

Why Every Athlete Should Practice Yoga

As a private trainer and yoga instructor, I meet a lot of athletes and workout fanatics. When asked if yoga is part of their workouts, many athletes will tell me they don't have the time to add yoga to their already intense training schedules. Some say they don't see how "stretching and breathing" would be of any benefit to them. Others say they've discovered yoga while recuperating from an injury.

Why not enhance your performance and prevent injury by adding yoga to your training plan now? A well-rounded yoga practice includes dynamic flexibility training, core stabilization, strengthening and balance work. By focusing on these vital elements, yoga can help you recover faster after workouts, open up the tight areas that hinder performance, improve range of motion, and develop mental focus and concentration.

"I've definitely noticed benefits in my triathlon training from yoga," said Heidi Resiert, a triathlete from San Diego. "My recovery time is much quicker, my shoulders feel stronger in the pool, and my muscles don't feel as tight after long runs or bike rides. I'm glad I found yoga and added it to my weekly workout routine. Not only do I feel stronger, but I also feel more confident that I will continue to be injury free."

Prevent Injury

Many sports, such as cycling and running, have very repetitive movements usually in one direction and in one plane of motion. These sports can develop certain muscle groups while ignoring others. Over time, this process causes imbalances in the muscles and joints leading to overuse injuries. For instance, tight hamstrings and hip flexors will cause the body to recruit from other joints, joints not intended for bearing extra loads.

Common overuse injuries among athletes include those involving the illiotibial band (ITB), knee, hamstrings, hip flexors and shoulders. Often, these injuries are directly linked to lack of flexibility, poor core strength and misalignment. Yoga helps alleviate this tightness, builds a stronger center, and aligns the spine. In order to minimize and/or prevent injury, athletes should concentrate their efforts on these areas used most in endurance sports.

Even if athletes stretch pre- or post-workout, they are usually just stretching the muscles in the same direction and plane of motion in which they will be exercising. Yoga goes beyond simple stretching by working the muscles and joints through all ranges of motion--activating the little-used muscles that support the primary movers. The body must be worked through all three planes of motion in order to remain balanced and healthy. Yoga works not just in the sagittal plane but, in the frontal and transverse planes as well, ensuring well-rounded development.

Many yoga poses, such as Revolved Crescent, feature twisting motions in the transverse plane, essential to opening up tight obliques and lower backs. Balancing postures like Tree or Eagle are some of the most effective ways to correct muscle imbalances and poor body mechanics.

Another essential element in yoga is breath work or pranayama. The attention to breath during yoga can be considered one of the most important benefits to athletes. Learning to stay focused and centered through uncomfortable poses by concentrating on even inhalations and exhalations sets up the athlete to stay focused during a race or challenging workout. The mind-body connection in yoga is essential to helping athletes develop mental acuity and concentration. In addition, yoga helps you to relax not just tight muscles, but also anxious and overstressed minds. Being more relaxed will also aid in athletic performance.

Where to Start

Yoga has been practiced for around 5,000 years and several schools of yoga have emerged over time. It can be overwhelming at first to find a style of yoga that resonates with you. If you are a competitive athlete, it is best to tailor your yoga practice to your training schedule. On a day where you are completing a long run for example, you'll want relaxing, mellow yoga. If you have an off-day, a vigorous, dynamic class will help you build strength and endurance.

You can choose from dynamic styles like Ashtanga yoga and Power yoga that consist of a rigorous flowing series of poses synchronized with breath to produce internal heat and purifying sweat. Alternatively, Bikram yoga is a set series of 26 static poses performed in 105-degree room. Iyengar focuses primarily on anatomical precision and alignment in poses, with an emphasis on healing the body and mind using postures. Anusara is a tantric-based system that combines alignment with awareness of energy flow in the body. Finally, there are restorative styles such as gentle Hatha and Yin yoga which feature longer holds.

Yoga helps the muscles, tendons, and ligaments move through a full range of motion, thus cultivating balance and core strength which is a huge benefit to athletes in their chosen sports. If you attend a few classes per week and/or a few 10-15 minute sessions at home, you will obtain fast results. A simple way to add in yoga is to perform your short sessions pre- or post-workout. Try it and see for yourself.

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