law School, who is partnering with Jha, Ph.D, director of contemplative neuroscience for the UM Research and Practice Initiative (UMindfulness) and associate professor in the Department of Psychology. Rogers has trained everyone from lawyers and judges to students and soldiers.

Practiced for centuries by eastern cultures, mindfulness is defined as paying attention in the present moment without letting emotions interfere.

Traditionally, Jha said, mindfulness was not considered a tool for performance enhancement. "It's considered a path for enhanced well-being, traditionally spiritual well-being and personal growth," she said. "It's now newly entering the arena of performance training and sports psychology."

Pete Carroll, head coach of the Seattle Seahawks, credits the practice in part for the team's Super Bowl victory. Carroll hired high-profile sports psychologist Michael Gervais to work with the team. Gervais, Jha said, is an informal advisor on this project. While some other pro athletes and members of Olympic teams have practiced mindfulness meditation, NBA coaching legend Phil Jackson is the best known. He not only practices himself, but incorporated it into training the L.A. Lakers and previously the Chicago Bulls. He's now president of the New York Knicks.

Along with Jackson, Gervais' use of mindfulness and psychology has made people take notice, Jha said. "His success is what's drawn people's attention."

As the Canes and their coach attempt to overcome past scandals and setbacks to climb back to national prominence, mindfulness offers a different path. "This provides a lot of what's necessary to stay centered," Golden said, "controlling the elements of this journey we can control."

For Golden, mindfulness is not a summer experiment but a long-term strategy.

"Football is a game of situations, having football intelligence, FBI we call it, awareness and the ability to play with poise and to respond the way you want to emotionally in a given situation. I think all those things are here to stay and big parts of our game. Mindfulness really addresses all those issues."

THE CANE BRAIN

Dubbed the Cane Brain Project, the team's mindfulness training is actually part of a research study Jha is conducting for the U.S. Army. After securing buy-in from Golden, she was able to launch the project with the tail end of a three-year \$900,000 grant that ends this year. The goal is to determine best practices for delivering effective short-form mindfulness training.

Soldiers lack the time to devote to months of mindfulness training. Through research, Jha is looking for the most effective mix of training techniques that can be delivered in a short period of time to help active-duty soldiers.

Jha currently has three active research grants with the U.S. Army, which is trying to help soldiers train and protect their minds as well as their bodies amid multiple deployments, life-altering injuries and high suicide rates. Mindfulness has also helped soldiers decrease anxiety between deployments and after injury. Mindfulness is a priority for the Army, which has more than a dozen "performance

enhancement centers" around the country.

"It was about how we can best protect them so that they have the mental skills to make good decisions under high stress circumstances, impossible circumstances really," Jha said.

So why the Canes?

While Jha also studies soldiers directly, this grant is looking at "high-stress, high-stakes civilian groups." She chose the Canes football team and firefighters. This fall, she has partnered with Miami-Dade County Fire Chief Dave Downey to study the effect of mindfulness training on county firefighters.

Jha stresses that the choice to study the Canes is not an attempt to equate what the players face on the field with the life and death choices of soldiers. "As a player, you're not going to go to battle," she said, "but you are going to have high-stakes performance, and it's going to feel like life or death even if it's not literally life and death."

The same is true for anyone facing high levels of stress, she said, although with the Canes and other high performance populations, the demands are consistent, day in day out for extended periods of time.

The program had to be developed specifically for the team, using techniques and language that would resonate with them. Jha said she sought advice on working with the team, both coaches and players, from Gervais and Col. Michael R. Brumage, deputy commander, clinical services.

She is working with both men on another Army study. Brumage, a West Virginia University alumnus, is providing mindfulness training for that school's football team.

Two years ago, Jha also added Joshua Rooks to her staff at the Jha Lab. Rooks, a graduate student in psychology and former tight end for the Northwestern Wildcats, discovered the practice as an undergraduate and used it as a player and student.

"In the game it was the ability to be very present in the moment, and not have to ruminate about a mistake I made two plays before," Rooks said, "and having that impact my game or my play right now."

"By being able to breathe, being mindful, focusing on the present moment I was able to then be fully present while I was playing the game, and that became true with every area of my life after that."

It was Jha's mission to sell the idea to the Canes. Over the past couple of years, she said, "It was kind of hard to get connected with them."

"Amishi came to us and really made me aware of what is out there in terms of how to train the mind, and

really making us aware of how often the mind is neglected in conditioning and training," Golden said. "We spend so much time on the conditioning side of it and also on the skill development side, but we have for the most part ignored the mind training. It was a great opportunity with a team that has been very mature to pursue it."

Golden said that at the Atlantic Coast Conference meetings in June, the NCAA's Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Brian Hainline, said the greatest challenges facing college athletics are overuse — athletes who begin specialized play before puberty and play year-round — and mental health.

"I thought how useful would mindfulness training

and negotiate as football players, which has to do with their longer-term career success. What does it mean to be an elite and somewhat entitled member of this campus? What does it mean to have that much attention on you that actually started before you got here?"

"How can we provide training that will bolster their ability to pay attention and be aware of their own decisions and behavior?" Jha said. "The hypothesis is that it will help them be more likely to consider better behavior and hopefully improve performance on and off the field."

In a sport and a team that has been plagued by incidents of bad behavior, including two recent arrests for rape, could the use of



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— UM Coach Al Golden

be to our guys given the stress and the high stakes that are involved in college athletics," Golden said.

Jha said she began her conversation with players by asking a question: "When you're successful or when you completely fail, what is it that leads to that failure or success?"

"Is it technical knowledge about what your coach tells you that you should do in terms of the play or the strategy? Is it physical or is it mental? They say the errors or successes are where my mind is."

As players who are also students, she said, their attention tends to decrease over the school year.

"We know from our published work with undergraduates that as you go through the semester, their mind wandering increases, attentional lapses increase and they experience more stress. That's just a normal everyday student," Jha said. "What stress are these people under?"

The journal *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* recently published Jha's research showing the positive effects of mindfulness on the performance of UM students over the school year.

"We found that the people who got our training improved in their attentional functioning," Jha said, "while the group that didn't get the training definitely got worse from where they started."

For those who practice, mindfulness strengthens their attention on the field, but Jha said, she is "concerned about the whole person."

"When I'm talking about the whole person I'm talking about the other kinds of decisions they have to make

and negotiate as football players, which has to do with their longer-term career success. What does it mean to be an elite and somewhat entitled member of this campus? What does it mean to have that much attention on you that actually started before you got here?"

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In a sport and a team that has been plagued by incidents of bad behavior, including two recent arrests for rape, could the use of mindfulness over time help players stay out of trouble and focus on the game?

"I hope so," Golden said, before quickly doubling back to the challenges of overuse and mental health. "We make errors when we lose our focus, and we make bad choices. I think this goes a long way not just in helping you combat it, but in providing you the tools to combat it daily, weekly, monthly."

Jha wants to continue the trainings and expand the research, but funds only cover the summer training and study of the effects. She is looking for additional funding, \$250,000, to continue the training, track player performance and, through brain imaging, study the impact on the players' brains. "It's not if it works," she said. "It's how it works that we're pursuing in my lab."

A recent study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* found that the hippocampus, a part of the brain necessary for memory, is smaller in college football players, particularly those who have had concussions. Some research has shown that mindfulness training may increase brain matter density in the hippocampus, Jha said.

The study would be a great benefit to brain science and to the sport, Jha said, particularly given national concerns about concussions and other traumatic brain injuries.

ONE BREATH

Will players take to the idea of meditation as a strategy? "We haven't looked at the data yet," Jha said, "so you'd never know if they're resisting."

"I really applaud Coach

Golden," she said, for how he introduced mindfulness to the team. He suggested she meet with the Unity Council, the team leadership, before introducing the concept to players. He introduced her to players, and has been instrumental in the process.

Golden said his players are ready to train their minds. "I think this is a mature team," he said, "a team that was ready to embrace anything that helps them or give them an edge. I think the fact that Michael Gervais worked with the Seahawks and they're just coming off a championship team lends credibility to it. I think the fact that Amishi and her group are working with soldiers certainly lends credence to it."

The Canes also have a direct connection to the Seahawks. Brennan Carroll, wide receiver coach for the team, is the son of the Seahawks head coach.

For four weeks, four mornings a week during the summer, UM players followed up their 7 a.m. weight training by putting on headphones to listen to 15 minutes of guided meditation, mindfulness training. The pairing of physical with mental exercises was an intentional strategy to make mental training part of their fitness regimen. In addition, groups of players attended 45-minute sessions with Rogers once a week. They were given recordings and encouraged by Rogers to ask for more individualized, even shorter meditations, three to five minutes, based on their needs.

At the Hecht Center, in the front row of the small auditorium is No. 62, senior and offensive lineman Shane McDermott. No. 70 Jon Feliciano is seated next to McDermott, an elaborate tattoo that includes praying hands on his arm. About 30 players are seated throughout the room.

The players are quiet for the most part when asked to respond to open questions from Rogers about what they've learned, or to share opinions, but some speak out. Soft-spoken Feliciano has an answer for almost every question.

It is the final mindfulness training session with Rogers before the start of training camp. He is recapping what they have learned and leading them through a relaxation exercise.

The first session, "Eye on the Ball," covered focus. Another introduced exercises for ignoring surrounding noise including listening to music passively without allowing the mind to become involved. A relaxation meditation led them to a place in their own minds where they felt "most centered, most grounded, most supported" and back again.

"Bruce Lee said the less tension and effort, the more powerful you will be," Rogers told the players.

Rogers ended the final session with a loving kindness or compassion practice, one the players had not heard before. He guided players into meditation that wished positive outcomes for themselves, a mentor, a stranger, a person with whom they struggle, and ending with their teammates. Some words were added to the traditional meditation to resonate with players.

May you be safe and protected. May you be healthy and strong ...

During the session, as the players participated, they also shared with Rogers the challenges the training is attempting to address.

"What's the biggest challenge of being a team?"

"Getting 105 guys on the same page," McDermott said.

"You're here as a team," Rogers said. "The world has somehow materialized in such a way that you are together with a common mission. What's your mission as a team?"

"To win," said offensive lineman Taylor Gadois.

"What's another mission?" Rogers asked.

Gadois had a quick comeback. "It's the only one that matters."

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MARSHA HALPER/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

RESEARCHER: Dr. Amishi Jha is working with UM football on the 'Cane Brain Project' to see how 'mindfulness' can help players better perform.