

Canes Football teams up with University of Miami neuroscientist for 'Cane Brain Project'

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Dr. Jha conducts brainwave recording research. Credit: Amishi Jha/University of Miami

The University of Miami Hurricanes football program will partner with UM neuroscientist Dr. Amishi Jha for an innovative research study to investigate how mindfulness training can help football players better cope with the high stakes and high demands of collegiate athletics.

"The question we ask is if mindfulness training – which has been found to benefit high-stress groups like soldiers, Marines, CEOs and college students – can help student athletes in their academic and [athletic performance](#)," said Dr. Jha, associate professor in the UM College of Arts & Sciences Department of Psychology and director of contemplative neuroscience for the UMindfulness Initiative.

Jha will be the lead researcher on the study.

Previous research by her group found that mindfulness training helps curb mind wandering and improve attention as high-stress undergraduates near exam season.

Mindfulness is defined as a state of active, open attention to the present. Practitioners of mindfulness observe their thoughts and feelings without judgment, and focus on "living in the moment."

The Jha-Hurricanes football collaboration is the first phase of a larger "Cane Brain Project," which aims to determine if mindfulness training may be brain protective in collegiate football players. Jha will begin the project this summer, working with Scott Rogers, director of the UM Mindfulness and Law Program, to develop and deliver an innovative mindfulness program to UM's football [student-athletes](#).

A recent study in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* reports that the hippocampus, a part of the brain necessary for memory, is smaller in college football players – especially those who have had concussions. Other research has shown that mindfulness training may help grow this area.

"While better helmet design may help protect their brains from the outside in, very little known about what types of cognitive training exercises might help protect athletes' brains from the inside out," said Jha. "We are eager to see if mindfulness training might help."

Josh Rooks, a graduate student in the Department of Psychology and a member of Jha's research team, said, "Our very first step is to see if cognitive performance and academic performance benefits from mindfulness training in collegiate [football players](#)."

Rooks, a former college football player who practiced mindfulness during his time as a tight end

for the Northwestern University Wildcats, joined Jha's lab in 2012.

"I recently returned from the ACC Conference meetings and a symposium given by the NCAA's Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Brian Hainline, MD. Dr. Hainline shared with us two of the greatest challenges facing college athletes; (1) overuse (as a result of pre-puberty specialization and year-round participation) and (2) mental health and welfare," said Al Golden, UM Football head coach. "The latter is why we are thrilled to be partnering with Dr. Jha and Mindfulness Training."

He continues, "Mental health is a vital, yet often overlooked component, of academic and athletic achievement. Our football program is excited about [mindfulness training](#) and enhancing student-athlete focus, stress management, working memory, and improving the overall competitive environment here at The U."

Recently, Congressman Tim Ryan (D-Ohio), a mindfulness practitioner who will be speaking at UM this summer through the UMindfulness lecture series, invited former NFL players and military veterans to the Capitol to discuss the benefits of mindfulness in their recovery from brain trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder. In addition, the 2014 Super Bowl champion Seattle Seahawks revealed that many team members practiced mindfulness meditation throughout their winning season.

Provided by University of Miami

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