

**HAVE YOU FELT THE JOY OF SWEAT** while killing it in CrossFit, scaling the wall in an obstacle race, or finally finding Zen in yoga? We want to hear about it. Email us at [crushedit@shape.com](mailto:crushedit@shape.com), and include your name, age, and hometown; details about your Crushed It! moment; and photos of yourself. You could be featured in a future issue!

**CRUSHED IT!**  
**Gina DiCello,**  
 34, Chicago, on  
 rediscovering the  
 runner's high



➔ Lining up for the Eugene Marathon in Oregon this year, I had no expectations. It was my 24th marathon, but for the first time, I wasn't looking for a new PR. Running the Chicago Marathon a few months back had felt so miserable; it shook me. This time, I told no one I had signed up, and I took a break from my running group. Rather than gun it at my usual sub-eight-minute-mile pace during the race, I kept with the nine-minute group. I reminded myself to breathe as I listened to Kendrick Lamar and Lizzo on my playlist. Unlike in other marathons, I never hit the wall—in fact, I couldn't remember ever feeling so smooth, so strong, and so capable. That love of running washed over me as I crossed the finish line.

# Get your head in the game

Meditation is vital to maximizing your workout—it makes you not only calmer and happier but also stronger.

By CLINT CARTER



There's more to meditation than simply chilling out, and you'd be smart to use its powers to make your mind and body fitter. In fact, recent research in the journal *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* found that just a few weeks of meditation can thicken your brain stem and increase your gray matter. This makes it increasingly clear that the mental exercise strengthens your brain and nervous system the same way lifting weight strengthens your muscles—with practice and consistency.

That's likely why meditation is becoming so popular with athletes looking for an edge. In a study published in the *Journal of Cognitive Enhancement*, college football players who

spent 12 minutes or more a day doing mindfulness meditation had better attention skills after a month of grueling preseason training than those who practiced for less time. Meditation also helps you stay calm under pressure: "Being present and focusing on breathing helps me when I'm anxious about a game," says Atlanta Dream point guard Layshia Clarendon, who meditates before warming up for WNBA games. "Understanding that you can relax your body even when things are tough—that really helps you rise to the moment."

So are you ready to elevate your mind and boost your body in just minutes a day? Here's everything you need to know.



**MINDFULNESS ON THE MOVE**

Meditation can be done anytime and anywhere—even on a commute—if you have five minutes to focus on your breath.

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Bruna Ponziani/Think Archive

**It's a cinch to plugin**

A guided-meditation app (there are more than 3,900 available; we like Headspace) or a trained instructor (search for venues at [meditationfinder.com](http://meditationfinder.com)) can help you get started. Eventually you may decide to do it on your own. Clear your mind by directing all your attention to your breath, says Laurie Cameron, a mindfulness coach and the author of the upcoming *The Mindful Day*. "Focus on the air coming into the body and then going out." Begin with five-minute sessions a day, and after a month or so, scale up to 10 minutes or more, Cameron says. "It's just like working out: Whatever you put into it, you'll get out of it."

**Your focus will become sharper**

By strengthening your prefrontal cortex, the area of the brain used for planning and decision-making, meditation makes it easier to lock in on what you're doing in the moment, Cameron says. "So when you're playing tennis or trying to keep the beat in dance cardio class, you can actually sustain your attention," she says. In fact, a study from the *International Journal of Psychophysiology* last year found that long-term meditators were less than half as likely to make mistakes on computerized tests designed to assess focus. "You're creating new neural pathways that help you stay in the moment," Cameron says. "And that can improve your performance."

**You'll push past your limits**

It's that last rep, the final lap in the pool or mile on the trail, that's always a killer. But harnessing your brainpower can help you cut through the discomfort. As evidence, in one study published in the journal *Cerebral Cortex*, meditators felt an electric shock as 22 percent less painful than nonmeditators did. The reason? "The meditators turned down the part of their brain that judges and tries to control the pain. Instead, they were able to view it with a relaxed, non-judging attitude," says study author Sara Lazar, Ph.D., a Harvard Medical School professor and an associate researcher in psychiatry at Massachusetts General Hospital. "There's a lot that the mind can do if we train it, and by meditating, you can learn to deal with pain in a new way."

**You'll gain workout willpower**

"Mindfulness is really powerful in that moment right before you decide whether to run that extra mile, stay through class, or swim five more laps," Cameron says. By acknowledging the itch to quit and instead taking a breath to let the impulse pass, you are creating a space to make a better choice—one that gets you some progress. "It's such a huge payoff, and it's why we're having a mindfulness revolution," she says. ★