

# Man enough for Yoga?

## Yoga and Sports Performance

Let's begin by putting a few preconceptions about yoga on the table:

Yoga is...

"...stretching."

"...putting your body in weird and wonderful positions (mostly weird)."

"...a whole lot of ladies dressed in spandex."

"...for nafs and hippies."

"...torture."

There is good reason why the yoga industry has recently experienced such a boom – it works! There is more to it than spandex and stretching. Allow me to enlighten you.

If it's more flexibility you need- yoga will give it to you. If it's more strength you need- yoga will give it to you. If it's better concentration you need- yoga will give it to you. If it's de-stressing you need- yoga will chill you out. If it's a stronger core you need- yoga will give it to you. If it's improved mental strength you need- yoga will give it to you. And on top of that it'll massage and refresh your organs, get your metabolism going, your energy levels in balance, your breathing right and your body looking like that of a Greek god/goddess (provided you're not munching Maccy D's three meals a day, of course). There is so much to be gained from doing yoga, especially for sportsmen and women.

The Australian rugby and cricket teams have incorporated yoga into their training for this reason. Tiger Woods is another sportsman who takes advantage of what yoga has to offer. Apart from being a great example as to how yoga can benefit your game, Tiger is an even better example of the effect yoga can have on the libido!

Stretching is what the majority of people understand yoga to be, so I'll begin by outlining the importance of improved flexibility to the athlete. Tight muscles restrict range of motion (ROM) at a joint, they are unable to contract to their full potential, increase the work of their respective antagonistic muscle/s, place undue strain on other areas of the body, reduce efficiency of movement and

are more injury prone than muscles at optimal flexibility.

Sportsmen and women tend to experience increased muscle tension due to years of intense training, insufficient rehab after injury and a lack of flexibility training. Often too, muscle imbalances develop as a result of repetitive exercise, which can cause the body to become misaligned and heighten the chances of injury. Yoga is a magnificent means of regaining muscle balance, skeletal alignment, freedom of movement and achieving greater movement efficiency.

Not only does yoga improve flexibility but it develops incredible core strength as well as muscular strength through a joint's full ROM. This is an important fact as in our typical sports and strength training regimens we most often develop strength through a limited ROM. Yoga uses body weight to safely and effectively develop functional strength. This is not to say that yoga should replace an athlete's current strength training program, yoga will be a great compliment to weight training and should allow the athlete to gain more from it.

Good core strength is a huge asset to any athlete. As well as providing support and protection to the spine, our core plays a huge role in energy transfer through the body and thus contributes enormously to an athlete's power output. The core provides stability through movement and thus greater movement efficiency. So in essence, a strong core enables an athlete to move more powerfully and quickly, with greater stability and thus with less likelihood of being injured.

Yoga also increases body awareness. This in itself plays a role in injury prevention. Increased body awareness will enable the athlete to identify areas of weakness, tension and/or imbalance more readily, allowing for action to be taken to correct the concern which, had it not been identified, may have led to injury further down the line. Proprioception (an awareness of where the body is in

space) is also an area which is developed through yoga practice.

Again, helping to prevent injury, enhance form and improve efficiency of movement by developing balance and body control.

Movement in yoga is closely linked with the breath. Breathing is essentially what makes yoga yoga and more than just a series of stretching and strengthening exercises. Breathing is our life force, without air we cease to exist. It is imperative to our physiology. It is logical then, that if we were to starve our bodies of oxygen by breathing to only one half or one third of our full lung capacity we would consequently function at a suboptimal level. Surprisingly, this is how most people live their lives.

The importance of proper breathing cannot be over emphasized. Breathing not only affects metabolism but also state of mind. Rapid, shallow breathing causes a person to feel stressed and out of balance, slow, deep breathing leaves a person feeling calm, composed and in control. Maintaining focus on only the breath and the body while doing yoga achieves stillness of the mind, similar to what athletes call being in 'the zone'.

Yoga teaches awareness of the breath and the correct breathing technique, both of which will help athletes to perform better physically and mentally and also to maintain composure in times of stress during competition. Increased anxiety causes tension in the body and negative thoughts to run rampant in the mind. This has a negative effect on performance, which increases anxiety further, creating a vicious cycle. By bringing the mind to focus on the breath, negative thoughts will lessen, anxiety will be replaced with a feeling of composure, muscular tension will dissipate and the athlete will be able to continue performing at his/her optimum.

Beyond the physical benefits of strength and flexibility yoga has an enormous amount to offer everyone,

especially the athlete. Yoga leaves a person feeling relaxed, calm and rejuvenated. In today's non-stop world, stress being the leading cause of disease, how valuable is a means of de-stressing and learning skills to maintain that state? Yes, it's valuable. Health is valuable.

Just scratching the surface of the yogic philosophy is enough to cause profound changes in your outlook on life, and thus your reality. Life IS beautiful. Yogic philosophy teaches us to focus on the positive side of everything (even yourself, especially yourself). This immediately shifts your perceptions, opens you up to opportunities, gives you the freedom to be yourself, to express yourself, to discover within yourself the resources you need to achieve what you set out to achieve.

An important point to make in any discussion about yoga is that it is not a religion. This is often an area of concern to people considering incorporating yoga into their training plan. Yoga is a philosophy which promotes living a peaceful, fulfilled and healthy life in which you strive to be good to those around you and be good to yourself.

Yoga, as we know it- a series of postures or asana (Hatha Yoga) - is only one of eight limbs of Patanjali's yogic philosophy. Within that limb there are many different types of yoga: Iyengar, Ashtanga, Sivananda,

Bikram, Kundalini to name but a few. All are unique. Some are stronger, more physical forms of yoga, others are slower and less physically demanding, some are focussed primarily on the physical, others place greater emphasis on the meditative side of yoga practice. What one person may enjoy may put another person off yoga for life. What is beneficial for a golfer may not necessarily be as beneficial for a rugby player or a surfer. There is something for everyone; however a fair amount of open-mindedness and experimentation with different styles of yoga is necessary. When you find the style that suits you, you will not be disappointed- guaranteed.

Ensure though, that you find a properly qualified instructor whose class you enjoy and who gives guidance as to correct alignment- like with any form of exercise there is potential for injury if done incorrectly, and so much more to be gained from it when done correctly. For this reason, make sure that the class you attend is no more than 15 or so people. It is very difficult for an instructor to give all students the necessary personal attention when in a big class.

An important note when beginning yoga: leave your ego in the change room. This pertains to men especially! For most of us our first yoga class is a humbling experience. Hence, we call it *yoga practice*. If we could do

everything perfectly there would be no need to practice. The reward is in the journey. Adopt a light hearted attitude, keep a smile on your face and persevere- you will certainly reap the benefits in all areas of your life.

In your first yoga class you'll probably notice the strength and flexibility components most. Once you are on your way to mastering each individual asana you will be able to flow from asana to asana, linking the breath with movement and keeping the mind completely focussed on the breath and the body. Allow any other thoughts that enter your mind to float on by. You will appreciate how relaxed and refreshed you feel. After a few sessions you will notice how free and light your body feels, how much easier it is to move and the positive effect it has on your mental and emotional states. And that's only after a few sessions!

The potential for yoga to improve not only your sports performance but also your quality of life is enormous. I mean who doesn't want better karma, increased libido, rippling abs and a bag full of new party tricks?!

Give it a try.

- Nicky Morphew (BHons SpSci)