Coming down

After one of the most intense workouts in team sports, what do you do when the game is over? Most professional hockey players will hop on a stationary bicycle and ride for a half hour. Players ride the bicycles to help remove lactic acid from their systems. Lactic acid is what causes muscles to burn after strenuous exercise. Let's look closer at lactic acid.

Lactic acid forms in muscles as we work or exercise. When muscles contract, energy is used. Chemical reactions in the body provide the energy, but any excess produces lactic acid and that causes soreness. So how do players (and the rest of us) relieve the soreness? The best way is to continue to exercise, but at a slower pace, without muscle strain. Also, if you can get it, a good massage will help. Increasing blood circulation cleans out built-up lactic acid from the muscles.

Clothespin Workout

(Modified from the Exploratorium book The Sporting Life)

This clothespin activity may seem like a "wimpy" workout -- but it does demonstrate how your muscles work. Also, you might be surprised to find that you get tired out pretty quickly!
You Need

- a watch with a second hand
- an ordinary clothespin (the spring-loaded kind)

You Do

1. Hold the clothespin between your thumb and index finger.
2. See how many times you can open and close the clothespin in one minute.
3. When your minute is up, DON'T STOP. See how many times you can open and close it during a second full minute.

You may be surprised at the results of this "wimpy" workout.

What's going on?

Odds are you slowed down quite a bit during your second minute.

What are you, some kind of weakling who can't twitch your fingers for two minutes without getting tired? Nope, it's just a question of how your muscles get the energy they need to function.

When you were first opening and closing the clothespin, your muscles were drawing on “stored-up” energy to contract. As that ran out, the muscles couldn't contract as quickly.

If you squeeze the clothespin slowly, as in aerobic exercise, your muscles can continually draw on oxygen and other energy-producers in your blood supply. So maintaining the strength to keep on exercising aerobically depends on your circulation and respiration.