

today's



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**Atlanta Braves Pitcher
John Smoltz:
At His Best in the Clutch**

**Surface EMG: Its Role
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M I L L I O N
D O L L A R
M A N

BY MELANIE EZZELL-NELSON

STANDING
ON THE MOUND, THE
ATLANTA BRAVES PITCHER TAKES
A SIGN FROM THE CATCHER AND SHAKES IT OFF.
HE LIKES THE NEXT CALL, THOUGH, AND SLOWLY LEANS
BACK FOR HIS WINDUP. AS HIS LEFT KNEE RAISES AND HIS RIGHT ARM
GOES BACK INTO THE PITCHING MOTION, HE FEELS EXCRUCIATING PAIN IN HIS GROIN,
BUT HE ONLY GRIMACES AND FOLLOWS THROUGH, SMOKING A 92-MILE-PER-HOUR FASTBALL PAST THE BATTER.



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his scenario is what right-hander John Smoltz went through during the 1992 baseball season, even as he compiled a 15-12 record with a 2.85 earned run average (ERA) and won the National League strikeout title with a career-high 215 "Ks." He was the National League champion Braves' best pitcher during the playoffs and the World Series, but most baseball fans didn't realize the debilitating pain this 26-year-old pitcher lived with on a daily basis.

Playing in Pain

"I suffered a pretty nasty groin injury late in the second half of last season," Smoltz recalls. "Unfortunately, for what I do and for what I *had* to do, there was no time to really recover or time to get it any better. I pretty much broke down my body at the end of the year, and I don't think people really understood what I went through. The only way to make it through the end of the playoffs was I had to get two cortisone shots, which I told myself I'd never get. But it was the only way to get through."

During the playoffs, Smoltz, with the encouragement of his wife Dyan, sought relief from Steven Katz, D.C. By getting adjustments from the 1985 Life College graduate, he was able to recover from pitching more quickly.

"I was going on three days rest, so I pretty much brutalized my legs and back through this process," says Smoltz.

However, he didn't remain under chiropractic care.

"At first, not to demean anybody or not to say that they weren't right, the trainers and doctors said, 'After the year is over, you need to rest.' I rested for a month, (or maybe a) month and a half, and I wasn't seeing any progress. I just had to seek something else."

Smoltz was referred to David Levinson, D.C., a 1981 graduate of Life College. Dr. Levinson, who has four clinics in the north Atlanta area, works with a number of the Professional Golf Association tour players, such as Jody Mudd.

One of Smoltz's athletic trainers, Chris Verna, was at a tournament and some of the pro golfers told him to meet with Levinson. Verna asked the doctor to examine Smoltz.

"One of the frustrating things

about his injury is it's different than an abrasion or a fracture," describes Levinson. "There's no telltale sign. You don't see anything because it's really more internal. And it's complicated because it's structure-related. That's where I think chiropractic comes in, because the analysis that we do is full body. We take everything into consideration.

"John's health concerns were right leg groin pain and weakness and chronic hip pain. For five months, he had no

change, regardless of rest or exercise."

Diagnosing the Problem

During the first examination, Levinson discovered that Smoltz's pain was coming from the iliopsoas/iliacus muscles of his lower extremities.

"Any movement was weak and caused discomfort," notes Levinson, "so we basically did an evaluation and found all the weak muscles in his body and those two were major ones."

Levinson's eclectic approach included posture and muscle testing ex-



Dr. David Levinson adjusts Atlanta Braves pitcher John Smoltz.

ams. He checked Smoltz's posture — both static and through ranges of motion. From the static checks, his findings indicated biomechanical spinal misalignments and imbalances with various muscles. He discovered anterior head translation, right lateral head, inferiorly dropped right shoulder, inferiorly dropped left hip, anterior pelvic rotation left hip and a pronated right foot.

The range-of-motion tests, which included walking, running and pitching motion, showed limitations on the left side of his body.

"These imbalances are likely caused by his occupation," Levinson explains. "He has over-excessive use of his right muscles because he's a right-handed pitcher."

In addition, Levinson conducted a kinesiological exam, which tested 90 different muscles. The major problem areas were the right psoas and right iliacus muscles. And he found the major cause of Smoltz's hip problem was a right femur head fixation.

"My philosophy with John was 'No pain was gain.' The goal was to increase strength, flexibility and endurance," says Levinson. "We assessed that his body was in defense physiology; weaknesses and pains were not a result of lack of physical exercise but a result of structural weaknesses and subluxations that prevented the body from healing. We wanted to increase flexibility and structural balance and to correct any subluxations."

The Care Program

Levinson started the care program on an acute status, seeing Smoltz every day. He cleared out Category II by a sacro-occipital technique blocking procedure and worked on correcting Smoltz's lack of a cervical curve with prone adjustments. Additionally, he stretched and balanced out the muscles on a daily basis.

"This was initial intensive care ... to get him out of pain," explains Levinson. "I felt like if I didn't do that then he wasn't going to be my patient. He wasn't going to trust what I was doing. Now we're into a reconstructive, rehab-type of treatment. In part of the analysis, we discovered, even in his

pitching motion, he wasn't breathing. He would just basically take a breath, hold it and fire it. And we all know that breathing is real important in terms of increasing strength, so it's going to help and probably prevent injury as well."

In addition to showing Smoltz how to strengthen his body, Levinson's wife, Debra Levinson, D.C., also a 1981 Life graduate, instructed him on certain exercises and breathing techniques she learned as a certified yoga instructor.

The next step, according to Dr. David Levinson, was nutrition. He says: "I've spoken to (John) about how he likes fast cars. You just can't put low-octane gas in a car and expect it to function at

"One goal I have is to be consistent, to be the pitcher that everyone thinks I can be, for a whole year."

optimal points. It will the first day, but not later on."

Smoltz realized his current nutritional program needed to change when his level of activity decreased due to the injury.

"I was so active and gung ho that I burned off a lot of things," he says. "Through this (injury) and my inactivity, I was like, 'Whooh! I can't do anything!' I have to watch what I eat."

Inspiring Confidence

After two months of visits to Levinson, Smoltz felt completely satisfied with his care.

"I saw a quicker result (with chiropractic)," he says. "I was in the dumps and I couldn't explain it to anybody. They'd say, 'Well, it's a groin pull. And this is what you need to do.' Well,

when I couldn't take my foot off the gas and put it on the brake comfortably, I said enough's enough. I just felt it was time to get to a different level or see if someone could pinpoint it. Really, in the last month, I've seen 100 percent improvement. When you see progress, it mentally makes you feel a lot better."

Levinson fully supports the mental component of fitness. He says, "When we talk about reaching the maximum athletic performance, we're really taking into consideration how much the physical body affects the mental side of the person's well-being. And when you add nutritional support, then you really have an opportunity to create a superhuman athlete."

The Braves recently rewarded Smoltz with a four-year, \$16 million contract, giving the club arguably the best — and most expensive — pitching staff in baseball. The deal was signed after Smoltz made an early morning trip to the chiropractor's office.

The deal is even sweeter now that Smoltz doesn't have to worry about pain. "The biggest difference is I'm throwing pain-free, and I have the ability to do what I have to do," he says. "It's easier to just lift up my leg, easier for me to pitch, easier to rotate certain parts of my body. All of this is going to aid in what I do because I have to do it so many times. The biggest thing I worried about last year was right at the release point (of throwing the ball), I'd feel pain. So I'm not even worried about pitching. I'm worried about the pain and how to alleviate it."

A Pitcher's Burden

The injuries most common for pitchers, according to Smoltz, are to the shoulder. He compared its effects on performance to a hitter with a rib cage injury.

"What's interesting about a pitcher is they always talk about the million dollar arm — in this case, multimillion dollar arm," jokes Levinson. "But in this particular case, and with a lot of pitchers, (John's) ability and strength come much more from his lower extremities and his legs than his arms. His arm is just kind of like a lever."

Smoltz agrees, saying, "I depend

so much on my legs that my arm was at a point in my career that it was close to having surgery. And that's where Chris (Verna) came in and tightened everything up. But then as soon as something goes wrong with your legs, when they're the strongest part of your body, it weakens everything. You could have the greatest arm in the world and it doesn't matter."

Levinson argues that the shoulder is often inaccurately deemed the problem by the medical profession.

"They classically will always evaluate point of pain because they're crisis-oriented," claims Levinson. "And invariably, baseball pitchers have rotator cuff problems. But it can often stem from a problem in the lower extremities. Just a sacroiliac subluxation, a hip being out of place, causes a player to have to compensate, to slightly change his motion and technique. That puts more stress on his shoulder and, of course, it breaks down. The goal is maximum athletic performance, maximum health performance, so you have to take the whole body into consideration."

In February, Levinson traveled to the Braves' spring training camp in West Palm Beach, Fla., to keep Smoltz healthy for the season opener in April. Regular adjustments were particularly important because of the intense training regimen.

As Smoltz describes it, "We're there early, unlike the regular season. We get up early and stretch and do our individual weight routine before practice."

During the first weekend of spring training, Smoltz had a four-hour physical. The orthopedist said that he was in as good physical shape as anyone he had ever seen at that point in a career.

Smoltz's incentive to stay in top condition comes from a grade-school coach's advice: "There's always someone trying to take your job."

During the season, Levinson plans to work with Smoltz before his scheduled starts and adjust him after he pitches to help him maintain his level of performance.

"The four days in between pitch-

ing allow me to go pitch every five days," says Smoltz. "People think we only work once every five days. It's true, but the four days in between are the most important."

The View From the Hill

Smoltz's biggest disappointment in his career is not yet being able to perform up to his physical potential. However, his frustration with ongoing injuries has lifted since discovering chiropractic.

"I'd love to pitch into my mid-30s," he says. "I'm 26 and people say I have the body of a 40-year-old, because I've always had to overcome something. I do it naturally. But it got to the point where I'm tired of this. I just don't know what it's like to perform totally healthy. And now I feel like I'm doing what I have to do to prolong my career."

His attitude is also clearly strengthened by his wife Dyan.

"John gets the headlines and the check is in his name, but his wife is incredibly supportive. I think that their relationship is really synergistic," says Levinson. "She is handling the things that he needs to do to get to that level."

Not only did Dyan suggest chiropractic for her husband, but she and their 15-month-old son Andrew are also under Levinson's care.

Another approach Smoltz tried was visiting sports psychologist Jack Llewellyn during the middle of the 1991 season. After seeing Llewellyn, Smoltz ascended from his pre-All-Star break slump of 2-11 to a 12-2 second-half record.

The visits caused a great deal of speculation by the news media, and Smoltz claims that, during that period, he didn't handle the press very well.

"That's just another thing that got blown out of proportion," he explains. "People say there's some magic somewhere. It's just like this process (chiropractic). People don't understand it, how simple it probably is."

Smoltz is not sure if other professional baseball players are under chiropractic care, but he believes in doing what is good for him.

"I'm more open-minded than most, just like with the sports psychologist I see," he says. "When there is a black

cloud, I learn about it (the new approach) and see what I can do."

Defining Moments

Smoltz has two victories that are most important to him. One is the first game after the All-Star break in 1991.

"I had lost so many in a row and was struggling to win my first game after the break," he recalls. "The win started me toward that mission."

The second big win clinched the National League's Western Division title for the Braves later that season.

"I won the game against Houston, and this was the first time we actually got into the playoffs. There are so many games after that, but you'll never replace the first," he says.

But there have been many other crucial wins for Smoltz, who has been the most consistent Braves pitcher during the last two years in the playoffs.

"I raise myself to another level," Smoltz says. "That's something as a kid I always dreamed of doing. I don't look at it (the playoffs) as pressure. I just enjoy doing it. My concentration is definitely at its best when it gets to that point. It's not to take anything away from other pitchers, but some people just like that, and some people treat it as pressure and just don't handle it as well. I just believe if you create too much (pressure) on one performance, you're not going to bring out your best talent."

On the physical side, Smoltz believes his stringent off-season routine helps him stay strong throughout the punishing 162-game regular season.

"Because I work out pretty hard throughout the year, I tend to get stronger as the year goes on," he says. "So I just go through the dry spells and when that point comes in the second half or when I can shine, I really take advantage of it and enjoy it more."

Fulfilling a Lifelong Dream

Smoltz, who started pitching in grade school, has known what his job would be for most of his life.

"Ever since I was 7 years old, I knew what I wanted to do," he says. "I go around telling people that, but they just don't understand what it is to have a dream, to have a goal. You shoo away all those people who are trying to



Smoltz exudes the same intensity while batting as he does pitching.

shoot you down."

Smoltz was an all-state basketball and baseball player at Waverly High School in Lansing, Mich., and after graduation he joined the Detroit Tigers organization. He played for the Tigers' farm team for a year and a half, and then he was traded to Atlanta for pitcher Doyle Alexander. He was called up to the major leagues after a year, and he has completed five full seasons with the Braves. Last season, he was named to the National League All-Star team. Through 1992, he had compiled a 57-54 career record, with 738 strikeouts.

Levinson believes Smoltz's attitude is one of his biggest assets. He says, "I think it's more than being an all-around athlete. There's probably so many people out there that physically match up with John. But his attitude is the reason he has reached this level. He's very receptive to coaching, and he uses other people around him to get to that next level."

Smoltz attributes his attitude to his upbringing.

"I don't know if you can teach people that," he says. "It comes from my parents and my family, but also it comes from within. It's an inner drive to succeed at all costs."

With chiropractic keeping his 6'3", 210-pound frame in shape, Smoltz may be able to avoid the no-win streaks that some pitchers suffer.

"One goal I have is to be consistent, to be the pitcher that everyone thinks I can be, for a whole year," he says. "I know what I can do in spurts, but going through a year and competing the whole year without having to overcome any injuries, ... I think you'll see a different pitcher."

Undeniably one of the best major league pitchers on a team that has won back-to-back National League pennants and played in two World Series, Smoltz has not let fame and fortune go to his head.

"It doesn't mean my job is done," he emphasizes. "The World Series ring is there to be had."

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