# Rolfing® SI and Sports

## A Conversation About Working with Athletes

By Russell Stolzoff, Basic and Advanced Rolfing Instructor and
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*Russell Stolzoff*

*Brad Jones*

**ABSTRACT** *Russell Stolzoff talks with Brad Jones about their collaboration in research on structural integration (SI) for soccer players, their love of working with athletes, and their curiosity about the role embodiment plays in sports performance.*

**Russell Stolzoff:**

Hi Brad! Thanks for taking the time to have this conversation. Let's start with the study we did at Western Washington University, where we collaborated with researchers to see the effect of the Rolfing SI, particularly the Ten Series, on soccer players. We were both initially surprised with some of the results, or you might say a lack thereof, when the study looked at a particular metric related to the ankle joint. Do you know that we went back later and analyzed the photographic data, looking at posture and shoulder tilt, and that gave a significant result?

**Brad Jones:**

Yes, I saw that in the poster you took to the Fascia Research Congress (FRC).

**RS:** Exactly. We went back to the photographic data because we were so impressed with what we saw as obvious changes. It was hard at first to believe our ankle measurements didn't pan out, so we made measurements based on bony landmarks and saw that there was a significant shift in lateral tilt of the shoulders and anteroposterior spine angle, and that's the research we presented at the FRC in Berlin (see "Rolfing SI and Sports: Structural Integration 10-Series Effects on Balance and Postural Alignment in Soccer Players" in the December 2018 issue of this Journal.)

**BJ:** I do remember us talking a lot about the positive anecdotes coming from the clients in the study. It was a big surprise when those initial measurements didn't turn out to be significant. I remember one guy and one girl in particular just talking about their ability to kick the ball more squarely on their foot, being able to kick better with their non-dominant leg. I also remember a number of comments about fluidity and being able to start and stop more easily while running. So many positive things! There were a number of people [subjects in the study] who had some sort of an injury going on too. A majority of them had their issues resolve during the Ten Series, chronic issues that had been going on for a long period of time. So, that's why I was so excited and thought, this is working great, the results are going to be off the charts.

[We later learned that] with an initial research attempt it's not unusual to choose measurements that end up not rising to the degree of significance that is required. But I guess that's the risk of doing a study. With my regular clients, I hear a lot of similarly positive stories, and yet, there's not a measurement being used to evaluate the efficacy of the treatment. In the end, it really is about their experience with their sport, or in life. As far as 'athletes' go, you

know, if someone's making money turning a wrench, or playing a musical instrument, to me they're a type of professional athlete.

**RS:** Right! Everybody has to use their body to make a living. A number of years ago I invented a category I call 'industrial athlete' – people who rely on their body more directly to earn their living: carpenters, tree climbers, musicians.

**BJ:** It's good for our notoriety if we can point to certain kinds of performance things, if people who are prominent are willing to talk about how Rolfing SI helps them, then it helps us be known for what we do. Like what you've done with Seattle Seahawks, Russell. It's definitely very rewarding as a practitioner to work with professional athletes, and be able to watch them, and then hear them tell you they're doing better. When you go see them perform, and see the things they are talking about, there's something very rewarding about that.

**RS:** Yes! And to see that you made a difference for them and they're using Rolfing SI to improve their performance in particular ways they can point to. Then you know Rolfing is helping them to perform and stay in the game. This goes beyond the very important aspect of recovering from problems or injuries: the focus on improving performance adds a little more. It puts a finer point on the results that they get from Rolfing sessions. It's not only that the backache has cleared up. Don't get me wrong, that's a definite win. But when but you work with somebody whose job depends on being able to use their body to perform better, and now they're able to do it better, and they can feel it . . . well, that has a different kind of a reward.

**BJ:** It sure does for me! [We all] hear from clients who've been to a lot of different practitioners: when they feel the way a Rolfer touches, it's immediate, and they know it's different. And the results speak for themselves. Athletes, especially the professional athletes, have often been to a lot of practitioners. So, if they end up with a Rolfer and they stick with it, and most of them do, it's obviously doing something different than other modalities. So when a professional athlete gives a testimonial, or speaks highly of Rolfing to his or her peers, you have to remember that they've tried so many things, they have access to a lot, and they're choosing to come see a Rolfer.

**RS:** You're right, I think it speaks highly. It's also makes me think about the challenges in reaching them, because word-of-mouth referrals seems to be how athletes find out about Rolfing SI. Up here in Bellingham [Washington State] there aren't too many professional athletes, so the challenge of reaching them is an interesting topic. It's something that people ask me about all the time and I often don't know how to tell them how to do it, because it has to start somewhere and grow organically. It has to be based on the value and the results you bring to your clients. Then they have to want to tell the next person to give you a try, and just like with all of our clients, it's not always a hit.

**BJ:** It is a total word-of-mouth thing. I remember when I was in Seattle and wanted to work with professional athletes. I wasn't sure how to make that happen. I wrote some letters and got nowhere, and it wasn't until a couple of years later that it started to happen via connections through clients that knew athletes. Maybe they were the portfolio manager for somebody, or they did some sort of work for the Sonics or the Seattle Storm or the Mariners. Sometimes, and I don't know if you experience this, I had to sign non-disclosures that said that I would not talk about working with them.

**RS:** No, I never encountered that.

**BJ:** What I was told, and this was with the Mariners specifically, was that players would get in trouble for going outside the system of what the Mariners provided.

**RS:** Okay, that makes sense. So the player himself asked you to sign it?

**BJ:** Yes, just agreeing that I wouldn't disclose that I was working with him.

**RS:** You can't really talk about your work anyway, due to confidentiality, right?

**BJ:** Yes, I think they were just covering their butts. I remember that I was a little concerned, so I had a lawyer look at it. I was worried that I would be on the hook if they got hurt and somehow said it was because of me. But, it was more them looking to make sure I would not talk about [working with them].

**RS:** I've heard of the situation where the team won't let players get treated outside of what the team provides but, nevertheless, it's happening all the time. I was exposed to it when I went out to Detroit to work with the Lions, and it was the same thing here in Seattle. I call it an 'informal economy', where the players don't get all the things that they need from inside the team environment. Even though some teams will bring in a massage therapist as kind of a courtesy, or something like that, there remains a big need for the work we do.

**BJ:** Would that be on-site at the facility?

**RS:** No, I would go to a player's home and they would get their teammates to come there. I guess what I'm saying is what we do hasn't really infiltrated into the team environment. I did meet a very accomplished neuromuscular therapist at the FRC who had a lot of experience working inside and outside team environments. He told me there was always a lot more control over how he practiced when he worked inside the team environment. So, even though I tried to make connections with teams, and would have liked to be a part of a situation where Rolfing SI was represented inside the team, at least I've been able to work according to our methodology and see its value to athletes who perform at the highest level. I'm a team player, and I love to collaborate, so I continue to think it would be a cool thing to be a part of.

**BJ:** I think there's a lot of ego with some of the trainers that work for these teams. If an athlete is seeing someone outside the team environment, they would probably question the methodology, or the treatment itself, or why an athlete would need to go outside of what is already being provided.

**RS:** Listening to you makes me wonder. What do you think we have to offer that is different? I have some thoughts about it, so I'll say a bit. I think there is something about the Rolfing perspective that is unique in a systemic way. Our approach is qualitatively different. Say someone comes in with a problem around a certain joint; a 'treatment' approach [in most modalities] focuses mainly around that joint, or maybe one segment away. The effectiveness of a targeted treatment can be limited if aspects of the larger, whole-body pattern are playing into the problem. So, I think part of the power of Rolfing is the way we work on the body as a whole, and the Ten Series is a kind of symbol for that systemic way of working. What do you think makes our work different and brings value to athletes that's different from what they can find in other types of practice, modalities or practitioners?

**BJ:** What jumps in my mind is something that happens in every session of the Ten Series. It's the way that we work and we touch; I think there's something about that that makes people – athletes, everyone

– realize that things are connected, that there's more to whatever is going on in their body than that one spot. So, over a Ten Series athletes begin to really feel those connections, more and more with each session. And I think that can be very helpful to an athlete because most sports are compartmentalizing. For example, a runner sometimes just thinks about their legs and doesn't pay a whole lot of attention to what's going on in their upper body. Getting work in their upper body and realizing what that does for their legs can really be an *aha* thing for them. Most of the high-level runners have had tons of work on their legs and feet. When you start working with other parts of their body, like their shoulder girdle, neck, and thoracic spine, they start to realize how much those places also impact their performance, even what's going on in their legs and how they strike the ground with their feet.

Even though Rolfers work globally like that, we also can work in a very detailed way. Most athletes really like that. Often they've been told a lot of very specific things about their bodies, and have had those things described to them as being part of their problem. For example, something is rotated. So, they like it when we can look at a joint and say it's out of balance in this way or that, and we're going to balance it. And then they can feel that change as well. So, there's a level of detail that we can work with, and we can explain what we're doing. A lot of athletes really like that.

So those are two very different perspectives. One is very global and the other is very specific. But that's the nature of the work too, and I think most Rolfers know that difference, when they're working specifically and when they're working globally.

The type of change in the way athletes thinks about their bodies is huge. This is more like software changes that happen. A switch flips and they realize that, hey maybe it's not just that my foot hurts, maybe the problem also exists somewhere else, and that this type of work really exposes that kind of dynamic. They feel the change, and since most athletes are so empowered, you know they'll own the work – they'll take it in and run with it, and continue that session on their own.

**RS:** I think that's an awesome way to describe it! I like that distinction, both the detail and the global, being able to do both.

**BJ:** With the global piece, some athletes already get that, but I find that most don't. When you can balance it out with the specificity – because that's usually in their belief system – that's really important.

**RS:** It's like first going right to the thing that bothers them, because that is where their focus is, and it's what's bringing them in. I think it's important for people in general, not only athletes, to not be too global when someone's very focused on something local that bothers them.

**BJ:** Yeah, you have to work with people differently and then you just start exposing them to some different ideas. Different concepts.

**RS:** That's a huge part, the way you talk about it to people.

**BJ:** I think with athletes especially, just listening to them and trying to figure out what motivates them, what their goals are, is extremely important. I do feel like there has to be some explanation of what we're doing and how that's meeting their goals, how it's going to impact their performance.

**RS:** Are you analyzing what's happened and telling them what you see? What's the balance between what you're noticing and what they're noticing, and how do you tie it together? How do you essentially make it a shared perception?

**BJ:** Again, it's like the standard answer for Rolfing SI, I think it depends, but you have to make it theirs, they have to own it. If, for example, you're going to explain how they could move better, then they not only have to be able to feel what you mean, but it has to make sense to them in terms of their sport. I have to backtrack a little bit to say you also have to be careful with athletes: if you don't play that sport, then you can't all of a sudden pretend you are an expert in it, because you can lose credibility pretty fast. For example, I know baseball, but I don't play baseball. I think it's super important to ask lots of questions and really draw the information out of them.

**RS:** So, learn about what their demands are. I always feel like that's my job. I wasn't a football player, and I certainly wasn't a professional-level athlete, so I feel like I have to learn about their sport, the particular demands of their position, and all the things that they do. I'm just a sponge for that that kind of information.

**BJ:** That's so true. When you learn from them and then use their own language to explain what you're doing with the work, that can be really effective.

**RS:** The curiosity is what I love most. I love learning what the demands and the nuances are. I want to know how they do what they do. Sometimes I find it's good for them to try to explain it, because it slows them down and makes them consider. Things that are automatic then become conscious, and that seems to contribute to their embodiment and enables them to sense their body in a different way. The feedback you're giving them through your touch dovetails with the description of their awareness. You're having this conversation on so many levels. To me that kind of discovering is really exciting.

**BJ:** Do the professional athletes you have worked with have more awareness of their body, in terms of how they move and feel connections within them, or less? I can think of athletes that actually have less connection, which you wouldn't think . . .

**RS:** It's all over the map. Some seem to have less, some have more. I think what you're asking is, can people be articulate about their awareness? Can they describe their physical motions? Can they be aware of themselves when they are moving? Or, do they just do what they do without being conscious of all that?

One of the things that always impresses me is an athlete's recall of the game in detail. It's as if they read a book and had really detailed comprehension. When I work with a player after a game and I ask about a particular moment when I noticed something happened, often they know exactly what I'm talking about, and can talk all about it. I'm amazed! It might be one little five-second moment in the midst of a whole game; they have recall and can talk about it. I don't know what it says about embodiment and awareness of movement, but it's definitely a form of memory linked to body expression.

**BJ:** I wonder if that's a characteristic of someone at that level. I think good athletes are incredibly aware of their surroundings, what's going on around them at all times, and sort of unconsciously paying attention to things that maybe other people aren't.

**RS:** That's interesting – unconsciously paying attention to other things that other people aren't!

**BJ:** Yeah, like there's a level of paying attention to what's happening at all times. And I don't know if that's just external awareness, you know outside their body, or how much of that they then take inside

to the embodiment and awareness. One thing I think about is that some of the best athletes have zero embodiment.

**RS:** What do you mean by that?

**BJ:** It's like they have a job to do and it's broken down to be so simple for them. Like to run from point A to point B. There's always technique involved, but it becomes almost like muscle memory type stuff, where it's just happening and they don't even think about it. For some of these people, it seems to serve them well to keep it so simple that they're not going to think about things like where the weight is in their feet, or how their body is stacked in gravity, and things like that. Sometimes I've worked with athletes to try to feel some of that stuff, and gotten frustrated because they just had no interest in it. They come back for the next session and I ask, "How did you feel after that session?", and they just say "Great" but can't offer any details.

Then there are other people that will report all kinds of details, like we were talking about earlier. Like, I was able to kick with this foot better, and I'm at the ball striking a different part of my foot, and I felt like I was using my torso to really wind up and kick . . .

**RS:** I like that you make those categorizations. It makes me think about how we work with different clients differently. It's always gratifying when someone can report in detail. It makes you think they really are understanding the work; it gives you something to work of off, something to converse about, and a common understanding of the effects. But then there's this other level where people feel like what you're doing is helping them but they don't articulate it. As a Rolfer, you still have to navigate, and I feel it's on me to notice the effects of what's happened, to find a way to engage and build on what we did and where they are now. But it's me noticing them, instead of them telling me their experience. I'm comfortable with both, but [with the second type] there's a certain kind of, okay, what do we do now? – because they're not giving you that much to work off of.

**BJ:** Yeah, sometimes with that type of person I would feel that it isn't going well, but they keep coming back and they keep saying things going great. We're trained to help people feel more, be more aware, be more embodied, but again it's about meeting someone where they are.

Especially with some of the higher impact sports, at some level – this is just my theory – building all that awareness and embodiment also builds a sensitivity to pain, and that doesn't always serve you well in in sports.

**RS:** It can really mess you up if you're too sensitive to pain [laughter].

**BJ:** It's an interesting dichotomy, something I've had to learn to deal with, and especially with athletes.

**RS:** I love it. You can't really pay attention to your body and do anything else at the same time, right? So, on one level it seems like paying attention to your body – how it moves, and your experience of your inner sensations – can be really great for self-discovery and understanding things on lots of levels. But, then you have to transition away from paying attention in that way in order to do anything else. We like to think that the discoveries you make are coming with you, that there's a value that carries forward from experiencing those things, but we really don't know much about this. We actually don't know what the value of awareness is, and if, or how, it does carry forward. I've often thought that if our work is working – and by that I mean that the effects are lasting – you shouldn't have to be thinking about it, or even be aware of it.

Maybe that set of people that you're talking about gives us that opportunity to find out; in terms of how we're communicating to the body, if we are creating any kind of lasting effect, it has to be coming in to the nervous system at a more unconscious level than what we can think of, and be aware of. An athlete can't be too discretely aware of many things at the same time. Think about all that goes into running a route in football, dealing with your defender, turning to catch a ball that's coming fast, trying to avoid getting hit . . .

**BJ:** Yeah, you're just doing your thing. It's especially like that at the highest level of the sport. That's where you hear all about 'flow' or the 'zone'. That's when you're at your best, and that's also when you're not thinking about any sort of little mechanical movement or anything like that. It's just happening. Maybe, with these people that aren't presenting a lot of details about how Rolfing work is helping them, they are just able to get into that place better. Anyone that's felt that knows you're not thinking in detail about anything; it's just happening.

**RS:** I think that's what Jeff Maitland refers to as the pre-reflective state. You and the experience are one. He talks about that in terms of a state that a Rolfer can experience working with their client.

**BJ:** Exactly! That's when I work my best, when I'm there and not trying to do too much.

*Brad Jones is a Certified Advanced Rolfer who has been practicing for eighteen years. He enjoys working with athletes from all sports and at all levels. As a collegiate athlete, Brad received a full sports scholarship to Penn State University, where he competed at the highest levels of Division 1 swimming. From 2008-2016 Brad competed internationally in kettlebell sport, where he was consistently ranked in the top three in the world for his weight class. In 2016 Brad returned to competitive swimming at the masters level and obtained twenty-two top-ten times in the US. In 2018, he was a member of the top-ranked relay team in the world. Brad lives in Bellingham, Washington where he is an assistant coach with the Bellingham Bay Swim Team.*

*Russell Stolzoff is a lifelong athlete whose understanding of Rolfing's impact on embodiment and performance dates back to the dramatic improvements in balance and quickness he experienced from his first Ten Series in 1983. For the past thirty years he has devoted his professional life to elevating his skills as a practitioner and instructor. In 2010, Russell founded Stolzoff Sportworks to bring the benefits of Rolfing SI to professional athletes. He was instrumental in helping members of the NFL's Seattle Seahawks stay in the game and perform at the highest level en route to two consecutive Super Bowl appearances and the 2013 Super Bowl NFL Championship. Russell's diverse background includes scientific research, studies in Somatic Experiencing® trauma resolution and Bodynamic Analysis, a developmental approach to body psychotherapy. Russell is a member of the DIRI Advanced Faculty and chairs the DIRI Executive Education Committee. He lives and practices in Bellingham, Washington.*

**Russell Stolzoff, the Journal's Sports Editor, is interested in talking with you about your sports Rolfing stories. He can be reached at rstolzoff@rolf.org.**