



The Power of Yoga For Sport Performance

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ABSTRACT *Why this ancient discipline has become the latest cross-training tool to enhance athletic performance and reduce the risk of injury. The practice of yoga was first developed in India and has evolved over thousands of years. Yoga disciples use poses, or asanas, to prepare their bodies for meditation practice-much as an athlete would prepare for a sports competition. The poses also serve as a means to alter one's consciousness and mental focus in the spiritual quest for "enlightenment". This spiritually transformative process is, in fact, the overriding purpose of the practice of hatha yoga. In essence, yoga is designed to bring body, mind and spirit into balance.*

Introduction

Just a few years ago, fitness enthusiasts had few options if they wanted to try out a yoga class. Today, yoga is a mainstay on the program schedules of most health clubs, personal training studios, YMCA's and corporate fitness centers. Unlike many other forms of training, the practice of yoga unfolds over time to reveal many layers of physical benefits and personal revelations. Now, more and more people are discovering the myriad ways that yoga can be used to improve athletic performance, from increasing mental concentration and improving flexibility and balance to preventing common injuries and honing skills in a particular sport. Whether by creating an entire training program for elite athletes or by simply integrating a few yoga poses into an existing group fitness class, fitness professionals at all levels can use yoga as an effective cross-training tool for their own athlete clients.

Content

Through the practice of yoga, elite athletes and weekend warriors alike can benefit from this type of balance. This is especially true when athletes have pushed their bodies to the max, resulting in weakness or injury. Yoga can restore a weakened body and build it back up. Yoga postures, breath work and inner focus can help rebalance, strengthen and restore overtaxed muscles, joints and ligaments. Through this restoration process, athletes can increase their career longevity and develop an inner balance that will last a lifetime. Balancing the mind, body and spirit is a primary philosophical principle of yoga. It is considered the true way to honor the body.

Athletes in all sports are finding that yoga conditioning not only elongates tight, shortened, fatigued muscles but also brings calmness and clarity to the mind. Some athletes begin the practice to rehabilitate an injury and to gain more flexibility, stability and strength. Others take it up to increase their powers of concentration and quiet the mind. And some do it because they don't want to miss out on what everybody else is raving about! The reasons are many, but the results are consistent.

The eight limbs of Yoga

Yoga is composed of many layers, all of which can enhance athletic performance. These layers are referred to as the **eightfold disciplines, or the eight "limbs" of yoga**. These eight limbs form the main principles of yoga, as follows: **Yama** refers to universal ethics; **Niyama** refers to personal ethics; **Asana** refers to posture; **Pranayama** refers to breath; **Pratyahara** refers to withdrawal or quieting of the senses; **Dharana** refers to inner focus or concentration; **Dhyana** refers to meditation, reflection or observation; **Samadhi** refers to absorption with the whole being, or absolute

enlightenment.

Athletes can benefit from these limbs just as they benefit from other tools they use to optimize their performance. For example, a tennis player intent on making contact with the ball and returning it to an exact spot on his opponent's side of the court is exhibiting inner focus, or *dharana*. If the tennis player can completely withdraw his attention from these potential distractions and remain steadfast in play, he will be revealing *pratyahara*. While athletes can benefit from all these principles, and they are all equally important to enhancing athletic performance, fitness professionals teaching yoga should focus on the limbs that fall within their area of expertise-for example, *asana* (posture), *pranayama* (breath), *dharana* (inner focus) and *dhyana* (meditation).

Injury Prevention

One of the best lessons athletes can learn from practicing yoga is how to respect their body's strengths and limitations. This knowledge is essential to preventing sports injuries. Yoga is a powerful biofeedback tool that can help athletes develop better body awareness. Listening to the body and responding to its messages is a way to honor the body and not push it over the edge.

Like runners, tennis players experience a tremendous amount of pounding, shortening and tightening of their muscles. When players do not restore, elongate and stretch these muscles, imbalances and injuries frequently occur. Competitive athletes who perform repetitive motions-swinging a tennis racket over and over, for example-end up with tight overused muscles that just keep getting tighter and weak underused muscles that just keep getting weaker. Tight muscles are hard, inflexible and brittle; their lack of elasticity contributes to joint instability and decreases resiliency. The tension in tight muscles hinders blood supply and creates scar tissue, which renders the muscles less elastic. Therefore, an athlete with tight muscles has to work harder, which in turn creates even more stress. This classic overuse syndrome is experienced by many athletes.

John Douillard, DC., PhD, is the author of *Body, Mind and Sport* (Harmony Books, 2001). When working with professional athletes, Douillard concentrates on improving their breathing. He says slow, steady, conscious breath increases blood oxygen flow, elongates the muscles and allows the body to engage in more stressful work without a degenerative emergency response-all effects that can help reduce injuries. Douillard teaches the players to remain calm during the stress of a game using a technique he calls "breathing in the eye of the hurricane." Douillard says this technique has helped the players consciously slow down their

heart rates and improve endurance at the height of physical and mental stress.

Deciding on the right Yoga Style

Hatha yoga

is the umbrella term for many different styles of yoga, such as Anusara, Ashtangavinyasa (sometimes called "power yoga") and Iyengar. These styles are all powerful, dynamic, alignment-oriented types of yoga that are well suited for fitness and sport adaptation. Depending on their goals and personalities, athletes may prefer one form of yoga over another. For example, some athletes may prefer a style of yoga that emphasizes holding postures for longer durations, while others may prefer a format that emphasizes optimal alignment. Certain individuals may gravitate toward a style that accentuates the spiritual aspects of yoga, whereas others may relate more to a style that emphasizes the physical component. Some will be seeking a gentler therapeutic yoga style that focuses on stretching poses, while others will want to increase their strength and stamina. Finally, some will be keen to touch on all of these elements in one class.

Here's a brief description of some of the more popular forms of hatha yoga:

Anusara.

A modern style of yoga that focuses on optimal body alignment, this form is practiced by using the body's strength to keep the muscles engaged while stretching.

AshtangaVinyasa.

Sometimes referred to as "power yoga," this is probably the most physically demanding style of yoga. It emphasizes strength, flexibility and stamina by combining breath work with a series of poses often done in quick succession.

Iyengar.

Considered one of the more therapeutic types of yoga, this style emphasizes alignment through the use of props such as chairs, blankets, blocks, straps and pillows. This style is especially good for novices.

Bikram.

Bikram yoga is also referred to as "hot yoga." The focus here is on the repetition of 26 poses, each performed twice. It is typically done in a very hot room, to warm the joints for movement.

Kripalu.

This gentle form of yoga focuses on the mind-body connection through the practice of meditation during poses.

Kundalini.

Also well suited to beginners, this style merges stretching, breathing and meditation.

Viniyoga.

This style is usually taught one-on-one. Students are encouraged to work at their own pace, integrating movement with breathing and awareness.

Starting Sports Yoga Conditioning

Mastering the physical and mental challenges of yoga can be a revelation for athletes accustomed to years of a different kind of training. Most athletes are used to conditioning in a particular way, usually by isolating specific muscle groups with the aim of increasing the intensity and frequency of the

training regimen. Yoga, on the other hand, is based on the principle of *integrating* the body as a whole and shifts the emphasis to the *quality* of the movement. This new holistic approach can reveal weaknesses and imbalances that may never have been exposed before. In some ways, this new acceptance of the body's limitations can be the first step in an athlete's growth. Becoming more aware of the body's own restraints is really the root of *niyama*. Learning difficult yoga poses requires time and patience and the process itself teaches respect for one's own limitations. Taking the time to learn each pose, along with its respective function, will likely present new challenges for your athlete clients. They will begin to appreciate that each pose uses the body as a whole and that the effectiveness of the poses is determined by the quality of the movement. This is a far cry from focusing on how many reps or laps they can do in a single training session.

You can help clients adapt to this new approach by gradually increasing the amount of time you devote to yoga in their training sessions. For example, start off by devoting about 15 minutes to yoga poses, then gradually progress until these poses constitute roughly half of all classes or training sessions. It is best to have clients perform the poses either during the warm-up or after the more strenuous portion of the workout, when the heat from exertion causes tissues to be more pliable and receptive to stretching.

Keep in mind that some of your athletes may balk at reducing time spent on more vigorous training, while others may be intimidated by their inability to perform the poses well. Remind them that yoga doesn't just "stretch" the body; it also strengthens all muscles, including the deep stabilizers; heightens body awareness, or proprioception; reduces stress; and counterbalances the repetitive actions your clients perform in their sport. Adding yoga to their regimen will ultimately result in a full-spectrum approach to sports conditioning.

The Importance of Postural Alignment

The postural alignment of the *asanas* described in this article are based on Anusara yoga, which focuses on specific principles of alignment. Anusara yoga is practiced by using the strength of the body to keep the muscles engaged while they are being stretched. This can help athletes tremendously because isometric muscle strength increases even as the muscles elongate. Since athletes gain flexibility without losing strength, their speed, power and force improve.

Conclusions:

Before having your clients attempt any yoga pose, it is important to teach them how to achieve and maintain proper postural alignment during *asanas*. Try this yourself so you understand the necessary actions.

1. First, become aware of your breath, and focus on being in the moment. Next, isometrically engage all of your muscles, starting with the feet and moving slowly up your body, isometrically engaging the muscles, or "hugging" them onto your bones.
2. While maintaining muscle engagement, open the pelvic floor by taking the tops of the thighs back toward the hamstrings. This creates core stability, which allows you to safely elongate to your furthest point of the stretch. Keep in mind that athletes who are tight in the hamstrings, hips and/or low back tend to have an excessive posterior pelvic tilt.

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