

CHAPTER 9

“Recovery (Stretch 30 minutes every day)”

Tom Brady’s fitness-related self-help book, *The TB12 Method*, centers around Pliability (like how *The Muscle Code* centers around Muscular Balance). He preaches the importance of spending half of his training time on what *I* would consider recovery. He calls it pliability; a mixture of stretching, massage and eastern holistic energy management. According to Tom: “Pliability is the missing leg of performance training, and the most underutilized and least understood.” He’s doing something right; his unheard-of longevity and durability isn’t just luck. The fact that he’s still playing the hardest position in sports, at 44 years old, is like the eighth wonder of the world.

The details of the TB12 Method are geared towards athletic achievement and preventing high-speed contact injuries. So let’s give optimal recovery a Muscle Code perspective, framed by bodybuilding and physique improvement goals. The premise being: taking care of your muscles, pre and post workout, is not only the fountain of youth, but a secret weapon.

For starters, I stretch for 30 minutes *every day*. It’s the office administrative work of bodybuilding and physique improvement. It’s brushing the dust away from your marble-statue-masterpiece after a day of chiseling. Organizing the clutter of your desk after a day of closing sales. It’s cleaning your cherished sports car and spreading the protective wax over it. It’s taking care of your work-in-progress, and being proud of it.

For some of you, 30 minutes a day might seem like a lot. And it is. It’s a valuable chunk of time, especially if you have a full time job, kids and other responsibilities. But physique improvement is my hobby. It’s what I do for fun, what I live for. So this passion affords me the patience to spend this amount of time stretching. Because stretching is a slow, boring, bland activity. You need to slow the hell down. It’s a mental challenge, fighting boredom and the urge to do something more stimulating.

I’ve been stretching for 30 minutes every day for so long it’s become an ingrained habit. The day doesn’t feel complete without it. I usually stretch at around 4:30pm; it’s a natural energy boost, it gets my blood flowing. It’s like a second wind for the energy of the day. After 30 minutes of quality stretching, you feel loose and more comfortable in your skin. Your breathing is deeper. You can think, relax and work better. It’s also a good way to manage stress.

But all these reasons pale in comparison to why I *really* stretch habitually. Mere side-effects of the true motivation behind stretching out my entire body. Which is: *to aid and speed up the recovery process for my muscles*.

This topic came up briefly in Chapter One in the form of Action Item 5—*Taking Extended Time Off*. That subsection illuminated the importance of taking a vacation for your muscles, so to speak, from time to time. But this Chapter will expand on the actual tools and techniques of what to do DURING your recovery time windows. Strategies applicable not only during extended time off, but essentially during your non-workout hours. This Chapter will cover the actions that will help you regenerate from your workouts faster and more completely.

The old adage ‘Muscle is not built during your workout, but during the recovery process’ is important to remember. It could get forgotten in lieu of the distracting excitement of the gym. To reiterate, lifting heavy weight breaks down cellular tissue, which is then repaired via rest and nutrition. The repeated breakdown and reparation process leads to muscle growth; cellular tissue is rebuilt bigger each time (albeit by microscopic intervals). So maximizing your recovery is a fundamental, necessary evil.

Just living your normal life with muscle soreness is part of the game. When you’re in pursuit of physical improvement, *a lot* of your time is spent sore and achy. Which isn’t always a bad thing...it could be an enjoyable sore, a badge of honor. “It hurts so good” type of thing. At other times, it’s a hindrance. A discomfort you have to fight through. But the reality is, you need to accept and welcome muscle-soreness with open arms.

One of the tennis teachers I used to work with would openly convey how he didn’t like to work out. At that time in my life, I couldn’t understand why someone would think this way. Eventually, I got his reasoning out of him—*He didn’t like being sore*.

You don’t have to like it, but broken down muscles is the equal and opposite reaction of a great workout. The better you get in the gym, the better you have to recover; and the more semi-intense pain you have to deal with.

To help with Recovery, Stretching is my primary plan of attack. The process of lengthening and opening up the crevices of muscle tissue improves circulation. It allows this living tissue to breathe. When your muscles are tight, they are deprived of sufficient blood and oxygenation. In other words, they don’t *heal* at an optimal rate. The process of lengthening and softening this tissue better allows muscle cells to absorb what they need.

Let’s cut to the chase: I’m not talking about half-ass, absent-minded, fluff stretch. The amateurish hold for one or two seconds; moving on to the next stretch quickly; no consideration for what you’re doing whatsoever. The stretching I’m talking about is DEEP. With intention and purpose, trying to get better. Taking pride in strict form and technique. Trying to go a little deeper.

To do your best stretches, you can’t force yourself as far as possible. It’s not like lifting weights where you push with blunt force. You need to enfold, open up to the elongation. To stretch effectively, you need to take your time (the opposite of rushing or multitasking). You need to almost let go and surrender. It’s counter-intuitive (like Golf, where sometimes the harder you try the worse you play).

This Recovery Stretch discipline is different from YOGA. A lot of people equate Yoga with Stretching, almost becoming the informal definition (like how “to google” something is synonymous with “to search online”). A recovery stretch is not taxing, at least not physically. It does require a mental cocktail of patience, concentration and thoroughness; but it should not be a physical challenge.

Here’s how I look at it: **people take for granted the basic, fundamental stretch movements**. The simple hands-reaching-for-toes hamstring stretch, neck side-to-side, side bends. The warm-ups you used to do in gym class. All the simple most basic stretches that lengthen and loosen the major muscles of the body.

Yoga is great. It involves all types of full body movements, improves flexibility in tons of places; focuses on breathing. But it’s more than I’m looking for. At least on a daily basis. My

workout program cannot afford to give 90 minutes to semi-intense flowing postures multiple times a week.

So instead of gauging progress by achieving complicated vinyasa poses, I'm staying where I am and trying to get better. Here's an explanatory analogy: as stretch-enthusiasts work on perfecting a downward dog flow into a one-legged plank, I'm working on the hands-touching-the-toes hamstring stretch with the same voracity.

There's almost a stigma that the tried and true stretch movements are for warm up only, or even a waste of time. But our goal here is to optimize recovery...as such, these stretches are valuable tools. Especially when compared to intense Yoga.

During my background synopsis in the Intro, I talked briefly about my move to Miami Beach. How I threw myself into its workout culture, spending time at every box gym or fitness center. But that also includes Yoga Studios! I've tried a class at nearly every yoga studio in Miami (not an exaggeration).

I've even tried a 'Yoga Only' for a month experiment (like my push up only phase). I was curious to see what would happen if I only did Yoga for a month; if I applied my weight lifting energy to intense vinyasa sessions only. So, I gave it a go. But I didn't make it. Those first few weeks were refreshing and challenging, but in the end, my hamstrings took a beating. For me personally, Yoga puts too much emphasis on the bending modality (figuring out what works for you is a big component of what The Muscle Code is talking about). This experimental take away solidified my interest and enjoyment of working on only the basic stretches for recovery.

My journey in finding the right stretching routine, in accordance with my bodybuilding goals, fits with a famous Winston Churchill quote: "Americans will always do the right thing... after exhausting all the alternatives."

Don't get me wrong, I still enjoy an intense Yoga practice from time to time. This modality has value in anyone's workout repertoire, and you do feel great afterwards; almost euphoric. I remember the very first yoga class I took back in New York—I went with my sister Lindsay. The studio was quaint, in the basement of a building, an oriental sanctuary type of vibe. I couldn't believe I was actually doing it, it was *way* outside my comfort zone (I even felt uncomfortable taking off my socks). But I made it through and was happy I did. My sister and I felt so good we *sang* the entire drive home! I guess I've been chasing that good feeling ever since.

In addition to recuperation benefits, consistent stretching will also help prevent injuries—keeping you in the gym for weeks at a time. As the sports pundits like to say: *the best 'ability' is oftentimes 'availability'*. If I was a NFL General Manager, durability would be my number one consideration (can you imagine a team that had no injuries? They would be hard to beat). I cringe when I hear an NFL player is out for the year, especially after signing a huge contract. As for your muscular improvement process, injuries can become costly. They're debilitating and can mess up your hard earned momentum.

I haven't suffered an in-the-gym injury in over five years (knocking on wood while I write this). When I was younger, muscle strains, tweeks and pulls were a lot more common. I lift weights just as intensely now, so keeping my muscles flexible has been the key factor. I've come to the conclusion that staying pain and injury free is correlated with adequate stretching time. Especially since most fitness-related injuries can be traced back to tight muscles. When an area

of the body is excessively used and super tight, *something's gotta give*. A strain or tweek could be right around the corner. It just needs a spark to go haywire...or an awkward push, pull or positioning.

And if I do suffer some type of injury, stretching is my go-to means to recover and heal. Barring a catastrophic muscle tear, there's not many strains and pain areas that can't be solved with a detailed stretching prescription. You could go to a top-of-the-line physical therapist or sports medicine doctor, the solution to your malady will likely boil down to specific stretch moves that will dig deep into that area.

During my five year high school basketball career, I only missed one game—the game *after* I hurt my hip (I was going for a loose ball and twisted in an unconventional way). This strain of my right hip is the only past bodily occurrence that I would consider a serious injury. Luckily, my dad's friend from college was able to take a look (a well-known sports/orthopedic surgeon, he even operated on Bo Jackson's shoulder at one point). He fit me into his busy schedule, did some tests and evaluated my hip flexor. To make a long story short, the take away and “prescription” going forward were three stretches. THAT'S IT. Doing three stretches, 2–3 times a day. So *a consultation with the best doctor money can buy* led to simple, daily, flexibility work.

Well, I became obsessed with these three moves. I studied the factsheet they printed out on how to correctly execute each one. I went to basketball practice, not able to play, but hung around doing these stretches. For about a week I was religious with it. In the end, I only missed one game and was back on track fairly quickly.

Tom Brady talked about a similar circumstance in his book. During one season, he experienced a severe strain of his right groin muscle. The doctors recommended surgery...but Tom and his TB12 coach weren't so sure. Instead, they applied persistent and intense pliability work to the injured area. Over the ensuing months, with this aggressive do-it-yourself approach, his pain and discomfort went away.

I do my own troubleshooting these days. Any minor “injury” gets stretched and massaged swiftly and thoroughly (more on massaging in a bit). Sometimes you have to be your own problem solver, and diligent in your corrective measures. Taking care of yourself in this department can fall under *recovery* since it keeps you coming back to the gym and working out.

An added emphasis on the recovery side is even more important as you get older! I've been passionately weight lifting for over 20 years, and throughout that time I've continually gotten stronger. There hasn't been a dip in strength or loss of muscle mass. My energy during my workouts is the same. It might take me a little while to get going, but once I'm rolling, I can still push it just as hard, if not harder (I'm like a diesel engine, very reliable once it's purring). But the one area that I have felt a slight dip and decline in is with my Recovery ability. It takes me a few days extra—after a heavy bench press workout, for example—to be able to go again. That's why I've spent my intellectual pursuits predominately on this topic. Reading books and thinking through any new ideas to help me bounce back quicker.

And in case you didn't already know, this recovery dynamic is what Steroids really help with. Most people think you take steroids and they make you stronger, but that's not entirely true. It helps you immensely on the recovery side so you CAN train more...which leads to the apparent increased size and strength. You don't just take steroids, do nothing, and get bigger. You

have the capability to workout *three times as much* as you could without the synthetic substance! This superhuman resiliency extends to the nutritional side as well; you can eat McDonalds all the time and the fat virtually stays off (if you keep training).

Doing a great job with Recovery, over the long haul, will naturally mimic the effect of steroids. Major areas of fitness and health, already talked about in this book, fall under this category (stretching is not the only means to enhance recovery, just the area I felt most overlooked and worth a deep dive). I've summarized these areas into a list of four categories (the first two are even more important than stretching!). This upcoming section can best be described as glorified common sense—taking things you already do and assigning them more meaning. Being a little bit more buttoned-up, responsible, disciplined, aggressive and consistent.

These other major aspects and tactics, to keep in mind and consider, include:

1 – Protein

I will give the role of protein its strongest due so far with regards to recovery (I'll throw it a bone, no pun intended). While I stand behind my previous statements—"most bodybuilders are rarely protein deficient" and "I rather you strive for precision over excess"—it's still the nutrient responsible for muscle growth. Acting as, essentially, the *building blocks* of human tissue. So adequate consumption is part of your "recovery strategy" whether you like it or not. I frame it as the motivation behind the time-consuming cooking work put into my protein sources. When your muscles are sore, they need this consistent serving of amino acids with every meal.

Proper hydration goes hand-in-hand with protein intake. Some experts say you should drink around your bodyweight in ounces per day (if you partake in strenuous exercise). I shoot for a bottle or medium size cup every hour. It's hard to believe, but it's a fact: muscles are composed of around 75% percent water.

To be honest, I can plug the entire 'Strive for Nutritional Balance' chapter in here. A sound dietary plan sets you up for success; providing the raw material needed to repair those hungry, depleted muscles.

2 – Adequate Rest (or patience)

If you're still tactically sore on a particular muscle, don't train that area directly. You're spinning your wheels if you do. Don't think you'll be ahead in the game if you workout your chest three times a week (for example). There are no shortcuts and nothing is free. If you're impatient, it could lead to overload, a muscle strain, burnout or other issues. Overtraining and working out a muscle before it's ready will negatively affect your aggregate progress. Slow and steady wins the race.

This is where those "off days" come into play. The strategic balance of rest sprinkled into your weekly training schedule.

Even more important than that, shutting it down effectively and prioritizing nightly relaxation. A good night's rest is a mark of a Professional. You grow during sleep!

3 – Massage

Close cousin of stretching, deep tissue massage is also a cornerstone of muscular recovery. Whether it be foam rolling or a private one-on-one massage, it's a discipline that will positively affect how your muscles perform and feel.

Instead of designating certain days as “off days” in my weekly workout schedule, I label them “massage days.” I'll foam roll aggressively for 30 minutes, trying to hit every muscle (even the bottoms of my feet). But I'll save the hard stuff for the end, spending the most time on quads, hamstrings and *tendinous* IT bands. Especially the IT bands...rolling on the side of a cylindrical foam roller *hurts so good*. I force myself to dig in there as long as possible; it's easy to shy away and do the bare minimum. But I like breaking up all that ickiness in my legs. It's like carrying awkward baggage around, that tightness could negatively affect your thinking ability, and maybe even your happiness.

On one “off day” a month, I fortunately get to soak in my monthly massage from my wife (I once calculated the lifetime value of this free gratis session at around \$46,000). If you have the budget, a private deep tissue massage will reap a return on investment; it's like a reset button for your physiological network. I feel my postural alignment is ironed out afterwards too. Jessi's comment after every massage: “you really needed that.”

This massage component is also part of my corrective troubleshooting—taking care of muscle strains and pain areas. There's not a whole lot you can't solve with a persistent application of deep tissue massage.

4 – Ice Therapy

This one might be a novelty, but there's an argument to be made. Almost every day I'll ice down my entire body with an ice pack. It's like a blanket of relief, bringing down the body's overall inflammation level a notch. Just think, football players take ice baths during training camp...and when basketball players sprain an ankle, they ice it right away. But I like the overall relief it provides when I'm not feeling my best. It takes the edge off, makes you a little bit more optimistic about what you're capable of. For me, a thorough muscular ice-down has made the difference—numerous times—between committing to a workout versus taking the day off.

In the end, Recovery is what makes you better. Fully healing and rejuvenating is what makes you stronger, smarter, able to do more than you previously did. Effective recovery locks in the progress of your hard work and training.

I spent a lot of time on the modality of stretching within this topic because there are valuable byproducts that trickle down. As we've already established, if you don't stretch you will be more susceptible to injury. You will not recover as fast as you could. Your muscles will stay sore a little longer, prolonging the muscle growth time frame. But you will also be LESS FLEXIBLE.

How cool is it when you see a ninja in a movie ultra-flexible, moving silky smooth through the air? It's a double whammy when they have strong muscles at the same time, right? The comic book superheroes from the X-Frame fall into this category as well. Captain America, Batman and Spiderman are all nimble and flexible (mesomorph, endomorph and ectomorph respectively).

Most guys use the muscularity of these characters as a motivation to hit the gym hard. They actively pursue bigger and stronger muscles. But what about the flexibility component? Maybe the fitness industry hasn't marketed and packaged this part of the program adequately. Regardless, the fact of the matter is: loose and athletic is always better than stiff and tight.

"Expand the mind here a little bit and try something new. I can do things at 45, not because I can do a bunch of push ups, it's because I stretch."

—Tony Horton

These are Tony's opening words for the Flexibility Component of his P90X program. I've followed along with this 55-minute video many times and I've always liked his turn of phrase. 'Expand the mind, to apply a new perspective, on the role of lengthening our muscle tissue and joints'.

This is an area of the physique game that most people ignore or do the bare minimum of. But that's what gets me excited. Taking something most people don't do and investing quality time to it.

Is stretching mandatory? No. During one season of *Hard Knocks*, HBO's summer documentary of an NFL training camp, the Offensive Line Coach for the Cleveland Browns was busting chops during the warm up stretch. Huge lineman were sprawled out on the ground, doing hip twists, and he's thinking out loud about his playing days; talking about how they never stretched when he played. Going so far as to say: "We won Two World Wars and those soldiers never stretched." It was kind of funny.

But we're bigger and more muscular today compared to the war years of the greatest generation. It comes down to perspective. Changing the narrative. Thinking for yourself and working on an aspect of muscularity other than contraction strength. Thinking with a broader, longer-term perspective. *Expanding the mind to expand your muscles.*

Most people aren't flexible simply because they don't work on it. For some reason, they just assume either you are or you aren't. That flexibility is a stagnant, labeling characteristic. But let me tell you, if you have already built bigger-stronger muscles: improving flexibility is a lot easier than that. And just think, most Yogis (the super thin gurus who teach large yoga classes),

do they bench press and work on their pull ups? Probably not. So be the bigger man, physically and metaphorically, and work on your flexibility.

Quite frankly, stretching is just more important when you're carrying substantial muscle. There's more organic fiber that needs to be taken care of. It's like owning a house with a *big* backyard. It takes more effort to manicure and landscape the lawn properly (but then you get to sit back, and enjoy jealous looks from the neighbor).

This pliability of your physique is a definitive component of Muscular Balance. It's keeping your physique in proportion on the elasticity metric. Or, put another way, proactively fending off any tightness in your muscle strands is an *imbalance* you're always correcting. It's a campaign that shows you're taking care of yourself. Doing your part in helping your body recover, while at the same time improving flexibility.

Stretching for 30 minutes every day is the unseen, behind-the-scenes work. You might not get any attention or recognition, but don't forget: **'The true test of a man's character is what he does when no one is watching'.**

'Recovery (Stretch 30 minutes every day)' Practical Example – Top 5 Stretches

This practical example will not lay out an exact stretching routine, but let's at least dig a little deeper into what that 30 minutes a day entails.

As mentioned earlier, on a typical day I'll stretch at 4:30pm. For a decade I would free-style stretch at this time while ESPN's show *Highly Questionable* aired (Miami-based program, filmed practically in my backyard). Now-a-days, I'll alternate between doing my own thing one day and a 30-minute video the next (usually a YouTube video). I've grown to like following an instructor; it allows me to turn off the decision-making and just breathe deeply, melting from one posture to the next.

This 30 minute per day repertoire is not the only time I stretch however; I also stretch a little bit before, during and after my workout. Sometimes I won't stretch at all, sometimes I'll stretch a lot—it really depends on the day and how I'm feeling around the vicinity of that training session.

Any pre-workout stretches act as a warm up, to limber up; getting my body ready. The *during* workout stretches keep me in rhythm and motion in-between sets (it's better than standing around doing nothing). Lastly, any post-workout stretches help facilitate the wind-down process.

The actual stretches I do, both during the daily 30-minute session and workout-related, is constantly evolving. Newcomers are always being worked into the routine...

You don't want to get COMPLACENT. The funny thing is, when I do end up having some 'tight discomfort' somewhere in my body, it's usually a result of neglecting a stretch tied to that area. In other words, the stretch you don't do, either through ignorance or neglect, is what gets you into trouble.

...With that said, there are certain stretches that I do give priority to. A select few that I think everyone should prioritize, in some respect, and for different reasons.

So the Top 5 list in this chapter shows up in the Practical Example for a change. Here are The Muscle Code's Top 5 Stretches, along with some commentary and rationale:

5. Bridge Pose

You can really plug in any backbend here, but I'll go with bridge pose because it has the brand recognition. I like to make sure I open up my lower back in the *opposite* way it's spending most of its time. To give it some relief of the constant 90 degree angle of sitting. For bridge pose, using a yoga block underneath will make the stretch a little easier, but it feels good when you get proficient without one...keep the abs tucked and the glutes engaged.

4. One-Leg-Forward Standing Hamstring Stretch

There's something about simple hands-touching-toes when one leg is staggered ahead of the other—I connect to the inner depth of my hamstrings much better this way compared to feet together. It does take twice as long since you have to stretch both sides (right leg in front, then left), but the hamstrings are universally the tightest muscle group; added attention is the way to go. To prolong the length of time in the stretch, I shift back and forth between a flat back and touching the ground.

3. Side-to-Side Neck Bends

I start every 30 minute session with the neck. It's the most intricate part of the body to stretch, so I get it out-of-the-way first (it's easy to forget this little area in lieu of the major muscles). There are several dynamic stretches you can execute for the neck, but static side-to-side bends are my favorite. Ear reaching for the shoulder, I'll use my left or right hand—depending on the side—to gently push a little deeper. I relax, with patience, to slowly inch along (more like *centimeter* along). If you have problems with headaches, move this to your number one ranking...a lot of headaches stem from a tight neck and bunched up traps.

2. Triangle Pose

This is my favorite stretch in yoga; I'm always glad when we journey through a Triangle. It feels good and you get bang for your buck. It's challenging enough to keep you mentally stimulated, both with coordination and balance, and deftly opens up the body on the horizontal plane. Even for people who stretch consistently, the side-to-side maneuvers of the body are often overshadowed by the vertical plane—stretching forward or back. It's the full package: thoroughly opening up the lower and upper body, on the sometimes neglected, and typically very tight, horizontal plane.

1. Pigeon Pose

The grand-daddy of them all. Most guys have trouble *even* with the starting position of this stretch: they can't fully get the front shin perpendicular. If that's the case, using a yoga block underneath the opposite butt cheek can help—but it's *still* not easy. This stretch is so hard you

can't passively work on it; it has to become an initiative (this is the only pose that has ever been written down in my workout journal). You need the extra motivation here, to defend against taking the easy way out and skipping this intense stretch. Especially for guys, this targets our body's main weakness: extremely stiff and tight hips (how many men can do splits?).