



Lakers' Fisher doing well with age-old problem

By Ramona Shelburne, Staff Writer

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It usually begins with a few little aches after a game, a pop of joint that never used to do that before, a sore muscle that takes three days to recover instead of just a good night's sleep.

It's a slow trickle that seems to run inexorably downstream until one day a guy wakes up and realizes it's time to start planning for life after basketball instead of training camp.

For Derek Fisher, that day came 3 1/2 years ago. His 30th birthday had come and gone a year prior and No. 31 was going to pass whether he liked it or not.

That reality was inevitable. But in Fisher's mind, slowly losing his game and drifting into the creaky twilight years of an NBA career didn't have to be.

"I kept thinking about other great athletes and how they stay at such a high level. Guys like Lance Armstrong," Fisher said. "So I went on a search for a trainer that could help me really think about myself in that light."

One of the first guys he met with was Tom Vachet, a Manhattan Beach-based trainer who'd

made a name for himself helping hockey players squeeze a few more productive years out of their careers or come back from injuries.

Vachet told Fisher that there was no reason he couldn't play into his late 30s or early 40s if he started training correctly and addressed some of the underlying biomechanical imbalances that were contributing to his accumulating injury toll.

That's right, late 30s or early 40s. For an NBA point guard, one of the most physically demanding positions in all of sports. And for a guy like Fisher, who'd already logged nine NBA seasons, including several deep postseason runs with the Lakers.

Uh-huh, and the Fountain of Youth is located in middle of the Fox Hills Mall.

Vachet's training program was even more unorthodox. He proposed a program in which Fisher would work out hard three days a week, then take the rest of the week off to rest and recover.

Generally speaking, if something sounds too good to be true, it usually is. But for some reason, Fisher decided to give the guy a chance.

He hasn't missed a game due to injury since.

If anything, he seems healthier and more invigorated at the age of 34 than he did at 28 or 29.

"To be honest with you, yeah I do," said Fisher,

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who is consistently an elite 4 percent body fat. "I just feel more in control of my body and my movements, I think I have a better feel for listening to what my body is telling me. If I need to work more, if something's off, I feel like I can identify it quickly and adjust to it."

This season, that's more important than ever. The Lakers lost young point guard Jordan Farmar to a knee injury back on Dec. 20, and in the 11 games since, Fisher has had to log almost 10 minutes more per game. He's played more than 40 minutes in six of those 11 games.

It's a pace that would send most 34-year-old players to the injured list and force the front office to look for outside help.

Fisher is thriving. Since Farmar went down, his scoring is up from 10.5 points to 13.0 points a game, his assists are up from 3.3 to 5.2, and perhaps most importantly - since shooting is often the first area of a player's game to be affected by fatigue - his field-goal percentage is up from 41.3 percent to 45.0 percent.

Vachet isn't surprised.

"I've told Derek that, really, he should be able to play as long as it's satisfying to him," Vachet said. "He should be able to make a decision about leaving the NBA that's based upon something better than being forced out by injuries or being unable to perform."

Around the Lakers' locker room, Fisher stands as an example to everyone.

"We call him 'Oldtimer' or 'Old Man' all that stuff," said Farmar, whose locker is next to Fisher's. "But he's all about his business. It's his job and he respects it and loves it. He takes care of his body, gets his rest. He doesn't want to feel like he's any different from anyone else on the team, no matter how old he is."

Some of his routines have seemed to rub off on his teammates.

Vachet advised Fisher to start eating a maltodextrin gel during competition, a common practice among endurance athletes, to help keep his energy level high throughout the game.

Now an entire box of the gel packets sits in the corner of the Lakers' locker room for anyone to take, and several players have adopted the practice.

That's just one of the many things Fisher does to keep his body in condition on a nightly basis. In addition to his work with Vachet, Fisher works with Chip Shaefer, the Lakers' director of athletic performance/player development, and Alex McKechnie, team's athletic performance coordinator and one of the leading experts on core training in the world.

But working out is just the start of Fisher's program. Really, it's a lifestyle.

Fisher tries to be in bed by midnight or 1 a.m. every night, eat healthy, rest whenever possible, train intelligently, get regular, preventative physical therapy, and most of all, listen to his

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body.

When Fisher first came to Vachet, he was "asymmetrical," with a "biomechanical setup that created a likeliness for future injuries" to his foot. Through physical therapy, he tried to address the underlying biomechanical condition that was causing Fisher to suffer foot injuries.

But after the condition was addressed, the physical therapy didn't stop. If anything, the program got more intense.

They'd hook heart monitors up to Fisher during practice to help him learn where his limits were. They designed a warm-up routine to help him get his mind into the correct state before the game. And during the offseason, they'd constantly work to retool and refine his conditioning regimen to help get him ready for the next season.

Fisher admits that at times it feels weird to only train three days a week during the offseason. Or never lift more than a 40-pound dumbbell. Or never run on the treadmill.

Most of his cardiovascular workouts are done on an elliptical machine to keep stress off his joints, or focused on core strengthening.

"It's difficult because you feel like you need to be doing more, like on those days off, the guys you're going to be playing against, they're working," Fisher said. "So you're very tempted to want to do more work."

Then he goes through one of those workouts.

In a word, Vachet says they're: "Humbling."

The first time he put Fisher through one, "I felt as though I had never worked out before. ... There was no barfing, but it wasn't fun. I didn't walk home."

After three days of that, four days of rest and recovery feel earned, not luxurious.

"I don't know if there's a better job out there, as far as I'm concerned," Fisher said. "The game has done a lot for me and to me. One day when I'm done, I'm going to really miss it, so why not do everything that I can to stay here and stay at that high level for as long as I can."

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