



Lions receiver Tony Simmons and Canucks forward Matt Cooke played cards in a hyperbaric chamber while rehabilitating injuries suffered in play last season. Simmons is opting for the chamber again to help heal his knee injury. — PHOTO COURTESY OF RICHMOND HYPERBARIC CENTER

On fast track to recovery

HYPERBARIC CHAMBER: Simmons back for more with knee injury

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The contraption was once called the *hyperbolic* chamber because of all the claims made by its backers.

Prominent in Vancouver sports pages in the early '90s, the hyperbaric chamber was used and promoted by many members of the Vancouver Canucks.

But when the Canucks found that as a performance-enhancing experience it was at best neutral, the chamber fell from the sports news.

But the chamber itself didn't disappear. Many members of the B.C. Lions use the Richmond Hyperbaric Health Centre to help speed healing, most recently Paul McCallum, Jason Clermont and Tony Simmons.

Simmons credits the chamber, with its high pressure and diet of pure oxygen, for how well his torn knee ligament healed after surgery last season.

He's back using it again after he

hurt the same knee this year in Game 2.

"I'm a big fan of the hyperbaric chamber," Simmons said. "It makes you feel better, rejuvenated. You feel revitalized after you go through it."

The list of athletes who are fans of the chamber includes Terrell Owens, who returned from ankle surgery after 6½ weeks to play in a SuperBowl instead of the 8-12 weeks doctors told him he'd need, Lance Armstrong, Michael Vick, Evander Holyfield, John Smoltz and Mario Lemieux.

You pop a plastic lid over your head — it resembles the helmets worn by the salivating aliens on *The Simpsons* — and breathe in pure oxygen while the pressure is increased to two or three times Earth atmosphere at sea-level.

Simmons, who's a bit claustrophobic, took some time to get used to the helmet and the tight neck closure.

But he says it's a comfortable experience. He's even played poker with Matt Cooke of the Canucks

while inside.

At high pressure, the oxygen is absorbed into the blood plasma much like the gas in a can of soda until the can is opened and the gas escapes.

"We're doing that with oxygen in the blood plasma," said Richmond Hyperbaric's Pawel Szopa. "In a healthy individual the red blood cells are saturated with oxygen so you can't get them to carry any more. You have to increase the pressure, change the physics and dissolve the gas into the plasma. Once you do that, it can transfer that oxygen on to all the other blood fluids in the body."

There are 13 circumstances covered by your CareCard for use of the hyperbaric chamber, but sports injuries aren't among them and visits cost \$100.

The Lions treat the therapy as, at worst, a harmless psychosomatic.

Others urge more caution.

"We're talking long-term memory loss, eyesight problems," said Guy Cramer, whose Langley-

based company quit making the chambers because of concerns over long-term side effects and civil suits.

But Cramer stressed he's talking about abuse of the chamber, such as using it as a performance enhancer.

"I'm not saying it doesn't work for soft-tissue injuries," Cramer said. "But you don't need to be putting a guy in there every day for six months."

"It's not the be-all and end-all of sports medicine. There'll be definite useful advantages to a thing like this, but you've really got to be careful when you're using something like this that you're not putting people in there for 100 or 200 treatments."

To which Szopa says, Amen. "We're well aware of all the side effects of hyperbaric therapy," said Szopa, who is certified by the National Board of Diving and Hyperbaric Medication Technology. "There are limits to how much you should use it."

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