

Ronda Rousey vs. Muhammad Ali: Does sex before athletic events impact performance?

Pep Guardiola is arguably the best soccer coach in the world. He's led giants Barcelona and Bayern Munich to domestic and international success—managing some of the world's elite talent in the process. He is revered around the world for how he handles his players. But Pep's influence over them apparently extends beyond the sidelines and into his players' bedrooms. “[Sexual] Relations must be before midnight. Even if you have a free day the following day,” he orders, according to [a former player](#).

Guardiola believes that sex curfews help players sleep better, avoid muscle injuries and increase overall performance. He's not alone; there is a pervasive belief in the sports world that sex has a negative impact on performance. Muhammad Ali [reportedly](#) refused to have sex six weeks



before a match. Several World Cup teams' coaches [barred](#) the nasty during the

2014 tournament. Buffalo Bills head coach Marv Levy mandated that his players stay away from their wives the night before all four of the team's Super Bowl appearances (they lost all four times, whatever that means). [Even](#) Plato, all the way back in 444 BCE, thought Olympians should abstain the night before their events to ensure peak performance.

On the other hand, Hall of Fame quarterback Joe Namath swore by it. In a 1969, [interview](#) he told *Playboy* that he 'didn't go to bed alone' the night before his miraculous win in Super Bowl III.

But what does the science actually say on the issue? Is Guardiola's sex-restriction protect his athletes from expending essential energy or did sex give Broadway Joe the edge he needed to win the Super Bowl?

The answer may depend on your sex.

Sorry, I need to get up early in the morning

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It's the night before your big race, or game or event, you've loaded up on carbohydrates, your uniform is laid out, and your head touched down on the pillow early to make sure you get a good night's sleep. You have tried your best to not exert yourself all day long,

because why waste precious energy? That's the way many athletes see sex: as an added strain on the body and maybe the mind that could wear them down or deplete the energy stores they've built up for the big game or run.

However, according to experts, this belief arises from a misconception many have about sex—that it's akin to a strenuous workout. In a study published in the *Clinical Journal of Sports Medicine*, Samantha McGlone and Ian Shrier said their research shows that the average married couple barely breaks a sweat during a session of [love-making](#):

Considering that normal sexual intercourse between married partners expends only 25–50 calories (the energy equivalent of walking up two flights of stairs) it is doubtful that sex the physiological performance tests.



For athletes worried about their energy reserves, Maria

Cristina Rodríguez Gutierrez, director of sports medicine at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, [said](#) they can easily replace what's lost during an average sexual encounter by eating a candy bar or drinking a can of soda.

Another belief is that sex may strain an athlete's sleep schedule. Former New York Yankees manager Casey Stengel once famously [said](#), "Being with a woman all night never hurt no professional baseball player. It's staying up all night looking for a woman that does him in."

It seems that this might be the school of thought Pep Guardiola subscribes to. The real issue, it seems, is how tiring the sexual experience, [according to](#) Julie M. Levitt, M.D., a 14-time marathoner and a board-certified ob-gyn. "Don't participate in an endurance event before the endurance event."

Sex's effects on sex hormone

Many men believe that after an orgasm, their testosterone level drop, which causes them to lose their

UFC 190: Rousey v Correia

aggressive edge. McGlone and Shrier explain that there is a “long-standing myth that athletes

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should practice abstinence before important competitions may stem

from the theory that sexual frustration leads to increased aggression.”

This belief about the relationship between sex and testosterone levels is not gender-exclusive. Ronda Rousey, arguably the most dominant mixed martial fighter in the world, [said](#) in a 2012 interview, that she tries to have sex the night before big fights:

For girls, it raises your testosterone so I try to have as much sex as possible before I fight, actually...A lot of the studies that I've read about it have not really substantiated the claim that if you abstain from having sex for that long that it actually raises your testosterone; you actually might start producing less.

There may be some truth to this idea. While few studies have addressed the issue directly, some have found that after a few days of abstinence (with or without a partner), testosterone levels did increase—to a [point](#). However, longer studies in which athletes abstained for months—a not so uncommon practice for many professional and Olympic athletes—have found that testosterone levels eventually plummet to resemble those of a child.

But Rousey and other women may receive a benefit from having sex before athletic events aside from any potential testosterone boost. [According](#) to Rutgers University psychologist Barry Komisaruk, sexual activity may release powerful pain-blocking chemicals in women.

“At least one of the mechanisms by which [sex] blocks pain is that it blocks the release of [a neuropeptide called] substance P, which is a pain transmitter,” he told National Geographic. His research has uncovered that the discharge of this compound can block chronic muscle pain for up to a day.

Is it all in your head?

In reality, though, nobody really cares about testosterone levels—what athletes and their coaches care about is on the field performance. And to this end, a few [small](#) studies have [found](#) that sex the night before has no effect, either way, on athletic performance. In a meta-analysis published in June 2016, researchers in Italy dredged the literature but found no conclusive directive for [athletes](#):

This aspect is considered important in sports, but there is insufficient evidence of the possible specific detrimental effect on the sports performance. In addition, no exhaustive data are available about the possible impact of the sexual activity on different kinds of sports, in terms

of endurance or resistance performance, or in terms of team or individual sports.



Lebron James has a well known pre-game ritual

Many scientists now believe that the effects of sex on athletic performance may be personal and psychological. Athletes are a very superstitious breed. Not being able to go through a pre-game ritual can [actually](#) affect performance. So if sex is part of an athlete's normal game prep, it could benefit them in this way, and if it's not, they might want to refrain.

"In general, an athlete should never try something before an important competition that they have not already tried in lesser competitions or practice," Italian researcher Emmanuele A. Jannini said. Which is to say that practice makes perfect for activities both on and off the field.

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