

Benefits of Yoga for Athletes and Exercises Broken Down by Sport

- Regular practice of yoga postures helps to stabilize tendons and muscles, which helps to avoid acute and repetitive stress injuries. Yoga is about balance and both mentally and physically, the practice of yoga helps the practitioner to balance mental and physical activity. Bringing a balance into sports training is the most effective way at preventing acute and chronic injuries as well as preventing burnout. The benefits of relaxation from yoga help body and mind to mentally and physically recover from sports training and competition. Allowing your body a reprieve from the constant physical, emotional, and mental stress of competition is key in maintaining optimum performance and wellbeing on and off the playing field.

Early Practice Mindfulness for Athletes

- **Body and breath scan** - While playing a sport or on the yoga mat, bring awareness to your muscles and scan your body from the tips of your fingers down to your toes, making a mental note of any tense areas. Use your breath to breathe in fresh energy and to breathe out the toxins that build up in tense and stiff muscles.
- Note that when on your yoga mat, the goal in relaxing poses is to clear out tension entirely, not to shift it from one area of the body to another. Take note of any areas of tension that are having difficulty releasing and send extra breath to those regions; give tense areas full permission to release and relax into a pose.
- **Be clear as to your intention of the practice (in your sport or on the yoga mat)** - Is today an easy practice; working on mindfulness, relaxation, flexibility? Is today a more vigorous practice; challenging yourself with holding poses for longer, strengthening exercises, or trying new poses? Is today a day that you want to focus on balancing poses? Or is today a day to work on being less judgmental of yourself, to really become aware of your breathing, and to find compassion towards yourself?
- In your sport, is today a lighter practice focusing on recovering and recuperating after a game/race? Is today a challenging practice, focusing on vigorous and intense activity in order to improve your training?
- **Honor your limits** – Never push or hold poses that are painful. There is a difference between intensity and pain. Do not use your competitive nature that you may exhibit in athletics in order to push through and muscle into and out of yoga poses. Yoga is not a competitive sport and should not be painful. If you experience pain, back off from the asana, return to your breath, and pay

attention to your alignment as well as noting the areas that are in pain. Never work through pain. Live the ego out of your yoga practice.

Yoga warm-ups (can practice anytime and for any sport)

- **Seated position** – Often athletes need to sit on a block because of tight knees and hips.
- **Cat/cow position** – spinal extension and flexion
- **Lateral reaching** – child’s stretching arms out in front to one side and the other, seated with arms overhead leaning to one side and then another, or crescent moon (standing and arms overhead leaning to one side and then another)
- **Threading the needle** – Shoulder stretch. Start in table top pose and lift one arm at a time threading the arm underneath the other so that the arm and shoulder are twisting on the floor
- **Pretzel twist** – spinal stretch
- **Standing position** – twisting from side to side with arms in an airplane pose (spread out in a T position)

Balance Poses – improve core strength, leg strength, and mental focus (as well as balance) – all of these can be done by a wall for balance (balance poses are key for cross-country runners, hockey players, skiers, dancers, or any sport requiring balance whether on trail, ice, or snow)

- **Tree** – foot at ankle or thigh, not at the knee
- **Eagle and chair pose** – quad strengthening and eagle pose arms stretches the shoulder blades
- **Dancer Pose** – Deep stretch for the hip flexors, chest opener (through a slight backbend), hamstring stretch for the standing leg.

Standing poses – Quadricep strengthening, hip strengthening, and flexibility (almost all sports rely on leg strength and flexibility especially for injury prevention)

- **Warrior I** – Stretches the hip flexors of the back leg
- **Warrior II** – opening from Warrior I increases stretching sensation along the adductors of the inner thigh. Never let the knee sink beyond the foot/ankle

- **Warrior III** – Hold warrior III to increase core strength or move in and out of warrior III as a warmup exercise. Arm variations can increase or decrease the intensity. Any lower back issues, refrain from extending arms out in front.
- **Stretching sequences – Triangle, Extended Side Angle, Pyramid Pose** (for core strength, keep back elevated or parallel to the floor. For a passive back, fold forward over the front leg).
 - o Triangle – helpful to practice with back lined up against a wall – backs of both shoulders against the wall and lifted hand back of palm against the wall
 - o Side angle – lateral stretch of the inner thigh, while engaging the legs in a lunge strengthening pose.
 - o Pyramid – Staple of athletes routine. Stretch of the hips and the hamstrings. If interlace the arms at base of the spine and reach up overhead this can stretch the shoulders as well
- **Revolved Triangle** – Can use a block on the inside or outside of the front foot. Deep stretch of the chest and the hips along with the IT band.

Lunges and Variations (great poses for runners in building leg strength in the beginning of the season or off-season and the easier variations for deeper stretching during season as a complement to training sessions)

- **Crescent Lunge** – back knee on the mat – intense hip flexor stretch
- **Twisted low lunge** – deepens the stretch in the outer hip of the front leg and the hip flexors of the back leg
- **Quadriceps Stretch in a Lunge** – A strap can help with the connection of reaching the foot with the back hand. Make sure that you are not balanced on the kneecap or use blanket, fold the mat. Move bodyweight onto the quadriceps
- **Runners lunge (toes down or up, back knee on the floor)**

Shoulder Stretches (great stretches for sports relying on upper body strength and flexibility in order to keep muscles supple and at ease; swimming, tennis, golf, baseball, hockey, crew)

- **Interlaced fingers in front with a cat back**– releases upper back muscles
- **Seated or standing** – opposite elbows behind your back – chest opener or interlace hands base of the spine as a chest opener
- **Half dog or puppy dog** – intense stretch underneath the armpits
- **Shoulder strap stretches** – hold the strap out in front more than shoulder width apart, reach it up over your and on an inhale and exhale as the strap slowly moves behind your head. Can repeat this several times.
- **Wall shoulder stretches** – create an L-shape with your palms pressing into the wall. Stretches shoulders, hamstrings, and releases back tension

- **Arm stretch on the wall** – extend whole arm back against the wall for an intense shoulder opening (can play around with the degrees of the arm against the wall)

Lower leg stretches (great stretches for all sports using lower body strength, especially important for runners to stretch out plantar fascia)

- **Malasana (wide-legged squat)** – inner groin muscles and thigh opening
- **Toe stretch and plantar fascia stretch** – both palms planted down and balancing on the balls of the feet, slowly roll forward and back to stretch toes and fascia

Backbends and Chest Opener (sports that require a lot of hunching over (catchers, crew, etc) benefit from chest openers and backbends to counter the hunched posture and stiffness that can develop)

- **Knees to chest**
- **Happy baby pose**
- **Child's pose**
- **Supported fish** (bolster at the base of the spine)
- **Bow pose** – using a strap
- **Bridge and restorative bridge**

Core strengthening (helps to prevent back injury; nearly all sports require back strength. Balancing back strength with core strength is crucial to injury prevention)

- **Plank pose or modified plank pose**
- **Forearm plank pose**
- **Boat pose**

Opening the front of the body (poses that stretch out the front of the foot and ankles along with the inner thighs are great for any sport)

- **Reclining Cobbler (supta baddha konasana)** – Bolster length wise at the base of the spine, soles of the feet together and knees apart and on top of blocks
- **Hero sit (use a blanket, block, bolster)**

Forward Fold and Seated Stretches (folds and seated postures are good for any sports independent of the sport relying more on upper body or lower body)

strength; keeping the back supple, hamstrings, intercostal muscles, the adductors, and the muscles in the mid-back between the shoulder blades loose is highly beneficial in athletic performance)

- **Staff pose**
- **Head to knee folding over extended leg** – hamstring muscles
- **Head to knee and opening up to the side** – side stretch of the intercostal muscles and mid-back
- **Wide-legged forward fold** – stretches inner thighs. Can use a bolster or block between your legs
- **Frog pose**– inner thigh and groin stretch
- **Cow face fold** – can put a blanket between legs to protect knees
- **Cow face arms** – can use a strap

Reclining strap stretches (all lying supine on back)

- **Strap around the foot lifted up facing the ceiling, other leg knee bent sole of foot on ground** – keep shoulderblades firmly placed on the mat
- **Calf stretch** – extend leg straight out in front of you and heel slightly off of the mat (dorsiflex foot)
- **Hamstring stretch** – Strap around the foot, keep head down and slowly stretch the hamstring
- **Inner and outer thigh stretch using the strap**
- **Reverse pigeon pose (figure four pose lying on back)**
- **Knees down reclining twist supine**
- **Knees down prone twist hugging a bolster**

Svasana

- **Traditional** – legs extended out in front and feet open to the sides, palms facing up at the sides
- **Knees bent relaxing on a bolster under the knees**