

By Sue Hollingshead

# YOGA

## for Sports Performance

Why this ancient discipline has become the latest cross-training tool to enhance athletic performance and reduce the risk of injury.

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, YMCAs 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.

## Finding Focus

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.

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 yogic 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 **eight-fold 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.

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).

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*. Now imagine that at the crucial moment of play, a gale-force gust of wind picks up, a fan screams words of encouragement and a car crashes in the parking lot. If the tennis player can completely withdraw his attention from these potential distractions and remain steadfast in play, he will be revealing *pratyahara*.

## 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.

Rebecca Browning is an amateur triathlete based in Boulder, Colorado, whose various sports-related injuries have been helped by practicing yoga. "Yoga not only stretches my body but also helps me with better balance and overall strength," she says. "At first, I thought yoga was a way to have a less strenuous workout, but now I find it is often harder than my competition training. After class, I feel much more focused and grounded, and this helps me in my training. If I'm tired, I can pull my senses inward and continue my practice without causing harm to my body. During competition, I can focus on the integration of small core muscles to give me better overall stability."

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 weaker 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 with-

out a degenerative emergency response—all effects that can help reduce injuries. In his work as director of player development for the New Jersey Mets professional basketball team, 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—which employs slow, mindful, focused breathing—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, Ashtanga vinyasa (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.

**Ashtanga Vinyasa.** Sometimes referred to as “power yoga,” this is proba-

## CURBING THE CHATTER

One of the most important abilities athletes can master is to remain focused on their sport. Remaining impervious to distractions, or mental chatter, is how athletes withstand hours of training and stay competitive. This kind of inner focus and concentration is something that can be honed through yoga. By exercising *pratyahara* (withdrawing of the senses) and *dharana* (focus or inner concentration), athletes can learn to quiet a busy mind and be in the “now.”

One exercise you can do is to have your clients lie down or sit comfortably with an elongated spine and eyes closed. Have them focus on their breath, following its flow. Cue them to visually “see” their inhalation move from the periphery of the body, expanding through the lungs, ribs, diaphragm and belly and finally into the core of the pelvis. Then tell them to “watch” their exhalation move from the inner body back out to the periphery. As they focus in this way, thoughts will come and go. Witnessing the thoughts, rather than getting sucked into them, can help your clients become more observant. Recognizing that they are not their thoughts and emotions will help quiet the mind.

Use visualization to assist this process. You might liken the thought process to waves ebbing and flowing on a shoreline. Another visual cue could be streams of clouds moving back and forth in the sky. Observe where clients are holding tension or other sensations in their bodies. Tell them that they can exhale these sensations out of their bodies, like waves rolling into shore. Then ask your clients to gradually increase the length of each inhalation and exhalation. After approximately five minutes, have them slowly return to gentle natural breathing and quietly open their eyes. Ask them to observe the difference between how they felt before this exercise and how they felt after it.

bly 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 begin-

ners, 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; this kind of conditioning focuses on isolating different parts of the body. 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. As you might expect, this will come as a surprise to many athletes who think they are in tune with their bodies.

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 coun-

terbalances 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.

Before having your clients attempt any yoga pose, it is important to teach them how to achieve and maintain proper postural alignment during *asanas*. (All of the poses pictured in the pages that follow rely on the same alignment principles.) 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. Draw the tailbone down so that the low belly lifts away from the fronts of the thighs; as you do this, focus on the muscles of the pelvic floor and the transversus abdominis and lower rectus abdominis muscles. 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.

## Sport-Specific Yoga Poses

The *asanas* described in the following sections are examples of some of the best choices for some of the most popular competitive and recreational sports—running, swimming, cycling, skiing, tennis and golf. (Due to space constraints, not all the poses are described in detail; see "References" and "Resources" for more information.) When introducing yoga poses into your athletes' training programs, remember to start off slowly and then gradually add postures during the warm-up or cool-down section of the workout.

Although all the poses described in this article can be used with all clients, certain poses are more conducive to certain sports. For each sport, the pose shown is an excellent choice; the other poses mentioned in the accompanying text will also help athletes who engage in that particular sport. Keep in mind that you can't go wrong mixing and matching these poses for different athletes, as many sports recruit the same muscles.

From a safety perspective, all poses described as "prep" or "modified" are good choices for athletes with limited flexibility and stability. Props like a stability ball, a strap or even the walls in a room can help beginners modify a pose and allow them to challenge their balance while recruiting deep intrinsic muscles, thereby increasing their core strength.

Poses can be held anywhere from 45 seconds (for beginners) up to five minutes (for advanced students). Poses that are more vigorous (this will depend on the individual) should be held for shorter lengths of time. Throughout each pose, cue clients to breathe!

## Final Thoughts

After doing the *asanas*, it is important to ensure that your athletes lie down and completely relax and rest in *Savasana* (corpse pose). This integral relaxation component is far too often eliminated in training, yet—

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### running

Runners pound and hammer their bodies on different hard surfaces, resulting in injury or overuse to the muscles and tendons of the legs, feet, hips and low back. One of the best yoga poses for runners is *Eka Pada Rajakapotasana Prep* (pigeon pose prep), which stretches many muscles, including the hip flexors, the gluteals and the piriformis, psoas, low-back and groin muscles. Also good for runners are any lunging poses that lengthen the Achilles tendons and soleus muscles—for example, *Virabhadrasana 1* (warrior pose). To deeply stretch the hamstrings, the best choices are *Parsvottanasana* (extended sideways pose) and *Supta Padangusthasana Prep* (supine hand-to-big-toe pose prep), the last of which is described below.

**Supine Hand-to-Big-Toe Pose Prep.** Lie on the back, with legs straight out on the floor. Inhale and isometrically engage the leg muscles. Keep the left leg on the floor. Loop a strap around the right foot, grasp the strap in your right hand and exhale while lifting the right leg straight up toward the ceiling. To deepen the stretch, draw the right leg farther toward your head, while drawing the right gluteal toward the floor. Hug up and in (meaning isometrically engage the muscles), then lengthen into the stretch. Come out of the pose and switch sides.

### swimming

Swimmers tend to have well-developed pulmonary-respiratory systems, the result of mastering the kind of regulative, rhythmic breathing that is similar to yogic breathing. Doing slow, steady, focused breathing alone is advantageous for these athletes; you can gradually couple this breath work with *asanas*. Swimmers benefit most from poses that increase flexibility and stability in the shoulder joints and stretch the low back. Good choices for beginners are any poses that open the shoulders—for example, clasping the hands behind the back or using a strap to open the chest and deltoids. More vigorous poses include *Bhujangasana* (cobra pose) and *Urdhvamukha Svanasana* (upward facing dog pose). A good choice to open the shoulders and also increase hip strength and flexibility is *Utthita Trikonasana* (triangle pose), which is described below.

**Triangle Pose.** Stand with feet about 3 to 4 feet apart, right foot turned out about 90 degrees and left foot turned in about 15 to 45 degrees. Open the arms to shoulder level. Inhale and lengthen the body while keeping the legs straight. Exhale and lean a straight torso over toward the right foot, placing the right hand on the floor, ankle or shin for support. Continue lengthening and turn the torso up toward the ceiling while stretching the left arm upward. Maintain the stretch while gazing at the floor; if comfortable, gaze instead at the raised hand. Come out of the pose and switch sides.

### golf

Golfers need to repeatedly twist their body in one direction to swing a golf club. Mastering the sport of golf requires tremendous strength in the entire torso. To strengthen and flex the spine, try *Utthita Trikonasana* (triangle pose) and *Bhujangasana* (cobra pose). Golfers can also gain strength, flexibility and stability by doing twisting poses, such as *Ardha Matsyendrasana* (pretzel pose), which is described below.

**Pretzel Pose.** In a seated position, fold the left leg so the left knee is facing directly forward, then cross the right leg over the left knee. Reach the left arm across the right leg and press the left elbow against the right thigh. Keep the right hand behind your back on the floor. Inhale and lengthen the spine while pressing the sit bones down. Exhale and twist to the right while drawing both arms back and extending the top of the head to the ceiling. Come out of the pose and switch sides.

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### skiing

Skiers often incur injuries in their low back and knees. Skiers also tend to have overdeveloped quadriceps and weak/tight hamstrings. These conditions can be improved by doing poses that strengthen the joints and muscles of the low back, knees and posterior legs. Examples to try with skiers include *Utthita Trikonasana* (triangle pose), *Modified Virabhadrasana 3* (modified warrior pose with hands on hips or bent 90 degrees at sides), *Paschimottanasana* (seated forward fold pose), *Supta Padangusthasana Prep* (supine hand-to-big-toe pose prep) and *Bhujangasana* (cobra pose), the last of which is described below.

**Cobra Pose.** Lie on the floor face down with legs together. Place hands under the fronts of the shoulders. Inhale and lift and open the chest up and away from the floor. Draw the shoulders up and back while elongating the wholebody away from the heart and pelvis. (If the shoulders round forward, don't raise the chest as high.) Keep the throat open (but do not force the chin forward) and extend through the top of the head.

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### tennis

Because of the demands of tennis, players often lose their suppleness in the back and torso and deplete the strength in their shoulders, elbows and wrists. *Prasarita Padottanasana* (legs spread wide, forward bend while standing) is excellent for opening the shoulders; it also deeply stretches the hamstrings and adductors. Other good choices for tennis players are *Utkatasana* (chair pose), which strengthens the abdominal muscles and stretches the Achilles tendons, calves and spinal column, and *Virabhadrasana 2* (warrior 2 pose), which builds strength and balance, especially in the lower body. Another excellent pose for strengthening and lengthening muscles of concern for tennis players is *Setubandha Sarvangasana* (bridge pose), which can be done with or without a strap; this pose is described below.

**Bridge Pose.** Lie on your back and bend your knees, keeping the feet hip-width apart and knees aligned over the ankles. Inhale and lift the hips off the floor. Interlace the fingers of both hands and "walk" the shoulders underneath the torso while pressing the arms toward the floor. Keep the throat open and maintain a natural curve to the neck. Extend the top of the head toward the wall behind you. Hug into the core of the pelvis and lengthen the back.

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### cycling

Due to the nature of their sport, cyclists tend to have very tight hips and hamstrings. Due to kyphosis of the low back, these athletes also need to stretch in ways that flex the spine; poses that address this spinal curvature help increase circulation around the lower vertebrae. Like swimmers, cyclists benefit most from poses that stretch the back and open the chest. Examples are *Bhujangasana* (cobra pose), *Dhanurasana Prep* (bow pose prep, with hands reaching toward the feet) and *Ustrasana Prep* (camel pose prep, with hands on the sacrum rather than reaching to the heels). An optimal pose to stretch tight hips and hamstrings is *Eka Pada Rajakapotasana Prep* (pigeon pose prep), which is described below.

**Pigeon Pose Prep.** Kneel on all fours and slide the left leg straight back, tucking the toes under. Bend the right knee in front of the body so the right foot is toward the left groin. Hug up and in while lengthening into the stretch. Draw the right hip toward the floor, and lower the upper body to the floor while extending the spine and placing the hands on the floor. Come out of the pose and switch sides.

to achieve total balance—it is the very thing that is needed after a vigorous workout. This component is also deeply satisfying and enjoyable!

*Sue Hollingshead has been a fitness professional and yoga practitioner for 17 years. She offers workshops and presentations internationally, specializing in teaching instructors how to merge yoga and fitness. She is an affiliated teacher of Anusara yoga and has trained in other yoga styles, including Ashtanga vinyasa yoga and Iyengar yoga. Sue can be reached at [yogasue@boulder.net](mailto:yogasue@boulder.net).*

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## RESOURCES

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