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Chicago shop helps jocks rebound from workouts Chicago Recovery Room in South Loop specializes in 'active recovery'

June 26, 2014 | By Erin Chan Ding, Special to the Tribune

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Will Neal sat hunched in a circular tub of frigid water, blowing air in and out, just trying to breathe. Behind him, Miguel Blancarte Jr. and Corey Parker reclined side by side, each wearing inflated black boots that rose to their hips, making them look like human balloons.

The three amateur athletes were at the Chicago Recovery Room, a South Loop business that specializes in what sports medicine experts call active recovery, the compressing and contracting of muscles using everything from ice water to rollers, compression boots and electric muscle stimulators. The idea is to help athletes bounce back more quickly from intense workouts.



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"We really just wreck our bodies," said Neal, 23, who lives in the West Loop and competes on a team for CrossFit, a circuit-training workout incorporating strength and conditioning exercises. "And when we want to improve our scores, there's no way we could do that if we didn't recover with all this stuff."

In the past, jocks who had overdone it were encouraged to sit on the couch. Then sports

medicine experts determined that getting overworked muscles working again aided recovery better than resting.

"Recovery is probably just as important, if not more important, than the actual running itself," said Joshua Harris, an orthopedic surgeon at Houston Methodist and founder of its Endurance Medicine Program. "If you are not recovering properly, you cannot become consistent enough with training."

The result is that businesses like the Recovery Room have been springing up around the country. The Recovery Room is one of the first of its kind to open in Chicago.

Liz Yerly, a physical therapist, athletic trainer and massage therapist, launched her shop in April 2013 to give amateur athletes access to techniques and expensive equipment used by professional athletes but not normally found in typical workout facilities. The compression boots she uses, for instance, cost \$1,750 per pair. Yerly estimates she's spent \$35,000 equipping the Recovery Room, aptly named since the space is only 326 square feet.

Yerly works with endurance athletes to implement strength training and encourages them to embrace targeted recovery as a form of injury prevention.

"Instead of being reactive, we're being proactive," said Yerly, 34. Any recovery "that uses the body at a low level is better than complete rest."

Yerly patterned the Recovery Room after a club called the Fuelary, formerly known as AllSports Recovery Club and based in fitness-crazy Boulder, Colo. She reached out to its founder, Josh Shadle, who opened the business in 2011, for guidance on logistics and pricing, but she tweaked her business model for a Chicago clientele needing to be eased into the concept of recovery.

"There was a large learning curve in getting people to understand how to use the room," Yerly said. "It was a whole new concept." Traffic picked up, she said, around last June, when running clubs started dropping by. She expects even more clients as runners gear up for the Bank of America Chicago Marathon in October.

By the end of last year, her clientele had grown to several hundred drop-ins, and she retained a core of several dozen members — not just athletes, but dancers and performance artists. Overall, the business is open 73 hours a week for drop-in members, and she has more than doubled the amount of time her business is staffed to 32 hours a week.

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Monthly memberships run \$30 and require a minimum commitment of three months. There also is a drop-in option for \$20 per visit and a monthly membership for \$80 that includes one deep-tissue massage. Clients can also buy a 10-visit punch card for \$120.

On a recent afternoon, Yerly manipulated the legs and feet of Jennifer Sprowl, a classical modern

dance instructor with the Joffrey Academy of Dance and the American Rhythm Center. Sprowl, of the South Loop, started seeing Yerly in January after she had arthroscopic surgery late last year.

Sprowl comes in for 30-minute massage tuneups with Yerly because "it releases things that have been incredibly tight. It helps a lot with blood flow, so my legs feel like they're performing better. The muscles are functioning better. I have more range of motion. And they are just happier legs."

The Recovery Room shares a building with an Accelerated Rehabilitation Centers branch. Yerly also works as a physical therapist at Accelerated. Her patients inspired her to explore recovery as a business. As their therapy regimens were ending, they told her they still wanted to be seen.

"They were like, 'Liz, can you please just do, like, that leg thing you did?'" Yerly said. "And I would say, 'You have to go to a doctor, you have to get a prescription, and you can come back for therapy.'

"So I was like, 'This is absurd. They're not hurt. They're not injured. We should have wellness, and we should have recovery and maintenance, kind of regardless.'"

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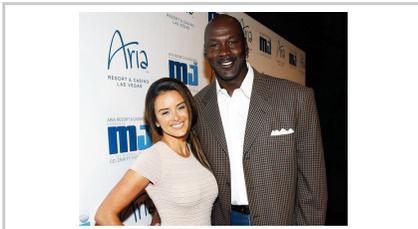


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