

# MUSCLE

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How To Bounce Back From Training Injuries...Fast!

By Kim Goss

“Pain Sucks” is the advertising slogan for a popular ointment designed to help people manage injuries. This slogan is true, but for bodybuilders, dealing with pain is usually the most manageable aspect of serious injuries. Should treatments such as drugs, liniments, massage, corrective exercise, nutritional supplements, and high-tech electronic modalities fail, the next logical step is surgery. And even in the hands of a qualified physician, the resulting scars, disfigurement, and/or extended layoff from training can crush the aspirations of almost any bodybuilder.

Athletes, bodybuilders in particular, need a better way to deal with injury, to receive treatment without worrying about getting ugly, Frankenstein-like scars or trying to decide if they should take up knitting, finger-painting, or card tricks as a hobby during a ten-week post-surgery recovery period. Bodybuilders need a noninvasive treatment that won't disfigure their physiques. And ultimately, it needs to be more than just a treatment: it needs to be a cure that has bodybuilders back in the gym training at 100% as soon as possible.

Agree? Then let me introduce you to Dr. Michael Leahy and his “miracle cure” called “Active Release Techniques.”

“Time is critical for an athlete,” says Dr. Leahy from his office in Colorado Springs, CO. While many other therapists and surgeons put time on their side – telling you not to expect too much too soon – Leahy is different. “Athletes should demand to be fixed *now*, and they should see major changes to an injury after the first or second treatment.” Leahy has made that possible, thanks to his amazing Active Release Techniques treatment.

Active Release is a collection of different “hands-on” soft-tissue techniques that, among other benefits, treat alterations in tissue texture and tension. “Most people think of a muscle that's tight as being strong and a muscle that's loose as being weak, but that isn't true,” says Leahy. “There's a desirable range of tension in the muscles and soft tissues. If a muscle stays tight for any length of time, it weakens. This weakness can affect performance and lead to injury. What we do is find the tissue that's injured and physically work it back to the texture, tension, and movement it should have.”

Well, just how effective is Active Release? For an example, let's look at carpal tunnel syndrome, an increasingly common injury that has expanded beyond the workplace to the gym. This is a problem many health-care professionals believe can be completely resolved only by surgery. But Leahy's treatment boasts a 96% success rate in curing

this so-called “incurable” injury! In fact, in a four-year period *more than a hundred people* were able to cancel scheduled surgeries after being treated by Leahy! “In total, we see about a thousand cases a year of chronic and repetitive injuries such as carpal tunnel syndrome,” says Leahy. “Even if an individual has had a problem for 15 years, we can usually resolve it in about 3 to 6 visits.”

One of the proponents of Active Release is the well-known strength coach and MM2K author Charles Poliquin. Earlier this year, Poliquin visited Leahy to learn more about this apparent miracle therapy. After explaining the theory behind Active Release, Leahy decided to give Poliquin a firsthand demonstration of its effectiveness.

Poliquin suffered from a nagging shoulder problem caused by his traumatic open-heart surgery last year. The treatment Dr. Leahy gave Poliquin took only five minutes. Leahy pushed, pulled, and poked on Charles’ shoulder. No drugs, no hot packs, no weird-sounding electronic gizmos taped to his body. The result? Poliquin noticed an immediate increase in his range of motion, and the very next day, his bench press increased by *35 lbs.!*



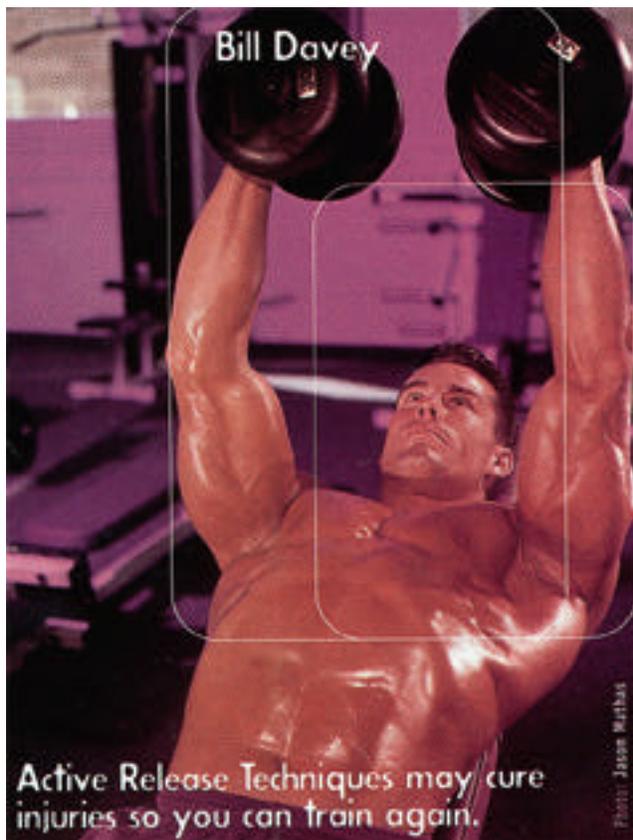
“There were a couple of things wrong with Charles’ shoulder, but the main trouble was in the rotator cuff. The problem was way up high in the armpit where a group of nerves cross the muscle; that muscle was injured to the point where it was tugging on the nerves. I separated the muscle from the nerve and then changed the muscle itself,” said Leahy when asked how this was accomplished.

Unlike many conventional therapies, Active Release doesn't require extended rest periods before you start noticing the results. Leahy says he has treated athletes right before events such as the Ironman race in Hawaii and Olympic weightlifting competitions. "In fact, it usually helps to work out right after a treatment to get the muscle to function properly," says Leahy.

I know what you're thinking: *there must be some drawbacks*. Well, you're right. There are – but not many. First, the treatment itself can be painful. Poliquin called his treatment "the longest five minutes of my life." However, intense pain is not a given with Active Release; it all depends on the injury. "Of course, you have to work it differently when there's chronic inflammation or if the affected area has screws, plates, and metal – but (even then it's not contraindicated," says Leahy. So, besides the possibility of a painful treatment (and which would you rather have, five minutes of pain or a surgical scar for the rest of your life?), Leahy believes "the only risk with Active Release is having people treat you who don't know what they're doing – they could cause nerve or muscle damage."

## Birth of a Miracle

If you had asked Leahy 30 years ago what he wanted to do for a living, pioneering a career in sports medicine would not have been his first choice. Actually, he wanted to fly. Appropriate, because after talking to him for five minutes, all of a sudden you realize the person he reminds you of is *Star Wars'* Luke Skywalker. And although it's not exactly as dangerous or thrilling as being a Jedi Knight, Leahy had visions of screaming through the wild blue yonder in fighter jets. So he accepted an appointment to the Air Force Academy. He graduated with a degree in engineering in 1971 and became so respected as a fighter pilot that he was one of the select few to serve as a test pilot. After Leahy fulfilled his military commitment in 1979, he turned in his light saber and turned his attention elsewhere.



His brother, a chiropractor, began to interest him in a career in chiropractic medicine. Two years later, the Skywalker look-alike *used the Force* to become the first person to graduate from the Los Angeles College of Chiropractic with a 4.0 grade point average.

During the following five years, Leahy worked on perfecting his Active Release Techniques. He soon found that his engineering background was going to be useful for him in his new profession; it was probably that education which helped him perfect his new way of treating injuries. "That engineering degree helped me learn how to be very specific biomechanically – there's no way I could have developed Active Release without having that engineering background," states Leahy.

Unfortunately, with almost any new idea, the inventor/creator is going to run into snags along the way. When Leahy shared his discoveries with his colleagues, it was often confused with standard massage, but in fact, it's a *soft-tissue treatment*. Insurance companies were also confused. Leahy explains, "I started using the term 'neuromuscular reeducation' in 1984 because it was an insurance code that could be billed, but it wasn't very accurate for what I did. Eventually, I came up with the name Active Release Techniques, which is now a Federally registered trademark."

There was another obstacle. In 1994, Leahy had a serious bout with cancer. "I had melanoma (a type of skin cancer), and it had metastasized to the lymph system. Because the primary site was never found, I was basically in the hopeless category – pretty much no chance of living even one year." Figuring he still had something to

contribute to the world, Leahy began an immune-system program that involved plenty of rest, antioxidants, and avoiding foods high in bacteria and growth hormone. That was more than two years ago, and today, Leahy is doing just fine: he recently completed his 14<sup>th</sup> Ironman Triathlon, the 4<sup>th</sup> since his cancer was discovered.

## **Active Release Techniques and the Bodybuilder**

Many of Leahy's first patients were bodybuilders. "I had some friends in Los Angeles who introduced me to some lifters. When I moved to Colorado, some of them would seek me out to get treated. And because of word-of-mouth recommendations, I saw several of the top pro bodybuilders," explained Leahy. And those big-name, big boys left Leahy's office feeling better for two reasons. First (again depending on the injury), the patient usually felt better after the first or second treatment. Secondly, Leahy contends that although the procedure won't directly cause muscles to grow, Active Release has an *indirect* effect on muscle development. "Most people who are trying to build muscle end up with biomechanical problems or a soft-tissue injury that can limit muscle growth. How many bodybuilders have had to drop the bench press from their routines because it hurt their shoulders? Or forget doing squats or any number of other exercises? With Active Release, you actually fix the problem, so you can do any exercise you want, which enables you to build muscle faster."

"Overtraining" seems to be a buzzword of late. 'Yer shoulder hurtin' ya? Well gosh darn, you must be overtraining!'" Leahy doesn't believe the problem is as widespread as many people like to think or claim it is. "What happens with a world-class athlete is that when he or she really starts to hit the edge of what the body is capable of doing, certain things will start to break down – and that, in the past, has been termed 'overtraining'. But in terms of problems with the mechanics of soft tissue, most of these can be fixed, so the athlete can keep training hard."

According to Leahy, bodybuilders seem to be very susceptible to shoulder injuries. Another chiropractor who acknowledges this problem is Joseph Horrigan, the poplar bodybuilding author who wrote *The Seven Minute Rotator Cuff Solution* and who is Leahy's former business partner. Leahy says, "Dr. Horrigan's book contains valuable information about the rotator cuff, although I favor other rehabilitative exercises. I like to prescribe a set of four unique rotator-cuff exercises that accomplish some of the same things that the Active Release treatment does."

So what about steroids? Does the use of anabolics increase a bodybuilder's susceptibility to soft-tissue injury? Leahy says yes. Steroids can weaken fascial structures such as connective tissue. Unfortunately, Leahy says his technique won't correct all the problems caused by steroids, but he believes that, with Active Release, he can break down the altered texture or adhesions that occur from using steroids, so the chances of injury will be far less.

## Getting the Treatment

The first thing Leahy does during an Active Release Technique session is find out exactly what the injury is. Is it a tear, a scar, an adhesion, or perhaps inflammation? The second step is to determine the exact tissue involved. “A shoulder is not an exact tissue. You have to know exactly which muscle, which ligament, which tendon, which nerve is affected.”

This is one reason Leahy is not a big fan of John Parrillo’s fascial stretching methods. “When you injure soft tissue, there will be some degree of scarring. The problem with just blasting away at it with stretching is that it’s not specific; you don’t know what you’re going to break. What’s more, you may end up breaking apart good connective tissue because the scar is as strong or stronger than the normal tissue.”

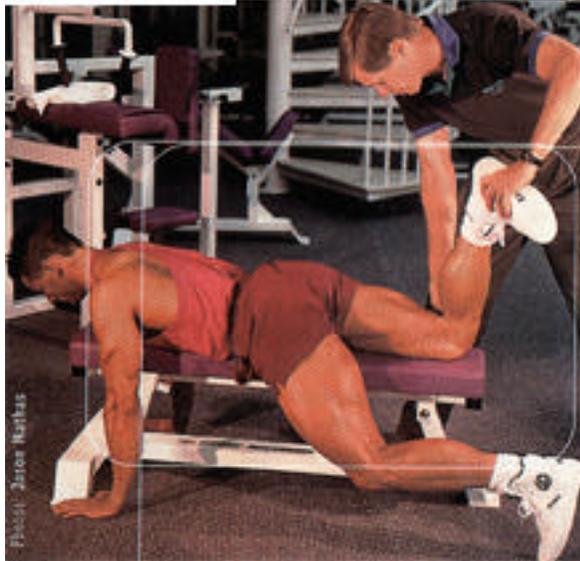
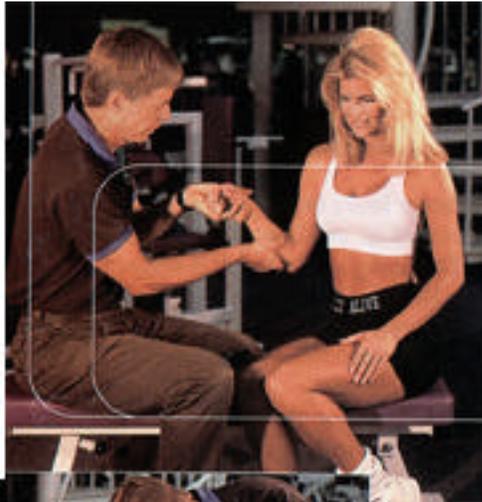
Once Leahy has determined exactly which tissue is involved and exactly what injury has occurred, he begins the treatment. The technique consists of using specific motions of the body to make layers of tissue slide over one another. “Then I use my hands to find out where it’s not sliding or where it’s not moving correctly or if it’s too tight. I’ll break up an adhesion, or I’ll force a layer of muscle to slide over another layer of muscle, or I’ll separate a nerve that’s stuck to connective tissue or a layer of muscle.”

Yikes, that sounds like it could be painful. Leahy says when adhesions must be broken up, it’s going to be uncomfortable. But he contends that the greater the practitioner’s expertise, the less it will hurt. (Sounds like you really want to make sure the doc knows what he or she is doing!)

After his success in beating cancer, Leahy became a big believer in the power of proper nutrition and is convinced that it can play a role in the success of Active Release. He states, “The main idea is being complete in your nutrition, so the body has a chance to heal from the micro-injuries that occur. Nutrition can accelerate the recovery process because if you’re missing any of the essential substrates the cells need, the healing process will be slow. To me, nutrition includes supplementation, but I don’t isolate nutrients. I just want to make sure my patients have everything because every nutrient is critical.”

## The Future

Leahy currently devotes much of his time to teaching Active Release to other medical providers and says it takes about two years of practice to master it. He says that just about anyone can learn the technique, but a good background in anatomy will speed up the learning process.



Although currently there aren't many people who can perform Active Release proficiently, the future looks bright. Formal classes on the procedure have started at the University of California at San Diego (UCSD). Leahy suggests that if someone claims to perform Active Release, ask to see his or her certificate with Leahy's signature on it. Or just call his office (719-473-7000) and ask for Active Release Techniques, LLP) for a list of providers in your area.

What's on the horizon for this new wonder therapy? "Well, we're starting research with the medical school at UCSD, and there are areas that still need to be looked at. We need to find a way to take a picture of the tissue we're working on – that might involve an MRI a CAT scan, an electrical measurement, or oxygen concentration measurements.

And while success stories like Bailey's are impressive, Leahy isn't concerned with names and fame. "Our goal is to put the athletes back into their sports as good as new, and if we publicize their names, the athletes would carry the stigma of the injury. It would be a little contradictory to our goals, don't you think?" Spoken like a true miracle worker.

So, if you're suffering from a shoulder injury, carpal tunnel syndrome, or any deep muscle injury and you thought surgery was the only way to get relief, think again. Leahy's Active Release Techniques may be a better alternative. When you're talking about lifelong surgery scars and/or multiple-week recovery periods, it might be worthwhile to investigate the possibility of getting Active Release treatments instead. Is this the technique of the future? It's too soon to tell, but it's already proving to be an exciting alternative to conventional therapy and surgery.

### **Seeing is Believing**

I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it: Bill Phillips, wrist and shoulder joints achy and damaged from a motorcycle accident, hadn't had a really decent chest or shoulder workout for months. If his shoulder didn't give out during a lift, one of his wrists did. Whenever I saw him standing, talking to someone, he would alternately rub his shoulder and then flex his wrist forwards, then backwards, almost as if he were working on some new version of that stupid *Macarena* dance.

Then, at Charles Poliquin's invitation, Mike Leahy and his partner, Tim Patterson, paid a visit to our new Human Performance laboratory in Golden. Just for kicks, I thought I'd ask Mike to treat Bill and see if he could do anything for him. (If it didn't work, at least I'd get to see Bill squirm in pain for a while.)

Bill, although somewhat skeptical, allowed Mike to examine his wrists. Mike probed the wrist with his sensitive fingers, dug his thumb into bill's forearm as hard as he could, and alternately flexed the forearm backwards, then forwards. Bill winced, but Leahy continued manipulating his wrist and forearm. Within 60 seconds, Dr. Leahy was done. Bill looked puzzled as he flexed his wrist. "I can move it again, and a lot of the pain's gone!" he said, still flexing it as if he expected the pain to come back. Leahy treated the other wrist and then had Bill lie down on a bench while he manipulated Bill's shoulder in a similarly excruciating manner. It looked even more painful than the wrist treatment, but after a couple of minutes, it was over.

Leahy then put a couple of 45-lb plates on the bench-press bar and motioned for Bill to test out his joints. Bill eased himself onto the bench and proceeded to pump out ten reps, all with virtually no pain. Later that night, he was able to work shoulders for the first time in two months!

Subsequent treatments have helped Bill even more. Like I said, I would never have believed it if I hadn't seen it. Bill claims that after only 4 treatments with Dr. Leahy (each lasting only 10 minutes), his wrist and shoulder strength improved from 40% to 80% of his "pre-wreck strength." Amazing!

- TC Luoma

## **Want More Info On Active Release Techniques?**

Dr. Leahy and his colleagues have put together a fantastic manual and video series that go into great detail about the Active Release Techniques. This material is not necessarily for “laypersons” (non-medical experts); it was designed to teach health-care professionals, like chiropractors, physical therapists, physicians, etc., how to use these techniques to almost “miraculously” resolve many skeletal muscle and connective-tissue problems. If you’d like to help your doctor, chiropractor, physical therapist, or even massage therapist learn about these Active Release Techniques so they can help treat you and others, make a copy of this article and give it to them. I think they’ll find it very interesting and helpful. They’ll probably thank you later for doing them a big favor!

(Health-care professionals, for information on how to order the Active Release Techniques manual and videos, call Champion Health at 1-719-473-7000 or write to them at 10 North mead, Colorado Springs, CO 80909.)