Long before the Cleveland Indians took up the nickname “Indians” and introduced their controversial mascot Chief Wahoo, they were named the Cleveland Naps! But, unlike the naps that help recharge Cleveland Cavalier basketball star LeBron James, the Cleveland Naps of the early 1900’s were not named after a favorite activity of MLB, NBA, NHL and NFL athletes, but rather after the player/manager Napoleon “Nap” Lajoie. Fast forward to last season, and the Cleveland Indians ended up in the World Series. One addition to their staff last year—a sleep doctor. Although they ultimately lost to the Chicago Cubs (who also have sleep staff), the Indians valued so highly the positive changes brought about by the sleep physician and his positive influence on their performance that they awarded him a World Series ring!

With the Boston Red Sox renovating a nap room this year in Fenway Park, napping for the professional athlete is back in the news. It has become a particular topic of interest between pitches on many baseball TV broadcasts when the Red Sox are the team being televised. Although many sports fans think this is a new idea, the nap room for the Red Sox is not entirely a new phenomenon as they actually built it back in 2013. (It should be noted they went on to win the World Series that year!) The current nap room is just a refinement of their earlier designated sleep room with attention paid to individual player bedding and pillow preferences!

In one recent article about napping and sleep, Hanley Ramirez, first baseman for the Red Sox was quoted as saying “How many hours can I sleep without waking up, that is the big thing for me. It changes the way you play. It’s unbelievable. When you’re young you don’t think about stuff like that.”

Unfortunately, the value of sleep in performance is still a topic that needs more discussion and inclusion by team trainers and medical staff. Too few are aware of just how important sleep is to performance, training, and recovery. Too few can recognize a common sleep disorder such as sleep apnea, or they minimize the health impact of this underdiagnosed health issue. But the tide is slowly changing as more professional training staff and athletes experience the game time improvements that comes from a good night’s rest...or a well-placed nap during the day.

Amy Bender is a Sleep Scientist affiliated with Centre for Sleep & Human Performance and also University of Calgary Faculty for Kinesiology. In her work with Canadian Olympic athletes, she knows firsthand the importance of naps for these elite athletes!

“Napping is key for athletes. We recommend that athletes schedule in daily naps like they schedule their training sessions. Ideally the nap should be less than 30 minutes so that the athlete is not getting into deep sleep and waking up feeling groggy. Naps are more effective than caffeine at boosting alertness, motor processing, and mood which are key components for an athlete to improve performance. We recommend 20 minute naps on training and competition days and then extend the nap to around 90 minutes on days off in order to reduce some of the sleep debt accumulation across the week and to get all the stages of sleep. Naps should occur between 1-4pm which coincides with the afternoon circadian dip and is not too close to the nighttime sleep period.”

Dr. Bender’s comments about accumulating sleep debt rang true with 3-time Irish canoeing athlete Olympian Eoin Rheinish when I asked him about the rigors of Olympic competition and how well prepared with regard to sleep issues he felt he was during his first Olympics in Athens in 2004. He replied via email and stated:

“With regard to my sleep at various different Olympic Games one of the best pieces of information I can give you is that for the athletes that go out to an Olympics (the biggest competition and the one they want the most) they lose a lot of control over the logistics, set up and preparation for their event. Part of this is the quality of their sleep. An Olympic Village is not always conducive to quality sleep…. As the events roll on the village itself becomes a much noisier place as athletes that have finished go in to party mode. You may have no control over who you are sharing a room with and their routines and habits good or bad. The beds are single beds and often quite small and depending on the culture etc. they can be very different to a western bed (Nanjing Youth Olympics 2014 – We had to go out and buy mattress toppers because the beds supplied were like wood!)”

Rheinish was fortunate enough (and talented enough!) to
participate in three Olympics! He had to learn to protect his sleep during training and insisted on moving out of the village to a situation that afforded him a better opportunity to rest and nap to allow him to perform at his best. His first Olympics in Athens, while housed on the noisy chaotic campus, he finished 21st. Four years later in Beijing at age 28 he finished 4th while living away from the noisy and stressful Olympic Village and a bit wiser about sleep training perhaps! Even at age 32 in London he managed to finish 14th another improvement from his first Olympics as a younger athlete living and sleeping in the Olympic village.

Athletes that compete at a high level are striving to recharge via naps due to the complexity of the environment in which they compete. With all of the distractions, time zone changes, and circadian obstacles, it is no wonder that Rheinisch and other elite performers place a high value on their nap and rest time. But this had to be learned at the expense of the first Olympic experience for him. It was not one of the areas that a focus during the team preparation. Other countries he competed against have been sharply focused for years on napping and sleep for their Olympic hopefuls. Sleep training was a “secret weapon” for many teams. Many Irish Olympic athletes whom Rheinisch now helps train may be more fortunate than he was as he coaches them about his experiences. This is especially important if they only have one Olympic shot! In his post athletic role at the Irish Olympic Center, he hopes to instruct and advise these new athletes about how napping is an important part of their training—right up there with diet and exercise—but easier!

In the U.S., professional athletes in the major sports are faced with many sleep obstacles such as late night travel, early morning arrivals, ill-timed practices, back to back games on the road, team commitments and training, bad hotel environments, family concerns, and lack of knowledge as to how to protect their sleep and create a good routine. Naps are a necessity, not a luxury, in this type of environment to enhance alertness and maintain good cognitive skills.

Athletes, fortunately, are fast learners! Many have turned the nap into an art form! They have certain superstitions and habits that allow them to rest and prepare to excel. According to one article in Sports Illustrated, hockey players have been reported to use their stick tape to make the room dark by taping the blinds, and use their luggage to push against the bottom of the window to make sure no light gets in. Others bring their own pillows as they don’t feel the hotel pillows are best for them. Seeing a marketing opportunity, many hotels have responded by making their hotels “nap ready” for athletes and weekend warriors alike. They are spending time and effort to find the correct décor, temperature, mattress, blackout curtains and bedding to support the daytime...
nap. They also are offering quiet floors for athletes napping during the day; holding all phone calls and keeping hotel staff from disturbing the napping players.

And if you think all this napping is just for elite athletes and no one is looking out for the rest of us — take heart! Ben and Jerry’s, Google, Huffington Post, Nike and Zappo’s, St. Leo University, Texas A & M University, and James Madison University are just a few of the many companies and colleges that now offer napping quarters for tired employees, weekend warriors, and college students in need of a refresher boost. Since their inception up to 5 years ago in some colleges, thousands of students, and student athletes have taken advantage of these napping locales.

So, just as they did as children, athletes and others are returning to the habit of daily naps albeit with a different purpose. The Red Sox believe it is one of the many little things they pay attention to that when added to the other “little things” will make a big difference. And if that difference gets them to the World Series Championship, there will be a big parade in Boston. And if you don’t recognize that person in the white lab coat waving their World Series ring, it just may be their sleep doctor!

Sleep Well – Compete Best!