

# 1

## USING YOGA FOR TRAINING

**Yoga will make you a better athlete.** Even if you never do touch your toes, gaining flexibility, balance, and whole-body strength will improve your form, efficiency, and power. And even if you never assume a single yoga posture, yoga's approach to concentration and breath awareness will improve your mental focus and mental endurance—the intangibles that become so important at the end of a long training session or race. The practice of yoga *asana* (the physical poses) and *pranayama* (breath exercises), and yoga's mental and spiritual approach, will teach you how to integrate the body, the breath, and the mind to stay focused and calm even in the face of intensity—a skill that will serve you in every aspect of your life, be it training, racing, work, relationships, or undergoing a root canal.

This book is a guide to the elements of yoga—as practiced in the twenty-first-century West—that will enhance your performance as an athlete. The poses described range from the basic to the intermediate; the breath and meditation exercises are, for the most part, simple. Most of the focus is on the physical and practical, minimizing the use of Sanskrit and the more esoteric beliefs underlying yoga philosophy. These important elements of yoga, while not explicitly treated here, can also enhance you as a person. I hope that you will be inspired by the benefits yoga offers and will follow up on your own areas of interest by reading and taking classes. The resources outlined in the bibliography provide a place to start your investigation.

## How Yoga Enhances Training

### FLEXIBILITY

You probably think of yoga as primarily stretching—or even contortionism. Indeed, flexibility is a big part of contemporary Western yoga. Practicing the postures will stretch tight muscles and encourage use of your full range of motion. Tight muscles are more prone to acute injury, in the form of muscle strains and tears. Loosening up those tight spots not only will help prevent such injury, but will help prevent repetitive-use injuries by allowing the body to move smoothly in swimming, pedaling, running, skiing, and daily activities. Stretching moves you through your natural range of motion, which is lost if it is not used regularly. A freer range of motion means more economy, since you can find the most efficient path for your body to move.

On a cellular level, stretching elongates your muscle fibers. Since the fibers shorten during effort and in response to the accumulation of lactic acid, it helps to begin with a long and relaxed set of muscle fibers that can contract more and thus generate greater force. Stretching can also help your body process lactate after exercise and can improve muscle oxygenation. And, of course, it feels great.

Beyond physical flexibility, yoga cultivates flexibility of mind. The poses, breath exercises, and meditation practices all encourage focus on the present moment. By letting go of memories of the past and projections into the future, we can find happiness in the here and now. As you gain experience with yoga, you'll come to see that the mind will heave you through highs and drag you through lows, just as happens during endurance exercise. Staying aware of the present without feeling overwhelmed builds equanimity, the capacity to remain calm no matter what comes your way. Keeping your brain—or one metaphorical foot—in the present while outside forces try to bend you in various directions is the equivalent of mental flexibility.

### STRENGTH

Yoga works holistically to strengthen the body as a unit. The exercises are all closed-chain, performed with hands or feet in contact with the floor (as opposed to an open-chain exercise like a biceps curl), and use body weight. Some poses are held static, engaging the muscles isometrically (holding the fibers long against resistance). Other sequences, such as sun salutations, involve flowing from pose to pose, engaging and releasing the muscles through concentric and eccentric contractions.

Practiced correctly—with attention to alignment—yoga confers joint stability just as weight-room strength training does. The regular practice of yoga postures trains the muscles and tendons to stabilize the joints, which in turn helps the practitioner to avoid both acute and repetitive-stress injuries. The standing poses

are especially good for strengthening the small stabilizing muscles of the lower leg while stretching the hip muscles. This combination leads to greater power and fluidity in sports.

Yoga will also increase your core strength, not just in poses that specifically target the core but also in standing and balance poses. These postures help create whole-body functional strength and encourage greater awareness of the body and the breath.

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Holding challenging poses also teaches mental strength. On the mat, you will observe your mental and emotional reactions to your physical situation and learn ways to manage intensity. When you encounter similarly intense situations on the course or in life, you'll have experience with using your breath and your form to find strength.

### BALANCE

Yoga confers balance. First, there's the literal work of the balance poses, which will strengthen your lower legs and hone your proprioception so you grow more aware of where your body is in space. The poses also teach a more subtle awareness of your body's center of gravity in different positions, along with a finer sense of how the body works as a unit to balance.

In addition, yoga gives dimensional balance to the work you do in sports and in life. Instead of moving stroke after stroke or step after step in a linear pattern, as you do in your sport, in yoga you'll move the body through every available direction. Sometimes you'll be standing, sometimes you'll be upside-down. Your perspectives will change, and you'll get a fuller sense of your body and what it can do.

Yoga will also balance the work of your training. Sports are goal-oriented. In your workouts, games, and races, you aim to cover a distance, to achieve a time, to beat the competition, or to reach a certain speed or heart rate—*doing* something. Yoga instead emphasizes the process—*being* in the present moment. Think of it as a mental recovery workout.

## INJURY PREVENTION

Endurance athletes occasionally suffer acute injuries—a broken collarbone from a crash, a sprained ankle from a fall—but the majority of our injuries are overuse injuries, stemming from the repetitive nature of endurance sports. When there’s an imbalance in the body that makes it function slightly out of alignment, piling on mile after mile of training can begin to grate on the body, leading to inflammation and excessive wear on the tissues. A regular and well-rounded yoga practice will help bring the body into symmetrical alignment, correcting flexibility and strength imbalances in the soft tissues. By practicing yoga in a class, you give instructors and other students a chance to point out your imbalances. Yoga poses also facilitate a self-awareness that can help you notice your own skeletal misalignments.

Yoga can do wonders in addressing underlying imbalances and instabilities that lead to overuse injuries. But some poses can exacerbate injuries such as carpal tunnel syndrome or herniated disks. Be sure to check with your doctor and physical therapist before beginning a new routine, and let your yoga instructor know about your physical issues. Even acknowledging “I have very tight hamstrings” can keep you from being hurt, both because it gives words to a self-consciousness you carry, giving you explicit permission to be in adapted versions of hamstring stretches, and because it lets your instructor know not to physically adjust you deeper into forward folds.

Finally, yoga will help you relax. The more relaxed you are, the better you will be able to recover from the stresses of training. Constant physical, mental, and emotional stress overtaxes the sympathetic nervous system (which prepares you for fight or flight) and the adrenal glands. Yoga helps you engage the parasympathetic nervous system (which allows you to relax and save energy) and restore balance to the body. This helps you sleep better, recover faster, and enjoy yourself more.

## MENTAL TRAINING

Yoga teaches you to be in an intense situation—say, deep in a backbending pose, or sitting on the floor for thirty minutes straight while trying to quiet your mind—and to bring your awareness to your form and your breath to make the situation manageable. This skill is invaluable when you encounter a similar intensity at lap 3 of 4, mile 18 of 26.2, or hour 8 of 10. In your yoga practice, you’ll voluntarily put yourself into these challenging positions and learn ways to cope. This translates not only to the (also voluntary) experience you have as an athlete but also to the adversities life sends your way.

## Yoga and Your Training Plan

How exactly does yoga fit into your plan? Approach yoga as you approach your sport training. First, determine how yoga fits into your goals for the season, and how it will suit your own strengths and weaknesses, both physically and mentally. If you are planning to focus on speed in shorter races, a more vigorous practice of strength-building poses and conscious breathing exercises will be in order. If you are going long, your yoga practice should concentrate on flexibility, to counter the miles you put in, and on extended meditation and mantra use, for mental strength. If you compete off-road, you’ll want to include plenty of balance and core-strengthening poses and to practice meditation in motion for focus while covering uneven terrain.

The off-season is a good time to get started with a regular yoga practice—and, conversely, during your peak period is not. You can and, in fact, should continue a preestablished yoga routine as you reach your goal race. But just as you (hopefully!) wouldn’t make changes to your equipment or nutrition plan as your race approaches, don’t go trying to achieve new, sophisticated, or deep yoga poses just before a big race. Instead, practice very gentle and familiar poses or limit your yoga to easy breath exercises and meditation.

## YOGA FOR EACH MESOCYCLE

You’ll also need to determine how a yoga class or a home practice fits into your mesocycle goals. What is the focus of your current training block? In the off-season and early season, as you work on base volume at lower intensity and spend time building strength, a more vigorous yoga practice makes sense. This is the time to try a power yoga class and to incorporate sun salutations and other flowing standing series into your home practice. You’ll be complementing the goal of the base period: gaining a big base through low-end aerobic work; encouraging the positive

In the off-season and early season, a more vigorous yoga practice makes sense.

adaptation of the muscles, tendons, and ligaments through a full range of motion; cultivating balance and core strength; and taking a break from the rigors of intense training and trying something new.

As you shift to a build cycle approaching a goal race, tone down your practice. If you’ve become used to a challenging weekly class, it’s fine to keep with it, provided

you continue to have the energy. But the build period is a good time to switch to cooler, gentler forms of stretching, including long holds of floor stretches for the hips and hamstrings. These will help maintain the gains of your base-period yoga practice, keeping you limber as training intensity increases. They will also facilitate recovery. Let yoga be the yin to the yang of your training in the build period, the coolness to the heat of your effort. In your yoga practice, you'll have a chance to observe your body's reactions to your sports training. Pay close attention: You may get the early warning signals of impending injury or overtraining when you listen carefully.

In your peak racing period, dial your yoga back even more. If you've maintained a vigorous practice during your build cycles, now is the time to let it go for a few weeks, just as you'd stay out of the weight room. Be gentle with the poses you do choose, since overdoing it now can affect your race performance. This is the time to practice restorative yoga, using props and enjoying long, relaxing holds of simple supported poses. While physical yoga is gentle in the peak period, you might be able to channel some of your energy and nervous energy into breath exercises and meditation. Be still, breathe, and picture a great race day. Chapter 18 goes into detail on prerace meditations, and Chapter 19 gives more specifics on fitting yoga into mesocycle planning.

## YOGA THROUGHOUT THE WEEK

To plan in even more detail, consider how yoga will fit into your weekly training schedule. If there's a class you plan to attend regularly, consider its energy and time commitment and its results. If it is a vigorous class, it should be treated as a strength workout and scheduled on a day when other efforts are light. As you gain experience and learn how yoga affects your body, you may be able to replace a day of strength-maintenance lifting with a warming, energetic yoga practice, such as power yoga or Ashtanga yoga.

Gentler classes can be scheduled on the same day as harder or breakthrough workouts. They could also be scheduled on a rest day, provided you find them enjoyable and relaxing. Don't sacrifice a true day of rest by working too hard in the studio.

Use the same guidelines in your home practice. If you've had an easy training day and are in a base period, a more energetic routine might suit you. On days when training is hard or long, a quieter, slower routine is in order. The poses you choose for yourself should complement the work of the day, your own weaknesses, and your areas of inflexibility. When you've been swimming, be sure to incorporate shoulder work and lateral stretches. When you've been on the bike, running, or skiing, focus on hips and hamstrings. Any day is a good day for a little core work, provided your back is healthy. If you know a particular muscle group is tight, be sure to address it—

gently—in every session. Chapter 20 suggests some stretches for common problem areas.

As you choose poses for home practice, notice if you gravitate to the same poses or sequences in every session. Question why that is; you might find that you are playing to your strengths and not your weaknesses. Make it a point to incorporate poses that challenge you. Ask an instructor for advice on your alignment or tips for using props to make bugaboo poses more accessible. Just as we discover and address our limiters in training, we should make it a point to identify and improve on our weaknesses in yoga. That goes for mental issues as well as physical ones—and sometimes helps both at once. Notice if a resistance to accept where you are in a pose is reflected in a tightness in the hips, or if an inability to relax and a propensity for worry translate into tight trapezius muscles. (It could be related to bike fit, but it could be more metaphorically true in your body.)

To maximize the results of a short yoga practice, add your *asana* practice after a workout, when you're already warm and loose.

How many sessions should you schedule in a week? As many as you have the time and inclination for. If your schedule is tight—and what endurance athlete doesn't already have a full calendar of obligations with work, family, and training?—making it to class once a week may be a big commitment. If you can, great. If not, that's fine, too. Your home yoga practice doesn't need to last ninety minutes, nor does it need to follow the same sequence you would find in a studio class. Say you've just been out for a tempo run. During the run you found a good groove, working at a comfortably hard pace with good mental focus. You used your breath as an indicator of your effort level, which helped you tune in to your body. Thus you're already centered, and you've warmed up. Follow your cool-down with ten minutes of hip openers, forward folds, and twists, and you've incorporated yoga in your day—not just in the time you spent on the mat, but through the entire workout. See Chapter 20 for some sample home routines.

To address the *when* question even further, when in the day should you do yoga? If you're looking to maximize the results of a short yoga practice, you'll want to add your *asana* practice after a workout, when you're already warm and loose. If you have a little more time, add some sun salutations or other standing poses to your warm-up routine as a dynamic warm-up. If you do, start very gently to give your muscles time to stretch. In general, it's safest to practice when the muscles are already loose and (relatively) pliable. Gentle poses are appropriate anytime you need a little stretch and a return to focus. As you continue to study yoga, you'll find yourself returning to the poses, breath exercises, and meditation throughout your day.

## RISHI FOLDS



**7.20** Rishi (and all folds) should originate from the hips

**7.21** Rishi fold with reverse prayer arms

Using a tighter leg stance than the pyramid pose, rishi folds work the back and outside of the legs and hips. They also engage your core to support your spine and lower legs to keep you stable.

Stand with your feet about twelve inches apart, forming a loose T shape. The right toes point 45 degrees to the right, the right heel points at the arch of the left foot, and the left toes point 45 degrees to the left. Bring your thumbs to the hip crease, where your pants bunch up at the top of your legs. Inhale and rotate your torso over your right leg. Exhale and press your thumbs into your legs as you draw the spine long and forward (Figure 7.20), stopping when you feel an appropriate edge of intensity in your legs or when your spine is parallel to the ground. After a round of breath here, inhale, press down into your feet, and return to standing. Step the right foot behind the left and repeat to the left side.

Once this feels stable, you can add a core challenge by taking various arm positions. In increasing order of intensity, options include prayer pose at the heart; hands to opposite elbows behind the back; reverse prayer position (Figure 7.21); and fingers interlaced behind the back, reaching upward. As you lean forward, make sure you're protecting your knees and not allowing them to hyperextend.

## WIDE-LEGGED FORWARD FOLD



**7.22** Wide-legged forward fold

**7.23** Wide-legged forward fold with twist



Taking the legs wide into a forward fold works the center of the hamstrings, the inner hamstrings, the adductors, and the outer edges of the lower leg. While the wide-legged forward fold (*prasarita padottanasana*) is more passive than active in nature, it fits well in a sequence of standing poses, so let's explore it here. (Its cousin, the standing forward fold *uttanasana*, is described in Chapter 8.)

Start with a wide stance, outer edges of the feet parallel. This will mean your big toes angle in slightly. If this puts pressure on your knees or feels too intense for your outer ankles, look for parallel alignment of the inner feet. Do not point your toes away from each other, because that will put far too much pressure on the inner edges of your knees as you fold.

Inhale to bring the spine to mountain alignment, then exhale to fold forward from the hips, tilting the entire pelvis forward. Your knees stay soft as your tailbone lifts and your head moves away from the hips and downward (Figure 7.22). After a few breaths, once you're sure you have truly angled the hips forward, let your spine relax.

Your arms could take any of the configurations described for pyramid pose. Play around, finding the best combination of chest and shoulder stretch and leg stretch.

While you're here, why not add a twist for the spine? Bring your hands to the floor beneath your shoulders, then slide the right hand to the floor beneath your face. Keeping your spine long, raise your left hand toward the sky and take your gaze with it (Figure 7.23). If you feel torque in the left knee, you can now let the toes angle toward the front left corner of the mat. Be sure to return your feet to parallel before moving to the other side. The left hand replaces the right, which reaches up as you rotate in the other direction.

This is an excerpt from *The Athlete's Guide to Yoga: An Integrated Approach to Strength, Flexibility, and Focus* by Sage Rountree.

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