

WHAT'S YOUR WORKOUT?

A Pitcher Called Thor Learns How Less Is More at the Gym

Noah Syndergaard of the New York Mets remains a fitness fiend, but guards against injury with a refined routine that includes meditation

By Jen Murphy

March 23, 2019

Now he's one of the most physically imposing players in Major League Baseball. But Noah Syndergaard did not always instill fear on the mound. The New York Mets' 26-year-old star pitcher, nicknamed Thor for his blond locks, 6-foot-6 frame and extra fast fastball and slider, was far less sculpted as a teen.

"I wanted to play ball so badly, I'd make my dad drive me to the YMCA so I could ride the elliptical and lift weights hoping to get rid of my baby fat," he recalls.

His dedication at the gym over the years paid off. The Mets traded for him in 2012 when he was still a minor leaguer already building a reputation for his powerful arm. Mr. Syndergaard started Game 3 of the 2015 World Series against the Kansas City Royals. It was the only game in the series the Mets won. His performance in 2016 earned him a spot in the MLB All-Star game.

He missed that game due to arm fatigue. Less than a year later, his obsession with getting stronger resulted in an overuse injury. Going into 2017, Mr. Syndergaard bulked up, adding 17 pounds of muscle, in an effort to throw even harder. He spent much of that season on the disabled list due to a partly torn lat muscle. (An acute injury to his finger also sidelined him in 2018.)

Keeping healthy is Mr. Syndergaard's priority going into the 2019 season, which kicks off March 28 for the Mets. If the team makes the playoffs this year, Mr. Syndergaard's cannon of an arm will certainly play a role.

At 240 pounds, one of his biggest challenges has been easing off in the weight room. "When I'm in the gym, I want to feel taxed," he says. "It's how I'm wired. But I've also realized that there's



All-Star pitcher Noah Syndergaard does a split-stance low cable row at Cressey Sports in Jupiter, Fla. PHELAN M. EBENHACK FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

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more risk than reward doing 500-pound dead lifts in the off-season. That won't translate on the field."

For the past two off-seasons, Mr. Syndergaard has worked to revamp his training strategy with strength and conditioning coach Eric Cressey, co-founder of Cressey Sports Performance in Jupiter, Fla. "Chasing huge strength gains on some of the classic weight room exercises won't always carry over to an endeavor like pitching, which is a high velocity, low-load challenge," Mr. Cressey says. "Lifting really heavy can take a heavy toll on the body, so you want to incorporate it sparingly. We'd rather have Noah use his bullets on the field."

To leverage Mr. Syndergaard's desire to improve, Mr. Cressey and his team redirected that energy to other areas, like diet, recovery and getting quality sleep. Mr. Syndergaard also started working with a mobility specialist this off-season to help break bad habits on the field and in the weight room. "This off-season was really all about injury prevention and going back to basics in

a way,” he says. In 2016, he threw for 190.2 innings, including the postseason. His goal this year is to reach 200 innings and lead another World Series run.



Mr. Syndergaard performs a Turkish get-up with a 70-pound kettlebell. He is trying to not overdo his training this year, though his routine remains quite intense. **PHOTO:** PHELAN M. EBENHACK FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

The Workout

“I treated this off-season like a 9-to-5 job,” says Mr. Syndergaard, who wore out his new car commuting from his gym in Dallas to his physical therapy sessions in Plano, Texas. In the mornings, he practices a combination of breathing techniques, cold exposure and meditation developed by Wim Hof, a Dutchman known for his ability to withstand extreme cold. He’s been channeling his meditation practice throughout his workouts.

In the gym, he’s still lifting, just smarter rather than heavier, focusing on lighter loads and explosive power. One of his mainstay lifts is the trap bar dead lift, which uses a hexagon-shaped bar that you stand inside to reduce torque on your back. Rather than focusing on load, Mr. Syndergaard shifted his attention to form. “I finally understand how to do a proper split squat,” he says, referring to a squat that uses a staggered stance similar to a lunge. “It’s all about big toe extension. My toes used to never move.”

He does a series of medicine ball throws, including both an overhead stomp and rotational drills. Another staple exercise, skater jumps, require him to explosively leap off one foot, moving side to side. He’s also added a lot of sprint work to his repertoire. “I think there’s a correlation between people who can run fast and the velocity you can transfer on the mound,” he says.

Mr. Syndergaard uses a foam roller before each workout and two to three times a week gets dry needling, a therapeutic technique where small needles are used to release muscle tension. He

also incorporates yoga poses into his daily stretching routine and works with a mobility coach to ensure his muscles are firing correctly and that he moves efficiently on the mound.



Mr. Syndergaard throws in the bullpen before a spring training game on Feb. 23 in Port St. Lucie, Florida. He hopes to hit 200 innings for the first time this season. PHOTO: MICHAEL REAVES/GETTY IMAGES

The Diet

Before the end of last season, Mr. Syndergaard met with a nutritionist and revamped his diet. “I eat a lot more Brazil nuts now because they’re a good source of selenium,” he says. He’s a big coffee guy. He usually adds supplements like collagen protein or powdered adaptogenic mushrooms to his morning joe. “I wasn’t big into cooking this off-season,” he admits. Most mornings he ordered an omelet with goat cheese, avocado and pork and a side of pasture-raised chicken sausage from Origin Kitchen + Bar in Dallas.

Lunch was often a leafy green salad topped with grass-fed ground beef and olive oil from pre-made meal service Snap Kitchen. He loosely follows the high-fat, low-carb ketogenic diet. On hard gym days, he does what’s known as a carb refeed, adding calories in the form of sweet potatoes, pasta and quinoa to his dinner. Mr. Syndergaard has a sweet tooth—ice cream is his favorite fix. If he’s going to splurge, he orders french fries and a burger from Shake Shack .

The Gear

Mr. Syndergaard has a contract with Nike . His contract with SSK makes him one of the few pitchers in Major League Baseball with a bat deal. He recently started to use meditation apps Headspace and Calm before bed.

The Playlist

Mr. Syndergaard refers to himself as a student of the game and is constantly listening to fitness

and mindfulness-focused podcasts to help improve his performance. Favorites include “The Tim Ferriss Show,” “Ben Greenfield Fitness,” “Bulletproof Radio with Dave Asprey” and “The Aubrey Marcus Podcast.”

There’s Use, And There’s Overuse

Many athletes, professional and recreational, feel the need to always give 110%. But constantly doing more, whether it’s running more miles or lifting heavier weights, doesn’t always translate to improved performance, says John Norwig, the head athletic trainer for the Pittsburgh Steelers.

Overtraining can often result in overuse injuries, which are caused by repetitive stress on the muscle and skeletal system without enough rest to allow the body to adapt. Sustained muscle soreness and fatigue are two physical signs that your body needs a rest. But Mr. Norwig says he also looks for signs such as irritability, depression, anxiousness and even trouble sleeping.

“People can become psychologically addicted to exercising,” Mr. Norwig says. “They feel an extreme need to be physical.” He emphasizes to his players that performance gains aren’t solely the result of strength and speed.

Good nutrition and proper sleep and recovery are essential. Mr. Norwig says people who struggle to take a full day off from activity should embrace relative rest, which involves doing something unrelated to their normal training routine.

“It’s kind of like cross-training, but you aren’t putting forth the intensity you would when you normally train,” he says. Low-impact activities like swimming, yoga or cycling, if those aren’t in your normal repertoire, can help the body rest so it can get stronger.

What’s your workout? Tell us at workout@wsj.com

WHAT’S YOUR WORKOUT?

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Corrections & Amplifications

The Mets’ 2019 season begins March 28. An earlier version of this article incorrectly stated it begins April 4. (March 24, 2019)

