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Marieta Akalski: Evolution of Sports Performance Therapy

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I don't suggest trying to compare yourself to Marieta Akalski '11.

This high achiever started as early as age 12, when she began rock climbing competitively (in indoor climbing gyms). It helped that her family owns Toronto Climbing Academy and her father, who coached the Bulgarian Competition Climbing Team, was her trainer. She competed throughout her teens and early 20s, winning more than 10 competitions around the world, including the 2001 Canadian National Bouldering Championship.

I met Marieta through mutual friends on a rock climbing trip in 2012, when I was fully ensconced in my pre-massage-therapy profession. Little did I know at the time that I'd end up following her career path and wanting to find out more about how she built her massage therapy practice into what she refers to as "sports performance therapy." Her path showed me that massage therapy is a great foundation for building a manual therapy practice that can include a wide range of modalities.

In her 20s, Marieta took a six-year hiatus from climbing, completing a business degree from Ryerson University and working 12-hour stressful days in finance, with the goal of becoming a Chartered Financial Analyst (CFA). With chronic back and neck issues from working at a desk job and being less active, she became a patient at Athlete's Care Sports Medicine. That experience of seeing doctors, RMTs, physiotherapists, and chiropractors exposed her to the sports medicine industry. She found that soft tissue therapy was the most effective treatment for her own injuries, which ultimately led to her decision to become a manual therapist:

The longer I was a patient the more it opened my eyes to the idea of a career in this field. It encompassed everything I was lacking in finance and what I need to have job satisfaction. That included human interaction with like-minded people (athletes), making a difference in their lives by helping them pursue their own athletic dreams, and having the freedom to pursue my own athletic endeavours again.

Marieta was so convinced of her new career direction that she told her therapists at Athlete's Care, "I'm going to work here one day." True to her word, she has never worked for another clinic since, although her private practice continues to grow.

Marieta considered both physiotherapy and chiropractic as well as massage therapy. Chiropractic school was a long time commitment and the cost was prohibitive, and she would have had to spend a year completing science prerequisites before starting to study physiotherapy. Although she was willing to put in the time and effort for these fields, she found that massage therapy offered a more direct route to achieve her goals. Plus, she was advised by many people in the sports medicine field to focus on a niche market and spend her time and money to learn modalities many chiropractors use that are also within the scope of massage therapy. She completed the Sutherland-Chan Massage Therapy Program in 2011.

Within a year after becoming an RMT, Marieta studied Contemporary Medical Acupuncture at McMaster University. She spent the first few years of her massage therapy career building her practice while working towards her climbing goals, which included making the Canadian Bouldering Team and competing in World Cups, spending more time outdoors, and climbing at an elite level (specifically a “5.14” - a grade of rock climbing route that is among the hardest in the world). To accomplish the latter she needed to focus completely on climbing and travelling. Taking a leave from her practice for several months, she travelled to Colorado and then to Spain to climb at some of the most challenging climbing areas in the world. It was in Spain that she successfully climbed a “5.14b” – the third Canadian woman to do so and placing her as one of the top climbers in Canada.

As news of her accomplishment spread in local and international climbing media, Marieta found herself being contacted by both friends and strangers from the climbing world wanting a “5.14” massage. She had never previously marketed herself to the climbing community and within weeks of working with these climbers she realized she didn’t have the knowledge necessary to effectively treat their complex injuries. Marieta explains, “Unlike other sports, climbing injuries come in all shapes and forms and I lacked the knowledge and experience to help them as best as one could.” This lit the fire for her to invest the same kind of effort into her practice as she did into climbing. She recognized treating climbers was a niche that she was ideally suited for and she was eager to learn more.

In the year after returning from Spain, Marieta spent thousands of dollars in continuing education within a span of eight months. She took more courses through the McMaster University Contemporary Medical Acupuncture Program, which taught her “advanced assessment, soft tissue therapy techniques, and needling techniques.” These were critical for her ability to successfully determine the reasons for her climbing patients’ issues. The courses showed her “how to map out the entire problem as a full body system as opposed to focusing locally on a shoulder, for example.” For her, to be able to assess the patient’s neurofunctional ability – rather than just biomechanical structures and functions – was the most valuable insight from these courses.

Through her advanced studies with instructors at McMaster, Marieta was able to partake in a fairly rare learning opportunity for massage therapists, one of which I am particularly envious! She took the week-long Fascial Dissection workshop offered by *Anatomy Trains* author, Tom Myers. It was a dissection of a ‘fresh’ body (versus one preserved in formaldehyde) with two or three other students,



Marieta climbing in Spain



Marieta treating at the 2015 Bouldering World Cup

where each person focused on an area of interest of their choice. The goal was to move very slowly through the different layers of the body to be able to identify the superficial nerves and vasculature, then the motor nerves deeper in the tissues, and learn how they are all connected. Marieta focused on the forearm and hand, which are very complex and challenging structures but valuable for her work with climbers. Twice each day participants reconvened and each student showed the rest of the group what they had found and how it may have impacted this particular individual. Through her experience at the anatomy lab, Marieta realized how little she actually knew before about anatomy. Textbooks she had learned from depict the body in a simplistic way, in part for the sake of clarity. She noted, "It was extremely difficult to even separate or see where the separation is between muscles or fibres and trace the nerves within the muscles without severing them." This literal lesson, that everything really is connected, gave her an entirely new appreciation of the human body.

Marieta's advanced studies with the McMaster Program led her to become an instructor in the Contemporary Medical Acupuncture Course. Beyond her McMaster experience, her continuing education and training is extensive and varied. Marieta was mentored by a chiropractor in her clinic for two years, spending one to two days a week watching and assisting him treat patients, many of whom had particularly complex injuries. She also provides Active Release Techniques® (ART), Fascial Stretch Therapy™ (FST), and athletic, kinesiology and clinical taping. As well, she is a certified yoga teacher, and she draws on this knowledge in her advice to patients on self-care.

All of this advanced education and training form the basis of Marieta's sports performance therapy practice. She uses different modalities within each treatment, depending on what she needs to focus on or achieve, and finds that certain techniques are more effective than others, depending on the patient. She rehabilitates athletes as well as 'pre-habilitates' and educates them on prevention:

We all need continuous therapy to allow our body to perform at its optimum level all the time – most athletes ask too much of their body in any sport, and without maintenance and pre-rehabilitation most of us will end up with repetitive strain injuries.

Marieta is also a Sports Emergency First Responder, which qualifies her to be a field-of-play therapist at sporting events such as the 2015 Pan Am Games and Toronto Climbing (Bouldering) World Cup.

As well, she counts NHL, NBA, and MLB players as some of her patients, along with professional tennis and squash players, and Ironman athletes.

Marieta feels that taking courses in assessment offers the most value for recent graduates, because therapists have to understand how the patient arrived at the point of needing treatment in order to treat effectively. She has found this to be true in her own rehabilitation from a shoulder injury from competitive climbing, which was not responding to a wide range of treatment approaches from chiropractors, physiotherapists, etc., until a doctor who understood climbing was able to diagnose the root of her problem. She notes that athletes often gravitate towards therapists and doctors who understand the biomechanics of their sport, and that usually comes from the health professionals doing the sport themselves.

After all her hard work building up her practice, Marieta has found some work-life balance and has taken up kiteboarding – challenging herself yet again. While we may not all be able to reach the literal and figurative heights that Marieta has, the evolution of her career is an inspiring example of how massage therapy education and practice can be a starting point for so much more, if we want it to be.

Sports Performance Therapy Case

Recently Marieta had a patient with a 10 mm tear in his supraspinatus muscle. She treated him for a few weeks initially and he was moving quite well but was lacking some strength when he played baseball. He took a six-month break from therapy with Marieta, during which time he got a Platelet Rich Plasma (PRP) injection in his shoulder, even though he was asymptomatic at the time. When Marieta saw him two months after the injection, the patient was presenting with adhesive capsulitis symptoms. She determined he developed frozen shoulder-like symptoms because he had been in so much pain post-injection that he had barely moved his shoulder and had developed severe compensation and holding patterns in his upper trapezius muscle. She used many modalities with him, including massage, ART, passive range of motion, traction, cupping and acupuncture, and also recommended extensive therapeutic exercises for self-care. Within a month and six treatments with Marieta his range of motion was up to 80%.