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Ronnie Polaneczky | Putting T.O.'s therapy to the test

Posted on Thu, Jan. 13, 2005

IT'S LIKE A BIG, blue, deflated vinyl coffin, with clear plastic windows. And it's where our Super Bowl dreams are resting right now:

In a hyperbaric chamber in Terrell Owens' living room.

When I heard Owens not only had a chamber, but that his first comment after his heartbreaking leg injury in December was that he was getting right in it, I knew I had to test-drive that thing.

What in God's name is this miraculous machine on which all our city's hopes are riding?

And what could it do for ME?

So, after a little digging, I found myself in the Super Fit gym of Long Branch, N.J., personal trainer Glenn Halvorsen. He offered to show me his hyperbaric chamber, a Vitaeris 320.

The Vitaeris 320 is T.O.'s exact model. Both Halvorsen and Owens got theirs from the Hyperbaric Therapy Center in Atlanta, and, needless to say, no expense was spared.

"It's the Cadillac of the line," says company president Jere Hyland.

Retailing for just under 20 grand, T.O.'s Caddy costs more than a full-loaded Hyundai. Fortunately, Halvorsen let me hang out in the chamber - a \$60-per-hour value! - for free.

"Should I sprain something before I visit?" I asked him the day before my session, "so I can experience the full healing powers of the Vitaeris 320?"

"I wouldn't recommend it," Halvorsen said.

"Will I explode?"

"You'll feel a mild pressure in your ears," he said. "Just close your mouth, hold your nose and blow, like you would on a plane when your ears need to pop."

"OK," I said, "as long as that's what T.O. does."

"I'm sure it is," Halvorsen said.

So the next day, wearing my official T.O. jersey, I climbed into Halvorsen's chamber.

If hyperbaric therapy sounds creepily familiar to you, it's probably because pop-perv Michael Jackson made headlines years ago when he said he slept in a hyperbaric chamber at night.

At the time, no one but doctors had ever heard of the therapy.

In a medical setting, it consists of administering 100 percent oxygen, for a scant period of time, to certain kinds of patients - such as diabetics whose wounds won't close. The therapy takes place in a room where the air pressure has been hugely increased.

The process concentrates oxygen, which is then more easily transported to damaged tissues, which need it to get better.



KRYSTLE MARCELLUS / Daily News
Ronnie in side the Vitaeris 320, the same model T.O. is using to recuperate.

Then some genius wondered, "Hey, if hyperbaric therapy can help really sick people, what can it do for pretty healthy people?"

Since then, "mild hyperbaric therapy" - as T.O.'s nonmedicinal version, in a much smaller chamber, is called - has become the rage. Not just among jocks hoping for speedy bounce-back from their weekend wars but among celebrities who swear by its touted by-products: better sleep, sharper concentration and revved-up stamina.

Singer Celine Dion has a chamber. So do actor James Caan, cyclist Lance Armstrong, boxer Evander Holyfield and a gang of others smiling on the Web site of the Hyperbaric Therapy Center.

Claustrophobics would find a session in the Vitaeris 320 excruciating, but, as I stepped into the chamber, I loved its weird coziness.

Halvorsen keeps a Coleman camp mattress and pillow in there, so the possibility of my session becoming a snore-fest only increased its appeal for me.

I lay down, and Halvorsen zipped the chamber closed. Then he messed with some outside knobs on a compressor and the chamber began filling with pressurized air, which turned the saggy walls into a tough shell.

As expected, my ears began to fill, so I held my nose and blew. And then I settled in, the loud whoosh of the air turning the Vitaeris 320 into a kind of sensory-deprivation zone.

And I gotta tell ya, it rocked.

I don't know if it was the soothing white noise of all that air. Or the cocoon-like vibe of the chamber. Or that it felt so good to cat-nap, mid-day.

But by the time Halvorsen zipped the chamber back open, I knew I wanted a Vitaeris 320 of my very own. If only as a mini retreat center to shut out the world, because I didn't think the chamber had any effects on me whatsoever.

But then I caught my reflection in Halvorsen's mirror.

My skin had a peachy glow it hadn't seen since I was 17!

"Could this be from improved circulation?" I marveled to Halvorsen, vainly turning my chin this way and that.

"Could be," he said, and I remembered that someone once told me that acne-ravaged teens clear their skin with chamber use.

Before I tried hyperbaric therapy, I thought it was a crock.

Now, I desperately wanted the chamber that the crock came in.

That night, I slept like I was in a coma - my first uninterrupted, nine-hour sleep in weeks, given the night-time wakefulness that plagues me these days.

Cynics and others who snort at mild hyperbaric therapy - and there are plenty of them if you do a Google search - will say that my rosy glow and restedness were coincidental, that machines like the Vitaeris 320 are this year's snake oil, sold to suckers too stupid to know they're being scammed.

Maybe they're right.

Or maybe, just maybe, me and T.O. know something they don't.