Yoga for Athletes and

in Sport

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How a targeted yoga practice can help improve sports performance

Yoga is frequently thought of as a place to go to for improved flexibility and, whilst yoga afficionados do indeed seem to enjoy a bit of stretching there is a lot more to this wonderful discipline than first meets the eye. Alongside seemingly spectacular flamboyant contortions of the body in the form of balances, twists, backbends and inversions comes also the opportunity to hold oneself supine with bolsters and eye pillows for company. The path to enlightenment may also be paved with philosophical and anatomical content and a deeper understanding of shared sense of community, others come along just for the heck of it, not knowing or caring why yoga ramps up the feel good factor.  Whatever your thing, improved breathing, mindfulness, weight management, stress reduction and better movement are just some of the many benefits associated with a regular yoga practice.  A yoga programme devised specifically with sportspeople in mind can do all of these things but also goes one step further in considering the demands that a specific sport may place on the body.

Alongside the joys of a dedicated sports practice can bring comes a raft of potential pitfalls. In the pursuit of medals, trophies or recognition or personal pleasure, pushing oneself to the max can all take its toll. Tight hamstrings, shortened hip flexors, rotator cuff injuries, cruciate ligament tears, stressed out joints and the body being in a heightened state of arousal long after the main event has passed, are just some of the physical and emotional responses in the sportsperson’s repertoire. Being aware of body compensations, and restrictions is a great way to start understanding what needs to be addressed. The athletic population may, as mentioned, have these limitations in abundance, either by design, default or unwittingly made on purpose. Measuring range of motion (ROM) is a place from which to identify and then work forward to correct dysfunctions and muscle imbalances. In particular, yoga gives you the opportunity to gain an awareness of the fact that you have asked your body to move in such a way. Now, you need to give it permission to work in alternate ways. Here the yogic principle of ‘ahimsa’ comes to the fore, being easy on oneself and the notion of surrender. Activating the parasympathetic part of the central nervous system, the rest and digest mode, may be in stark contrast to that which plays out in the sporting arena or may simply go against the grain of those with a competitive nature making complete states of relaxation hardwork and difficult to achieve, especially amongst high achievers always on the move. Here the teacher’s ability to create a calm and inviting atmosphere is relevant and conducive to the end result. It also means teaching the student to move and hold the body in a specific way using repetition and of course, most importantly, the breath to guide the body. It involves changing the pace of movement during the session, allowing time to mitigate the stretch response so muscle fibres can relax and lengthen. But it is pertinent to note here, that increased flexibility though commonplace in yoga, may not be what all athletes need. Those with hypermobile bodies for example, may benefit from a session focused on strengthening exercises rather than flexibility ones which could simply just exacerbate a fragile joint.

Yoga performed incorrectly or going into a pose just because one can or because it looks ‘good’, making compensatory movements so as to appear to be making the pose, where the body is held in an unstable position or attempting too advanced asanas before understanding the basics, can not only be uncomfortable, it can be downright dangerous. Developing body awareness and learning how to park the ego outside the studio is thus a necessity. Patterning good functional movement, in the form of spinal articulation, dynamic warm ups and slower cool downs with a decent savasana at the end and incorporating strength, stability, gliding and flexibility into sequences enables the sportsperson to move through their full range of motion and thus move optimally. Targeted yoga sessions aim to improve, maintain or prevent further deterioration of the athletic body in the context of the sport practised. In doing so it aims to increase performance capabilities, reduce injury, aid recovery time and extend the potential career of the athlete.

A targeted yoga inspired programme also considers the athlete themselves, their own personal sporting narrative investigating highs and lows of their own performance and their team if that applies and of course, other physical and mental demands of the sport. Understanding the geometry of the sport alongside improved proprioception of oneself e.g. knowing where your foot is in relation to a ball, or where your opponents and team mates are in setting the scene and having an advantage in terms of being able to open up or close down positions in order to maximise opportunity for success. Self-confidence which comes with self- awareness, utilising one’s strengths and working on one’s weaknesses tempers arrogance. Placing one’s trust in knowing what to do and when to do it and having the ability to bring the body back to an stable athletic stance or stable emotional state when tough decisions need to be made or in preparation for the next move, this is where yoga can assist. Other factors affecting performance include team dynamics, including working closely with those coaches or medical team whose player you may be working with. High profile sportspeople may have additional sponsorship pressures or subject to intense media scrutiny. Some may be at the top of their game not wishing to be toppled off or they may be on the bench or out due to injury. It is helpful for us to know how they are doing during training sessions and rest periods and the impact that social networks and personal events may have on their lives.  By aiming to understand the athlete in a holistic way and working towards building a relationship based on trust and information sharing, so the yoga teacher:student relationship can blossom and a really meaningful bespoke programme can be devised.

We are looking to improve the athlete’s game not turn them into yogis per se, though this will be inevitable at some level, yoga is a persuasive discipline. Communicating in their language is therefore important as is understanding how the student absorbs information. Demonstrating poses which we know are beyond their realms of capability or baffling the student with Sanskrit and expressions such as ‘open the heart’ may be useful in some circumstances but not always, and instead may lead to feelings of inadequacy and a desire to give up. Remember this cohort is likely to come to class with a kaleidoscope of pre-existing conditions or newly developed ones, and where you meet them on this journey will affect the type of sessions offered. We need to find the balance to keep the student engaged. This means being observant and reading between the lines, looking as much to the silences as the smiles, to the grimaces and breathing patterns when in a pose to take them in and out, to provide space for contemplative reflection. It means also simply asking direct questions about how they are feeling, getting them to check in with themselves and so encouraging mindfulness of what may have affected them that day or month or whatever. It involves asking what they might like to achieve from a yoga session with you, realistically what you can offer and both working together to help them reach their goals.

Trusting you have put this all in place, teaching yoga to athletes, with them in mind, can result in a happier, more productive human being. A person, who happens to do yoga but who hopefully evolves over time and recognises the benefits of such a discipline, not only to them in their sporting capacity but to them and society at large. So whether you are an athlete or sportsperson or not, next time you are on the mat, think about what you are doing and perhaps more importantly why you are doing it. Self-awareness is after all a key tenet of yoga and, as with all good sporting events, brings much enlightenment to all.

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