

Recovery Methods – The Sauna

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In this article series, I'll be profiling some of the different recovery/regeneration methods that I've tested and used over the years to speed up recovery. I think there is quite a bit of confusion out there about what works and what doesn't work and without the use of heart rate variability to measure response to the various methods, most people are just guessing so I can see why.

The reality is that there are a lot of different methods that can be used, but there is no one single recovery method that works all the time for everyone or should always be used. Each method I'll outline in this article series has a specific use and can be used very effectively when performed as described. I've tested each and every one of them over many years with the Omegawave and have been able to precisely measure its role and impact on recovery as a whole.

In this first article, I'll be giving you one of my favorite recovery methods: the sauna.

Not Just For Making Weight

Although the sauna has been used over the years mostly for dropping those last few extra pounds of water weight, I've found that it's best use is really for recovery/regeneration. The exact method I'll outline below is one that I was first told about by a former Russian coach and athlete.

He said they used it with many of their athletes and found it to be effective during periods of intense training. I've been using it myself and with athletes I train for over ten years now and all I can say is that he was right. I've made a few modifications here and there over the years, but the core of the method is still the same.

Using the sauna for recovery is most effective during periods of parasympathetic overreaching. If you have no idea what that means, check out the article series on Tim Boetch's training for his last fight. You wouldn't really want to use it if you're sympathetically overworked as it wouldn't really be of much help. Some of the symptoms of parasympathetic overreaching/overtraining are: general lethargy, lack of motivation to train, drop in morning resting heart rates and lowered heart rates during training, excessive sleep, etc.

The sauna works because it provides a very mild sympathetic stimulus that essentially triggers the body's adaptive mechanisms without really placing much physical stress on the body itself. It's akin to jump starting a car really, it gets things going. This is pretty much how all recovery/regeneration techniques work for the most part.

Using The Sauna the Right Way

To get the most out of the sauna method, you have to be pretty specific in how you go about using it. Just hopping in for a few minutes and then getting out probably won't do a whole lot for you and is mostly a waste of time.

You also want to make sure that you're using a dry sauna for this method, not a steam room, wet sauna, or infrared sauna and the hotter you can get it, the better – preferably over 200 degrees. I've got an old Finnish sauna made by Helo (the one featured in the picture above) in my condo and it's absolutely ideal. If you find one of those you're in luck, but if not any good dry sauna that gets very hot will work.

Next, you also need a shower close by to really do the method correctly. Fortunately, most saunas tend to be in locker rooms or near a shower anyway so it shouldn't be an issue. Assuming you have a dry sauna that gets very hot and a nearby shower, you've got everything you need to use the sauna to promote recovery so you can keep training or get back to it.

I most often recommend and prefer to use methods such as the sauna either towards the end of an intense training cycle when I want to promote recovery and regeneration as I take the athlete out of the loading phase, or whenever I see an athlete is moving too far towards overtraining. I personally don't believe in using these types of methods all the time as I believe that you need to overload an athlete/individual to force adaptation and if you are constantly trying to promote recovery all the time, there is a point where you will be losing this benefits of the loading.

It's also very important to note that if you overuse a recovery method and try to do it all the time, it will lose its effectiveness. I like to rotate recovery methods and use different ones depending on the athlete and the situation. You can use the sauna for a week or two at a time and then use something else the next time you need to promote recovery. Don't overdo it or just like anything else, your body will become accustomed to it and it won't have the same effect.

The Ultimate Sauna Recovery Method

To perform the method correctly and get the most out of it, make sure to follow these specific guidelines as close as possible:

1.
 1. Pre-heat the sauna to the highest temperature possible, at least 200 degrees is preferable
 2. Begin by getting in the sauna and stay in until you first break a sweat and then get out
 3. Rinse off for 5-10 seconds in luke warm water and then get out of the shower, pat yourself off, wrap a towel around yourself and then sit down for 2-3 minutes
 4. Get back in the sauna and stay in for 5-10 minutes. The original method calls for staying in until 150 drops of sweat have dripped off your face, but I've found for most people this is 5-10 minutes
 5. Take another shower, this time make it as cold as possible and stay in it for 30 seconds. It's most important to let the water cover your head completely the whole time
 6. Get out of the shower, pat yourself dry, wrap a towel around yourself, and sit down and relax until you stop sweating completely and your skin is dry. This typically takes anywhere from 3-10 minutes
 7. Return to the sauna, this time stay in for 10-15 minutes and then get out
 8. Repeat step 5-6
 9. Get back in the sauna for another 10-15 minutes and then get out
 10. Take another shower, this time make it fairly warm and stay in for 1-2 minutes
 11. Dry yourself completely off, lay down and relax for 5-10 minutes