



Is Kong King?

An expert rates three self-massage devices for runners—and one dog toy

"I took Kong to bed with me and it really made a difference!" enthused a client as she walked into my NeuroMuscular Therapy (NMT) treatment room.

She wasn't referring to a particularly successful date—she was talking about the 'homework' I directed her to do in between appointments: trigger point her glut medius muscle. Hey, it didn't matter to me where she used the Kong, as long as it helped her to run again.

NeuroMuscular Therapy helps runners mitigate the impact that pavement puts on their leg muscles; NMT can help prevent injury when used proactively. Self-massage is a way for runners to enhance and extend the benefits of NMT and maintain muscle health.

Man's Best Friend?

I discovered Kong when I had a hip spasm. Since stretching didn't relieve the pain, I tried rolling on a tennis ball, which was too soft and didn't penetrate deeply enough. A golf ball was too small. A baseball was too hard; ditto a lacrosse ball.

Then my dog's red Kong Ball caught my eye. This Kong lacks King Kong's height, nor is it hirsute, with a thing for blondes or the Empire State Building—but it does share the primate's strength. The indestructible dog ball, which is made of solid rubber with an ideal consistency for self-massage, is approximately three inches in diameter. Although it's meant for dogs, Kong is an ideal tool for massaging a human's glut medius muscle.

I've sent clients with various muscle strains to the pet store to buy Kong and their rave reviews continue, from a 15-year-old gymnast with tight hip flexors to a performance enhancement specialist, among others. One client swears that Kong helped cure her hamstring tendonitis. She spent five minutes a day sitting on the Kong, and is now so attached to it she brings the ball on business trips.

Kong isn't the only self-massage option available (although it is the only one intended for a canine). Here's how The Stick, the Biofoam Roller and the Quadballer measure up

when used to treat iliotibial band (ITB) syndrome, one of running's most common injuries.

Purported to prevent and predict muscle injuries, improve flexibility and accelerate recovery, the Stick, made of "spaced-aged plastic," is guaranteed to last a lifetime if used properly. It allows users to "self-perform general as well as segmental therapeutic procedures with a high degree of precision." You can even take an entertaining "Stick Selector" online survey to help find the right stick for you. Of course, my profile produced a recommendation for the "Stick Fitness System," a total muscle management system including the Original Body Stick, the Marathon Stick, the Trigger Wheel, the Foot Wheel and a six-minute instructional video for \$105 (my mother always said I had expensive taste).

The Stick stimulates circulation, which will make muscles feel better. However, its utility is limited by the amount of arm power that the user can apply; one must twist the upper torso while standing to roll the side of the leg. Gravity, it seems, is the Stick's downfall. The device will warm-up the ITB before a workout, but it has all the precision of a rolling pin (not much).

Biofoam Roller

Less crudely named, the Biofoam Roller, available in a plethora of sizes and colors, is useful for myofascial release and balance training. Its primary New England distributor, Perform Better, also offers elite versions that last longer than the original white rollers, which degrade over time. You can also order a deluxe package that includes six different models in various shapes and sizes.

This is an excellent tool for general extensibility and flexibility of the legs. You can leverage the amount of pressure applied to the ITB by placing the Roller under the leg while lying on your side. The more body weight you support with your arms, the less pressure—and pain—you'll inflict on your ITBs.

On the other hand, the Roller is blunt and will not specifically address any trigger points or knots in the adjoining quad, hamstrings or glut muscles.

Whatever you do, don't leave the Roller lying around. One client left a white Roller on her white-carpeted bedroom floor, tripped over it and landed a few feet away—on her hip. The Roller should prevent injury.

The Quadballer

This device from Trigger Point Technologies is, according to their



website, "bringing relief to thousands of athletes afflicted with ITB Syndrome. Quadballer's dense materials mirror the feeling of a human thumb changing [a muscle's] shape after five to seven seconds of pressure."

The Quadballer doesn't feel like a thumb. It feels like a roller blade wheel digging into your IT Band, because that's what it is—a pair of roller blade wheels connected by a Dr. Seuss sock. It's ridiculous looking, yet effective. The ability to roll effortlessly on your side with the wheels is ingenious. When angled in different directions, the wheels can also be used to pinpoint the ITB. The Quadballer rivals Kong in firmness and consistency, but when I put my whole body weight on it, I heard the center creaking.

The Kong

Kong doesn't creak like the Quadballer. It can be used to massage the iliotibial band, as well as deeply palpate the glut medius and minimus muscles. If harboring latent trigger points, those muscles can exacerbate lateral leg pain associated with ITB Syndrome. Runners with ITB tightness should definitely roll out their hip muscles for a thorough self-massage treatment.

It doesn't have to take all day. Bring a self-massage device with you in the car, on the plane, to the gym, the track, or even to bed, like my client. Get out there and start rolling, because in the end, working your muscles with any gadget mentioned here for any condition is better than skipping self-massage altogether. But please put your toy away when you're done—especially if it blends in with your carpet.

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Katie Adams is the principal of 360 NeuroMuscular Therapy in Needham, MA, where she collaborates with medical practitioners and athletic performance specialists to restore optimal muscle health and prevent recurring injuries. She is developing a series of trigger point therapy balls-for humans-in partnership with The Quabaug Corporation, the North American manufacturer of VIBRAM rubber soling products. Adams can be reached at www.360NMT.com.

