

Plastic Magic

If you think you are about to unwind into the best story you've ever read, your inclinations are correct because I am writing this story with a custom-fitted performance enhancing mouth guard in place. It is the human growth hormone to my fingers, the steroids to my keyboard. Who knew gaining a competitive advantage would be so easy?

Text **Manouk Akopyan**



Art Howard/Photo by Tom Casiro

→ Mouth guards are most common in football, hockey, combat sports and basketball.



Adrian Peterson/Photo by Scott Clarke

For the last four years, three times a week, I play pick-up basketball at my athletic club. My tenacious style of play at the center position has earned me the nickname "Manucleus." (Get it? Manouk...center...nucleus...Manucleus?) Then came the fatal fall of 2012, when after a six-week vacation from basketball, I was dealt an insurmountable level of ineffectiveness. I couldn't hit water if I fell off a boat. A practice that once seemed as simple as a free throw had reached Dwight Howard levels of foul line futility. I watched *White Men Can't Jump* – even *Kazaam* and *Space Jam* – in hopes of channeling my inner Woody Harrelson. Luckily, Roobik Ebrahimi answered my cry for help before the Voluntary Anti-Doping Association did. Mouth guards are most common in combat sports, football, hockey and basketball, just to name a handful. In recent years, however, a growing number of pros, weekend warriors and even everyday Joe's and Jane's alike have been wooed by the wonders of jaw-positioning retainers.

A plastic retainer can make someone a better athlete? If only you can imagine my level of cynicism when I met with Roobik Ebrahimi, a neuromuscular dentist by vocation who specializes in making custom mouth guards. The first thing that came to my mind was the failings of Power Balance or any derivation of the silicone wristband with the hologram that markets itself as a "performance bracelet." That was my chide-side speaking before I actually tried the mouth guard Ebrahimi custom made for me. During the evaluation, Ebrahimi said that by using the mouth guard, his is commercially known as the Miracle Mouthguard, it would improve my oxygen intake, posture, strength, power, balance and accuracy, as well as help me think more clearly under pressure. "By biting down at your optimal position, you are flexing your muscles and at a physiological rest position," says Ebrahimi. "In return, it decreases the likelihood of fatigue and injury and

it gives you up to 30% more strength. For world-class athletes, the smallest percentage of improvement takes their talents to new heights. For the average person, they can see improvements on entirely new levels." The science of neuromuscular dentistry entails the contact between teeth and the function of the jaw muscles and points before, during and after treatment in order to obtain results. By clenching your teeth, a mouth guard edges your jaw forward by a few millimeters. Your clench pinches the nerves that run through the temporomandibular (jaw) joint, causing a lower production of the stress hormone cortisol. (Excessive levels of cortisol impede performance.) By holding the jaw in a position that also allows the neck muscles to relax, the mouth guard gives an edge in strength, balance, speed, flexibility and vertical jumping. During the testing process for strength and range-of-motion, as I stood on one leg with both arms stretched at my

A mouth guard can make someone a better athlete? If only you can begin to imagine my level of cynicism when I met with Roobik Ebrahimi, a neuromuscular dentist by vocation who specializes in making custom mouth guards.

shoulders, Ebrahimi almost tossed me aside like a rag doll when he slightly pushed down on my arms. I then bit into a bite registration stick. This time, with the same amount of force, Ebrahimi clearly struggled before I stabilized myself with the other leg. A series of other tests followed before I was molded. A 2008 study by Rutgers University concluded that high jumpers leaped one inch higher while wearing a similar mouthpiece. Other studies have shown that professional weightlifters add several pounds to their snatch; golfers drive the ball farther, and soccer players can kick the ball up to 15 yards more. I put myself to the test with weights. I complemented my Miracle Mouthguard with a pre-workout energy shake and felt like I could karate chop a fortress down to the ground as I consistently lifted additional repetitions at an average of ten pounds more than my previous marks. Dr. Anil Makkar, the initiator behind the current science, first began marketing his brand Pure Power Mouthguard (PPM) in 2008 with the millions of dollars he obtained from investors. After having hundreds of high-profiled athletes from all over the world use the product, Makkar's efforts and his stream of revenue folded soon thereafter. Although his acumen as a businessman may have been meager, Dr. Makkar left a lasting effect for the industry as it moved forward into neuromuscular dentistry. On November 2, 2009, Jon Gruden, the fierce, no-frills Super Bowl winning coach, gave the mouth guard a lifetime-lasting endorsement on the telecast of ESPN's *Monday Night Football* by linking the New Orleans Saints winning the Super Bowl the previous year to every player using the product. PPM instantly became the poster child for performance, an enhancement that Drew Brees and company might have had a *wee bit* to do with as well. Ebrahimi also has a list of clients that's not too shabby either. He goes on about his work without conglomerate hullabaloo in his dental studio and lab in Montrose, Calif. He's fitted world-class athletes Andre Agassi and Ronda Rousey and businessmen Dennis Washington



← Ebrahimi has made UFC women's champion Ronda Rousey and trainer Edmond Tarverdyan their custom mouth guards.

↓ Strength, balance, and jumping are just some of the physical attributes which see improvement with the mouth guard.



LeBron James. Photo by Ben Solomon

(No. 63 on the Forbes 400) and Bill Gates for their custom mouth guards. If you are wondering why the billionaire behind Microsoft is using a customized mouth guard, it is not because he uses it to program better, but for golfing. Celebrities like Charlize Theron, Sean Penn and Jim Carrey have entrusted the contents behind their money-making smiles to the hands of the Armenian-Iranian Ebrahimi as well. But as Ebrahimi puts it, he always holds a special place for Armenians. He seeks them out – boxers Vic Darchinyan, Vanes Martirosyan and Art Hovhannisyan already among them – to educate them with the current science and studies available in order to make them better athletes. Which is why for the 2016 Olympic Games, he will reach out to

the Armenian Olympics Committee to provide every athlete their own customized mouth guard. Ebrahimi says he practices what he preaches by biting into a balanced lifestyle. At 50, he has as much energy as he did as a 15 year-old playing soccer for FC Ararat Tehran. Ebrahimi's active lifestyle today includes racquetball, golf and soccer for at times upwards of four hours or more. "There are a lot of products available in the market, but you need to have one that is actually going to help you. If neuromuscular dentistry were not behind the mouth guard, it might as well be an accessory," Ebrahimi says. "Neuromuscular dentistry is a fascinating discipline that's still fairly new to people. That's why I want to



Tigran Tomanyan

Roobik Ebrahimi
Roobik Ebrahimi is a neuromuscular dentist who specializes in making custom-made mouth guards known as the Miracle Mouthguard. He also has a background in advanced cosmetic dentistry and restoration, with a celebrity list of clients that includes Charlize Theron, Sean Penn, Jim Carrey, Tobey Maguire, Rebecca De Mornay, Tyler Perry, Nelly, Lisa Kudrow and Haley Joel Osment. Ebrahimi has made the Miracle Mouthguard for Andre Agassi, Ronda Rousey, Bill Gates, Dennis Washington, Vic Darchinyan, Vanes Martirosyan, Art Hovhannisyan and Edmond Tarverdyan, among countless others.

- ▶ Certified Dental Technician, Tehran, Iran, 1984
- ▶ National Dental Board of Certification United States, 1994
- ▶ Certified LVI Master Technician and Neuromuscular Technician, 2004
- ▶ Founder of Dream Smile Studios, 2004
- ▶ Chief of Dental Technology, Cornerstone Dentistry, Glendale, Calif.

A 2008 study by Rutgers University concluded that high jumpers leaped one inch higher while wearing a similar mouthpiece. Other studies have shown that professional weightlifters add several pounds to their snatch; golfers drive the ball farther, and soccer players can kick the ball up to 15 yards more.

educate people and have athletes unlock their true potential." Hall of Fame boxing trainer Jesse Reid, who's been involved with and trained 23 world champions over the course of the last 46 years as a boxer and trainer, praises the sweet science's protection aside from the obvious reasons of not getting their teeth punched in. "Your jaw is one of the strongest parts of the body. When you bite down on the mouth guard, it gives you more strength and pop. It also allows you to breath better and prevents you from swallowing your tongue. Although a fighter may not be feeling this all at once, it is there helping him." "A lot of times, when a fighter's mouth-piece flies out, it's either because they were playing around with it or it was a

generic one. I always tell my fighters – and I would advise all fighters – to get a mouth guard especially made for them by a dentist who specializes in them." Reid, 70, now training out of Powerhouse Gym in Burbank, Calif., trained the late Hector "Macho" Camacho Sr.'s wins over Sugar Ray Leonard and Roberto Duran, the late Johnny Tapia to four world titles, as well as Roger Mayweather's two championships. "At the end of the day, it's all about what a fighter's God given talent is." Growing up, I could never shake the picture of an impregnable Mike Tyson hopelessly trying to pick up his mouthpiece during his knockout loss to Buster Douglas. Today, I can't shake the haunting images of LeBron James doing 360s with his piece of plastic

during every play stoppage. And now, if you catch me at your local playgrounds, you won't be able to shake my "Dream Shake." And I didn't even have to go to Hakeem Olajuwon's summer school. Ever since I started sporting my black and gold piece of plastic magic, I've tapped into physical talents I didn't have before. It could be mind over matter or a timeless case of classical conditioning or just a newly-found unconventional way of conditioning myself. Call it whatever you want, but I no longer have to dunk on my three-year-old nephew Vartan and his Fisher Price to regain lost confidence. Bite into your Miracle Mouthguard... and voila! Just throw on a headband, the newest pair of Jordans, and the farce hologram bracelet of your choice and you're good to call out any athlete on Twitter. ■