

THE 7 WAYS YOGA BENEFITS ATHLETES

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Working with athletes is an art and a science. The art is to appreciate their motivation, attitudes and beliefs. The science is to understand their movement, sport-specific demands and the environment within which they have to work and perform.

The art of getting an athlete to practice yoga means knowing how best to communicate the benefits to them. If they can't see how it is going to help improve their performance, they are less likely to try or maintain a regular yoga practice.

Understanding how to introduce and apply sport-specific yoga to athletes directly into their training environment is where the science comes in.

Over the last 15 years I have worked with athletes from all ages and abilities and delivered sports-specific yoga to them in different types of environments from Olympic weightlifting gyms, to working trackside and poolside. I would like to share with you some of the ways that I have applied the benefits of yoga to athletes and how our Yoga Sports Coaches™ deliver value to the sports people they work with.

A male athlete in a white singlet and blue shorts is in a starting crouch on a track, gripping the starting blocks with a determined expression. The background is a light blue gradient.

How is yoga going to help me?

The biggest question that athletes ask me is, 'how is doing yoga going to help me in my sport'? I have found the best way to respond is by asking athletes questions about the specifics of their sport, the structure of their training sessions and what it is they think they need. Getting an athlete to talk about their sport is not only a great way to understand where you can add value, but also to learn from the athlete too. The art is to listen, the science is how to apply what you have heard.

I have put together 7 main areas to highlight where yoga adds value. It is important to note that there are many other areas where yoga can benefit athletes.

If you are already working with athletes, or want to, then I hope that you will find the information below also of benefit to you.

THE 7 WAYS YOGA BENEFITS ATHLETES

How sports-specific yoga can be applied into an athletic environment.

1. YOGA AND AWARENESS

HERE'S HOW IT WORKS IN SPORT...

By helping an athlete develop an awareness of self can also help them develop an awareness of others. This is essential in team sports where the need for proprioceptive awareness is crucial.

Initially, athletes start cultivating a sense of awareness of joint position and motion in space, through sensory feedback from the body. What occurs overtime is the athlete starts to deepen their awareness of self and begins to explore aspects of their own nature.

This opens up a whole new area of discovery for the individual, offering opportunities to integrate this level of awareness, not just into their performance, but also their everyday life.

This is one of the many interpretations to the meaning of yoga - the union of self through awareness and discovery. Yoga is a tool to help navigate that path.



2. YOGA AND BREATHING STRATEGIES

HERE'S HOW IT WORKS IN SPORT...

By assessing the athlete's breathing patterns, it is possible to identify the recruitment of the primary and global respiratory muscles that impact on the overall efficiency of breathing. This has an influence on the athlete's ability to perform to their highest level.

Getting a broader profile of the athlete is an important factor when considering other influences that may impact on their performance. For example, discovering that the athlete experiences anxiety prior to an event. In my experience, athletes have resigned themselves to the fact that performance nerves go with the territory, however the Yoga Sports Science® interventions that our Yoga Sports Coaches™ have implemented have supported athletes in developing breathing strategies to reduce performance nerves.

We have also provided athletes in endurance sports with a number of ways that they can learn to adapt their physiology at a low-level of intensity on the yoga mat, which teaches them how to switch their breathing in a strategic way in their sport.



3. YOGA AND MOVEMENT EFFICIENCY

HERE'S HOW IT WORKS IN SPORT...

Using sport-specific yoga can help to establish fluid and economical movement. First we address the functional stability and structural integrity of movement at the athlete's joints. Then we address the functional mobility and range of movement of the global muscles surrounding those joints.

This helps to establish fluid and economical movement. It is important to note that this is always tailored to the individual's biomechanics and sport specific requirements.



4. YOGA AND INJURY PREVENTION

HERE'S HOW IT WORKS IN SPORT...

The introduction of a sport-specific yoga warm up ensures that the body and mind are fully prepared prior to the activity. The benefits of a short sport-specific yoga warm up are to help prepare the muscles and joints for more demanding loading, to connect the breath to low level movement that replicates the movement requirements in the sport and begin synchronizing movement and breath with any sports-specific performance affirmations.

The introduction of a sport-specific yoga cool down ensures that the body has sufficient time to recover post-activity. The benefits to a short sport-specific yoga cool down are to help reduce the build up of lactic acid, prevent muscle soreness, reduce the risk of injury and prepare the body for the next day's training or event.

This encourages the athlete to develop a mindset that they have the performance advantage and are ahead of their competitors.

A regular and appropriately varied Yoga Sports Science® program throughout the athlete's periodized training schedule helps to support the athlete and underpin the demands of their sport.



5. YOGA AND DYNAMIC BODY CONTROL

HERE'S HOW IT WORKS IN SPORT...

Developing neuromuscular control through the application of sports-specific yoga sequencing techniques helps prepare the muscles to move and respond to rapid or unexpected directional changes.

Integrating breathing and practicing low-level intensity movement patterns on the mat helps athletes to develop and enhance the links between the body and the brain.

The low-level moves that athletes practice on the mat transfers to the high-level movement demands of their sport.



6. YOGA AND POWER OUTPUT

HERE'S HOW IT WORKS IN SPORT...

Initiating movement from the ground upwards and with sequential muscle activation through the kinetic chain supports the athlete and helps the Yoga Sports Coach™ identify structural imbalances that can impact on how effectively the athlete is generating force and power.

Consideration to the breathing requirements of the sport influences how the sports-specific yoga techniques are applied to the athlete in order to maximize power output.



7. YOGA AND RECOVERY

HERE'S HOW IT WORKS IN SPORT...

Introducing a yoga relaxation and recovery session to athletes can help them to experience a greater sense of calm and an improved feeling of well-being. In my experience athletes have used their relaxation time to unwind by playing games on hand-held devices and watching movies. While the athlete may be taking time out from physical and mental training, the mind is still being stimulated and the central nervous system is still functioning in the 'excitatory' neurotransmission mode. (1)

A simple 5 minute recovery session, using progressive muscle relaxation techniques helps athletes experience the contrast between muscles that are consciously made tense on an inhale and then consciously relaxed with a lengthened exhale.



7. YOGA AND RECOVERY CONTINUED...

Working through the limbs and linking in performance affirmations, makes this an effective practice to help athletes reduce stress, promote a greater sense of well-being, regroup from their previous performance activity and feel better prepared for the next day's training or event.

If you would like to learn more about how yoga benefits athletes, then contact Hayley Winter and the team at The Institute of Yoga Sports Science® Email: admin@yogasportscience.com



Hayley Winter is the founder and director of The Institute of Yoga Sports Science®. She is a Yoga Sports Scientist, creator of the YSS 40-Hour Foundation Course: Yoga for Athletes, as well as the YSS 200 and YSS 300-Hour Yoga Sports Coaching™ Courses. She is co-developer of the YSS Research Method, author of the YSS Syllabus and Course publications, An International lecturer with a Masters education in applied sports and exercise biomechanics. She has practiced and taught yoga for 30 years and is passionate about making the science of yoga accessible to all types of learners.

References:

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If you love yoga and sport and want to turn
your passion into a career, then contact us today!