

Tuesday, July 12, 2011  
Updated: July 14, 12:35 PM ET

## Old Mavs, new tricks

By Ric Bucher  
ESPN The Magazine

*This story appears in the July 25, 2011 issue of ESPN The Magazine.*

**IF IT SEEMED THE OLDEST, MOST INFIRM** among the Mavericks drank from a fountain of youth on their way to snatching this year's NBA title from younger, quicker hands, well, they didn't. Oh, the Mavs found something, all right. But it wasn't a fountain as much as a fog. And they didn't drink the rejuvenating potion; they bathed in it.



Jason Terry and other stars on the Dallas Mavericks used cryotherapy sessions to help their bodies recover during the NBA Playoffs and Finals.

From late April right through to their final championship-clinching victory over the Heat, a sextet of Mavs -- [Jason Kidd](#), [Dirk Nowitzki](#), [Jason Terry](#), [Shawn Marion](#), [Tyson Chandler](#) and [Brian Cardinal](#) -- made the 20-minute trek from American Airlines Center to a wellness facility in Plano, Texas, two times a week. The grizzled NBA vets, all of whom are 33 or older except for the 28-year-old Chandler, would head to an upstairs room that had all the warmth of a no-frills clinic. They would strip to their underwear and socks, don fleece gloves and, one at a time, step inside a six-foot-tall, padded blue-green silo that encased them up to their necks (or, in the case of the seven-footers, Nowitzki and Chandler, up to their chests). A large metal bin next to the silo would begin to whirl, and smoky vapor would swirl out of the chamber, as if the players were being cooked in a cauldron.

Actually, they were being frozen. For two and a half minutes -- at a cost of \$75 per person, billed to Mavs owner Mark Cuban -- blasts of nitrogen-chilled air emanated from the walls, quickly dropping the air temperature to as low as -320 degrees Fahrenheit. By the last 30 to 45 seconds, their bodies would be shaking uncontrollably.

"The first time Shawn did it, I thought he was going to jump out after 30 seconds," Terry says. "He was yelling, 'My nipples are about to fall off!'"

The regimen is known as cryotherapy, and its devotees say it's an upgrade over the more traditional 15-minute ice bath athletes have long relied on to treat aching joints and muscles. There are, it seems, two problems with ice baths: No. 1, the coldest temperature a person can endure in a bath is 41 degrees; No. 2, when a body is immersed in cold water, it reacts by sending blood to its chilled extremities. But chilling the skin to extreme levels in less than a minute with cryotherapy prompts a different response: The body withdraws the blood to its core in an act of self-preservation. That blood then circulates in a shorter cycle, increasing its nutrients and oxygenation. Once the treatment is finished, this super-enriched plasma returns to the body, flowing first to damaged areas most in need of repair. "It's not going to make you fly out of the room or jump like [LeBron James](#)," says Terry of the treatment, "but the feeling you get when you step out of that machine is unbelievable. You feel completely rejuvenated."

Cryotherapy's shorter chill time also means muscles and ligaments don't stiffen, and there's less risk of skin damage, according to Eric Rauscher, managing director of Plano's Millennium Ice USA. The modern concept of cryotherapy ("cryo" is Greek for cold) was first developed in the late 1970s in Japan, and cryosaunas have been used in Europe for several decades.

Rauscher learned about the device from his Russian father-in-law and brought the first one to the U.S. in 2009. He knew that while the public might not be quick to embrace such a radical treatment, professional sports teams are always looking for an edge.

Hoping to spark interest among local teams, Rauscher made a pitch to Casey Smith, the Mavs' trainer. Smith was concerned about the liability of working with liquid nitrogen and such extreme temperatures. But then April arrived -- and with the playoffs looming, an exhausted Kidd looked as if he wouldn't make it to May, missing 12 of 13 shots and scoring a total of three points over the course of back-to-back losses to the Warriors and Trail Blazers. The Mavericks sat him for the next two games. In the meantime, Smith called Rauscher. "I want to come out and bring a player with me," the trainer said.

The 38-year-old Kidd, looking for any edge to help avoid another first-round playoff exit, was that guinea pig. After stepping out of the cryosauna, he said, "That's amazing." Kidd returned two days later with the other thirtysomething Mavs in tow. Each of them took a long look at the machine, then at Kidd. Nowitzki muttered something and went first. In the end, they all left giddy and convinced.

The next day, the Mavs blistered the Suns by 25 points, and the night after that they beat the Rockets by seven in Houston. In the season finale two days later, Kidd posted his best game in more than a month, outperforming Hornets star [Chris Paul](#) with 12 points on four of six threes and eight assists with only one turnover in a 32-point beatdown.

Then in the Finals, Kidd had to defend [Dwyane Wade](#), arguably the most athletic 2-guard in the league, and James, arguably the most athletic player in the league. Kidd gives a big nod to cryotherapy. "I can't take it quite as cold as some of the others," he says. "But it still worked."

Other NBAers, including [Manu Ginobili](#) and [Kobe Bryant](#), have also tried the procedure. There are now about 10 cryosaunas in the U.S., including one on the Nike campus near Portland, Ore. -- convenient for Kidd and Co., considering the Trail Blazers were the Mavs' first-round opponent.

"It gave us a tremendous edge, not only physically but psychologically," Terry says. "I don't know if it was a team-bonding thing, but it's something that came up every day. We'd plan on getting together and hitting it. It became a ritual."

And after winning the franchise's first NBA title, the Mavs have no intention of coming in from the cold.

*Ric Bucher covers the NBA for ESPN The Magazine.*

---