

Yoga for Athletes

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Introduction

Yoga is a science; it is the balance between the three H energies ‘head’ (intellect), ‘heart’ (emotion) and ‘hands’ (action). *Yoga* is beneficial for everyone and can be practised to enhance various activities including intense physical exercise. As a triathlete, I find that incorporating *Yoga* into my training schedule brings balance, it assists in performance, in avoiding injuries and in relaxing the mind.

Through a triathlon training program, there are some recoveries days off and I find that practising gentle *Yoga* on those days helped me calm down, stretching my muscles and relaxing without feeling anxious that I didn’t train myself on those days for the upcoming event (the Sydney Triathlon).

There are many types of *Yoga* but I believe the most beneficial for the improvement of intense exercise are *Hatha Yoga* and *Yoga Nidra*.

Definitions

Hatha Yoga is the science of body purification and awakening of pranic energy to bring body purification and mental stability. It is based on ancient tantric even though it was developed from the 6th century AD.

Yoga Nidra is also based on ancient tantric theory. It is a relaxation tool that brings your conscious on the borderline of awakened and sleeping state. It can be used to remove the subconscious program (for example bad habits) and reprogram by using visualization.

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Benefits

The benefits of *Hatha Yoga* and *Yoga Nidra* are:

- improvement of concentration and focus which is much needed for excellence in any sport competition
- control of thoughts and emotions that could interfere with concentration
- peaceful and stability of the mind for a healthy and stable body
- increase body awareness for better performance, knowing your limits to avoid injuries which is the athlete's worst nightmare
- improve the flexibility and strength of the body
- relaxation and gentle asanas for recovery
- balance of the body and mind essential for stability to handle competition nervousness.

Which practice for what purpose

Hatha Yoga

1. Asanas

Asanas are body posture maintained in a relaxed manner even if the posture is physically demanding. It is a great practice to enhance physical performance because it builds strength and stamina. These postures may be practised as a warm-up, to prevent an injury, to strengthen, to do a physical check of your body, to assist in the recovery stage of your body and to prepare yourself for meditation.

Asanas have numerous beneficial effects for athletes from strengthening a particular body part to improving the efficiency of internal organs.

As an example practising *Paschimottanasan* (full forward bend) encourages full stretch of the legs, stretch of the back, arms, purification of the nadis (energy channels) and improvement of their function, activation of the *kundalini* (dormant energy), pressure on internal organs which helps the process of the digestive system.

Or again, practising *Garudasan* (eagle pose) increases blood supply to all the muscles of arms and legs. I personally used this asana to strengthen my ankles

because they do get a lot of stress from running. Another positive point with *Garudasan* is that it is a balancing pose, really good for concentration and focus.

2. Pranayama

Pranayama means ‘control of *prana* (the vital force), it is a breathing control technique of this energy. With the practice of *pranayama*, all the *chakras* (psychic energy centres) are awakened. It can cure physical disorders and increase the functioning of the brain. It is a simple process but should be practised under the guidance of a teacher because if it is not practised properly it can have negative effects.

Athletes require a high-quality focus and concentration, and a healthy body. *Pranayama* can improve those qualities if it is practised regularly. For example, *Amrit pranayama* (deep belly breathing) improves the focus tremendously and increases vital energy. Each incoming breath brings fresh Universal energy into the body’s system and remains stored in the cells of the body. Each outgoing breath carries away waste and bad thoughts from the body’s system.

3 Mudras

Mudras are psychic gestures showing a particular state of consciousness, emotion or attitude. It can alter a state of mind, thoughts and emotions to help with the control of the mind, with concentration and focus. *Mudras* are used during asanas and breathing exercises.

4. Bandhas

Bandhas are energy locks used to control the flow of *prana* and therefore balance the energy in the body which enhances performance. It has the same benefits as *mudras*. *Bandhas* are used during the breathing exercise.

5. Shatkarmas

Shatkarmas are cleansing techniques to purify the body. These are specifics and I cannot imagine an athlete practising them as part of his/her training program because it could affect other aspects of their training eg. what if it makes him/her sick. The exception may be for *agnisardhouti* (contraction and release of the abdomen towards the spine) as it is easy to perform: this cleansing method

increases the circulation of blood to the digestive organs and takes away impurities, improving the efficiency of all organs.

Yoga Nidra

(a) Relaxation

Yoga Nidra is a process of complete mental and physical relaxation. It brings meaningful rest while revitalizing the body and mind. After weeks of intense training and just before an important event, athletes could practice *Yoga Nidra* to control their nerves and emotions and be able to rest before the event. It would also bring greater mental strength and self-confidence. All they need to do is lie down in savasana (the corpse pose) and listen to the instructions of a *Yoga Nidra* CD (all other senses should be inactive), it takes about 30-40 minutes.

(b) Visualization

Yoga Nidra can be used as a visualization process of the past by purifying the memory, reinforcing the best from past performances, or changing bad habits that are automatically reoccurring in the present.

Visualization can also influence the boosting of confidence in future events and faith in the athlete's abilities to face challenges or again to project an event.

Conclusion

I am positive that *Hatha Yoga* and *Yoga Nidra* would influence athletes performance and would be of great help to keep stable general health and stable mind. From personal experience, what I find difficult is to fit Yoga into an already intense training program but knowing the beneficial effects, I would recommend anyone taking on a sporting challenge to practice Yoga to strengthen, relax, prevent injuries and be able to enjoy the challenge with great confidence.

Reference:

1. The Runner's *Yoga* Book: A Balanced Approach to Fitness 1 Jun 1990.
2. The Athlete's Guide to Yoga: An Integrated Approach to Strength, Flexibility & Focus (Mountaineers Outdoor Expert) 15 Dec 2007.