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Saltalamacchia says yips are gone

By Gordon Edes
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FORT MYERS, Fla. -- There are taps to the eyebrow, the side of the eye, below the eye, below the nose, below the lips. A tap below the armpit, below the collarbone, below the pectoral muscles. A tap to the top of the head, then repeat the circuit.

Even if people watch closely during the course of a game, they may never see any of these, because you are taught how to hide these motions. They are intended for you, only you, and for you they are intended to be empowering.

The system is simply called tapping, and while Tom Hanson, the man who teaches this form of what he calls "energy psychology," describes it as sounding "weird," [Boston Red Sox](#) catcher [Jarrod Saltalamacchia](#) is a believer.

Once, Saltalamacchia was too proud to acknowledge that he needed help from someone else, be it a longtime sports psychologist like Harvey Dorfman, whom he once worked with, or Hanson, a performance-enhancement coach to whom Saltalamacchia turned when he was having trouble throwing the ball back to the pitcher, the simplest of tasks for a catcher.

"When I was first coming up, just being young, your ego plays into it," Saltalamacchia said Tuesday morning after concluding a workout here with a session of batting practice, along with two other early arrivals at Sox camp, [Ryan Kalish](#) and [Daniel Nava](#). "You don't want anyone to know you're getting help. But you're getting help in the training room, why not get help for other issues?"

"I didn't want anyone to know I wanted somebody, I needed somebody. That was a big issue with me. But it's done wonders for me. Going home after a game two years ago, I could have hit the bed and slept for 18 hours because my head was just going, and now, I've learned to be able to work with that. Think smart, think positive. You can't put negatives in your head, it's just going to hurt you all around. It's been great for me."

Saltalamacchia reached out to Hanson last spring when the throwing problem surfaced -- in sporting parlance, it's known as the "yips," the same affliction that can affect a golfer's putting. Saltalamacchia had had surgery the previous September to correct thoracic outlet syndrome, a group of disorders that occur when the blood vessels or nerves in the thoracic outlet -- the space between the collarbone and first rib -- becomes compressed, causing pain in the shoulders and neck, and numbness in the fingers.

As part of the surgery to alleviate the condition, Saltalamacchia had an impinged rib removed from near his right shoulder. During his recovery, the throwing problems surfaced. They grew acute after he was sent down to the minors by the [Texas Rangers](#) one game into the season, after he'd hurt his back.

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The catcher said his father found Hanson on the Internet. "He called," Hanson said, "after reading about me on a site called YipsBeGone.com."

Hanson said he worked for the [New York Yankees](#) in 2001 as a performance-enhancement counselor, but was fired before the end of the season, primarily, he said, because the team was not ready for someone who did what he did.

"I watched [Chuck] Knoblauch go through hell," Hanson said, referring to the former Yankees second baseman who had trouble throwing the ball to first base. "But I never talked to him, and at the time I couldn't have helped him."

It was only in the past couple of years, after Hanson and his wife, Birgit, started their own business in Tampa, that he discovered the system of tapping.

"I didn't make it up," Hanson said. "I learned about it by reading Gary Craig, who is in California and developed something called 'emotional freedom techniques.'"

Hanson's initial reaction? "I thought it was stupid," he said.

But after an encounter with a distraught high school player for whom, Hanson said, the technique produced immediate results, Hanson became a convert. The system, he said, is modeled after the pressure points found in acupuncture. And athletes with the yips, he said, "are in so much pain."

"Tapping helps clear out the negative emotion," he said. "Say you struck out to end the seventh inning, and you still have to play defense and might come up to bat again. How to clear out that negative emotion?"

"You focus on the negative. Start on your eyebrows. Focus on the negative. Each site, your eyes, below your nose, below your lip. The idea is to do a tap lap, go down and around, tap the top of your head, then start again. Tapping helps clear out the negative emotion."

Hanson said all the counseling he did with Saltalamacchia was done over the phone. "I've never met Salty," he said, "but he became pretty functional, pretty fast."

Saltalamacchia said that tapping "has been very helpful," and he has maintained a relationship with Hanson. The two may finally get together, both men said, during camp.

Hanson acknowledges that his system represents a sharp break from his previous training in cognitive behavior. "This is below your conscious level," he said. "Tapping is in the family of energy psychology."

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Curiously, while Hanson's website biography says he holds his doctorate in sports psychology and he refers to himself as "Dr. Tom Hanson," he writes elsewhere on his site that his degree is actually in physical education, which he confirmed on the phone Tuesday night.

"People don't care," he said about the discrepancy. "It matters to me, it matters to psychologists, but I'm not a psychologist. I have a Ph.D. in physical education with a specialization in sports psychology. I am Dr. Tom Hanson. I have a doctorate."

Hanson also works with businesses -- he cited some work he had done for Verizon -- and said he has heard from numerous athletes.

"I didn't set out to be the 'yips guy,'" he said, "but I happen to be able to fix it."

The problem, which gave Saltalamacchia so much trouble while he was with the Rangers' Triple-A affiliate in Oklahoma City, has not surfaced since he came to the Red Sox in a trade last July.

"It was a health issue that kind of grew mental, obviously, but I worked on it," Saltalamacchia said. "I've got stuff I go through, but as far as I'm concerned it's a dead issue. Are there going to be recurrences? I don't think so. It's one of those things that through my career I'm going to have to deal with, but I don't see it being a problem. I don't think about it. I used to."

Now, Saltalamacchia said, he is able to focus on the challenge before him, which is establishing himself as Boston's No. 1 catcher. That's why he spent much of the offseason working with bullpen coach Gary Tuck on grueling,

twice-a-week, 2½-hour sessions of blocking balls, receiving balls and throwing.

"They've said the starting job is mine," Saltalamacchia said. "Whether it's three days a week, four days a week, whatever, I don't know. I'm not really worried about it. My job is the pitchers, to go out there and help them get through their game. When I get to the plate, do my job in whatever way the situation calls for."

Saltalamacchia will share time behind the plate with [Jason Varitek](#), the team captain who turns 39 in April. Of those who suggest the team's biggest question mark, and possible weak link, is its catching, Saltalamacchia said:

"Honestly, I don't have anything to respond to that. What they think and what people are saying is what they want to think and say. We know as a team what we've got to do on the field. We all have a job and we've all got to be there for each other. I'm prepared to do my job, and I'm going to be there for every single guy on the team. I don't look at it any other way than to go out there and play hard every day."

Saltalamacchia is 25, the same age, as has been noted before, that another switch-hitting catcher, Varitek, launched his stellar career with the Red Sox. In some ways, Saltalamacchia agreed, he is an "old" 25 since he has already been traded twice and dealt with a number of injuries.

"I've definitely been through a lot more stuff than a lot of 25-year-olds, but ultimately it got me where I am now," he said. "I'm in a perfect situation to go out there and make a career out of it."

And it helps, Saltalamacchia said, knowing he has someone to talk to when he hits those rough patches. There is Hanson, there is Dorfman, there is Bob Tewksbury (the former major league pitcher turned sports psychologist).

"It's almost a necessity," Saltalamacchia said. "That's why a lot of teams have gone with shrinks. We've got Tewks for us just to talk about issues. You don't want to go home and talk with your wife, talk to your parents about it. It's good to have someone in baseball who has an outside look on it, that has no ties to you. It's helped me tremendously."

Gordon Edes is ESPNBoston.com's Red Sox reporter. He has covered the Red Sox for 12 years and has reported on baseball for 25 years. [Ask a question for his next mailbag here.](#)
