

Yoga for Runners

Author - <http://www.therunningbug.co.uk/>

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Yoga can help runners become stronger and more flexible. Find out how yoga can make you a better runner.

As runners, we all know there's nothing like bounding through the parks to get the heart rate up, tone the body, and de-stress. Paradoxically, though, some of the most active people pounding the pavements are also the least able to move when it comes time to bend down and unlace their trainers.

While running provides a great workout for the heart and lungs, the body is only taken through a limited range of motion. Depending on your build and gait this can lead to tight, overworked muscles in hamstrings, hip flexors, low back, calves, ITB band or, well.... fill in the blank.

Correcting alignment problems and cultivating a more balanced range of motion helps avoid injury and allows the body to work more efficiently. Conscientious athletes already know this, and might divide their training between running, strength work, stretching and mental preparation.

And this is where yoga enters the picture. Although often associated with mere stretching, yoga can improve flexibility *and* strength, as well as helping cultivate the right frame of mind needed to pull off a competitive racing strategy.

Yoga, meaning "union", is the oldest known science of self development. Hatha yoga, the physical branch, is a system of exercise and breathing used to achieve physical harmony and well being. But Hatha is only one part of a complex belief system that involves transcending your mind's inner chit chat, focusing on the present and accepting the outcome of your actions.

There's been a lot of hype about yoga in the past 10 years. While this has brought many curious people to the mat,

others are still reluctant to give yoga a try. Often they're intimidated by images of gymnastic looking girls in elaborate backbends. Others may object to the spiritual system or the occasional smattering of new age jargon. Some might be confused by Sanskrit pose names or unsure about which style to try. Certainly there is now a wider range of yoga styles than ever before, but this is exactly why there is probably a style and a teacher to suit everyone.

When fitting a yoga programme into your running training, either "bookend" your run with a brief practice (dynamic practice such as sun salutations before running and/or slow, static postures afterwards) or find a local class to attend between runs. And you don't have to pay top dollar for a yogi superstar to come to your home. You may be fortunate enough to find someone wonderful at your local leisure centre, church hall or gym. A "good" teacher is simply one whose classes *you* enjoy and who makes you feel better in your body - not worse!

Yoga culture adopts a "start as you are", non-aggressive approach, so if you keep your ego in check and go easy at first, you'll be sure to avoid laming your first downward facing dog!

For those more familiar with stretching terminology, yoga styles might loosely fall into categories as follows:

Static stretching=Iyengar yoga. With strong focus on alignment, postures are often held for several minutes. This allows the Golgi tendon organ (which detects muscle tension) to be stimulated, allowing for a slow, deep stretch in the muscle without injury.

Passive stretching=Yin yoga. Postures are held with the muscles relaxed, allowing for a gentle sustained stretch in connective tissue .

Dynamic stretching=Astanga Yoga. Postures flow dynamically in synch with the breath and are generally held for 5-8 breathes before moving to the next pose in the sequence.

Many classes these days are a blend of styles. Generally, a well-rounded yoga class will take the body through a variety of ranges and planes of motion (forward bends, side bends, balancing, back extensions, twists, inversions) and relaxation.

As bipeds we tend to develop lower body strength and upper body instability. A dynamic practice that includes sun salutations, arm balancing, and inversions, develops lower body flexibility and upper body strength. This is a great practice for anyone continually "legging it".

On top of obvious gains in flexibility, working barefoot in standing yoga postures and balances also strengthens the ankles and arches. With healthy connective tissue in the

feet and shins, the feet become better shock absorbers. Over pronation and supination maybe even be improved. Orthotics aside, a healthy foot pattern often helps prevent pain further up the body in the Achilles, shins, knees, ITB and hips.

What separates yoga from a stretch routine is awareness of the breath. Attentive breathing improves concentration, calms the mind, creates a rhythm for the practice, recruits the appropriate muscle groups for the posture and acts as a monitor of effort. Good posture will help your breathing and good breathing will help your posture. Hatha yoga is about finding balance between opposites, so each posture should maintain a balance between the opposing qualities of effort and ease. Both are desirable qualities in running, as studies have shown that we slow down if we tense up. You may run faster when you care less about the result.

With time you may find that the tenets of yoga begin to shape your outlook on running itself. In The Bhagavad Gita, an ancient Hindu text, teaches that the wise warrior lets go of results and focuses on action alone. This philosophy allows an athlete to work hard but and enables him or her to move on in the face of a set back.

The sage Pantanjali defines yoga as stilling the “fluctuations of the mind.” Though possibly the hardest to master, this part of the practice can help athletes stay confident, using concentration and breathing to overcoming negative mental back chat. Other elements of yoga philosophy are particularly pertinent to runners, too. Adopting an attitude of ahimsa (not harming), for example, or aparigraha (non-covetousness) will make you less likely to push through an injury to your detriment.

But how can we maintain our yogic sensibility without losing our competitive edge once we've bent down with ease and laced up our shoes again? It's worth remembering that competition is not the same as fighting. The word comes from the Latin "competre" which means "to seek together". Anyone who's ever tried a running event will know how racing unites people.

So if you thought you had to choose between the track and the mat, think again. Try to incorporate a yoga class into your routine. You might not get into lotus position on the first day, but at least it'll give you something to do when all your socks are in the wash.