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Muslim Player Thrives With Nourished Spirit

By NEIL MacFARQUHAR
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During the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, Hamza Abdullah of the [Denver Broncos](#) got up around 4:30 a.m. every day, read the Koran for 45 minutes, ate a hearty meal before dawn and then did not touch food or drink again until sunset — no matter how difficult practice turned out to be.

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Other players find it impossible to imagine, said Abdullah, whose Ramadan fast ended yesterday. But he thinks the focus that comes from fasting all day improves his game, an effect echoed by other Muslim athletes like Hakeem Olajuwon, the former N.B.A. star.

“I have had some of my best games during Ramadan,” Abdullah, a 24-year-old safety, said in an interview. “I got my first and only interception while I was fasting.”

It does not work for everyone. His teammate Ryan Harris, 22, a rookie offensive tackle from Notre Dame, lasted only six days, saying he decided to break the fast between a heavy workout in the morning, when he repeatedly bench-pressed about 275 pounds, and an afternoon practice.

“After the lift I was just out of gas and I needed something that would get me ready for practice,” said Harris, who had back surgery this summer and was also worried that fasting might slow his rehabilitation.

Teammates, he acknowledged, “think it is crazy,” particularly the idea of not drinking water all day. Devout Muslims avoid sex and eating or drinking from dawn until sunset during the month. Actually, they are not supposed to ingest anything, which rules out all manner of activity, including smoking.

The idea is to focus on their blessings and their spiritual awareness, which the athletes say carries over into their play. As with any change, they admit it is hard, like trying to get into shape after weeks of not working out. But eventually the body establishes a new tempo.

“When your stomach is full, you get tired and lazy and too relaxed,” said Olajuwon, who retired from the [Houston Rockets](#) in 2002. “You get tremendous energy from fasting. Everything is crisp. When your stomach is empty, you get a lot of oxygen and you can

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breathe.”

It is a unique form of energy that he has never gotten any other way, Olajuwon said, speaking in a telephone interview from Amman, Jordan, where he spends much of the year learning Arabic. Olajuwon said his statistics always jumped when he was fasting. He remembers scoring at least 8 more points each game.

Abdullah credits the whole idea of Ramadan with helping push into the background all the distractions from daily life that might interfere with his concentration while playing. “You are focused on the things that matter in your life,” he said. “You are not worried about extracurricular activities with the guys that you usually get caught up in. I don’t hang out at all hours of the night, I don’t listen to music and play video games.”

For the most part, players said, the coaches and training staff let them do it, although the players worry that if they sustained an injury — Abdullah pulled one of his hip flexors this year — it would be blamed on not eating enough. As a safety, he also worries about keeping his weight up. During Ramadan, he often drops at least 5 pounds from his ideal weight of 215.

He tries to prevent that by making sure his suhur, the Arabic name for the morning meal, is always hearty. His usual routine is two of everything — waffles, eggs and [vegetarian](#) sausages, plus lots of bananas and fruit, as well as two bottles of Gatorade and at least three glasses of water.

The hardest parts of the day come during lunch time, he said, when he heads to the locker room to hang out while everyone else is in the cafeteria eating, and between afternoon practice or a game and sunset. To help make the time pass, Abdullah sits in a cool tub in one of the therapy rooms or goes home early to play with his young daughter.

The players have no sense how many professional athletes fast during Ramadan. They mention one or two others they know personally, but there is no formal network for sharing their habits. Abdullah was born into a Muslim family, as was Olajuwon, but Harris converted in the eighth grade, drawn to the humility that is a key tenet of the faith, he said.

Islam teaches that if you cannot fast for some reason, you can either try to make it up some other time or pay for food for the hungry. Abdullah pointed out that Harris has been helping to support meals at a Denver homeless shelter.

“When you fast, you feel a sense of being part of a community, you are part of something bigger than yourself,” Harris said. “You learn how unbelievably lucky you are to be able to have a meal.”

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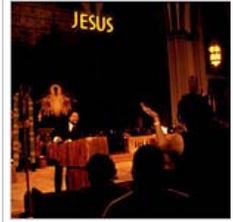
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