

Yoga Benefits for Fitness & Sports

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Introduction:

Many people enjoy sporting activities both for pleasure and as a means of achieving fitness, to tone up the body and feel invigorated, which in turn leads to mental relaxation. However, as sport is becoming more and more competitive, sports have also become a career with an emphasis on material gain and the desire to win at any cost. Therefore, it is important to find solutions to the changing sports scene of today. A sports person needs four basic qualities: speed, skill, strength and stamina. To achieve them in professional sports the daily life of a sports person calls for discipline in training, a balanced diet, a balanced lifestyle and an inner focus and determination. To this another element can also be added - Yoga. Yoga is a holistic science, and as sport is not a purely physiological phenomenon, but a complex interplay of the mind and body. Yoga is an ideal means of reaching and maintaining the peak of physical and mental performance.

Asana (Yoga asana):

To date, sports science has been mainly concerned with asana. The practice of asana can contribute greatly to the success and well-being of all sports people. However, it is not only asana that can help in this way. In yoga the mind is also trained to reflect from moment to moment and not to be caught in the movement of the moment. The trained mind is in a state of quietness, which develops inner strength, thus refining practice and performance. Ultimately, the result of the event is not within the athlete's control. The breathing practices of pranayama as taught in yoga are very important for an athlete. By optimising the control and capacity of the breath, they help one to realise that energy is not solely physical in nature, but there are untapped resources that can be brought into play, which helps in overcoming mental and physical strain.

Pratyahara is called the withdrawal of the senses. It leads to a sense of detachment which helps in accumulating stress and prevents further excessive build-up, particularly in the heat of competition. Stress is ever present in any sport; it is part of the stimulation of competition and one of the reasons for participating. It is needed for proper stimulation of the body and mind, but if the response is in any way too little, the person and performance will suffer. Stress at any level has to be successfully managed.

Dharana, the ability to focus continually at one point, has the potential to help the athlete bring his body and mind to a state of total poise and stability in all levels of experience. When the athlete is so focused in the act, perfection flows; the distinction between the self and the sport is lost. He or she transcends the limitations of the mind and the body in the context of the limitlessness of the universe. The athlete can strive to reach the chosen goal. One of the most important aspects for the athlete to understand is the SWAN principle. SWAN is an acronym where 'S' stands for Strengths, 'W' for Weaknesses, 'A' for Ambitions, and 'N' for Needs. This is a technique of contemplation or reflection which allows a close analysis of those qualities that can make the difference between success and failure. It is necessary to assess one's strengths accurately and how they can be expanded and become even stronger. Similarly, knowing and understanding one's weaknesses and how they can be overcome is equally important and can help in the approach to a training program. Ambitions have to be understood in the context of one's strengths in order to be realistic about one's aims and desires. Knowing one's needs, what is necessary to get the best out of sporting activities and realise the true nature of success.

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Preventing injuries:

Preventative steps play an important role in saving an individual's sporting career. The barriers of ignorance, misconception and too much eagerness to reach the top level in the shortest duration of time should be addressed by education amongst coaches and players equally. Yoga is useful for all types of sports to help prevent injuries in the first place. First, there is extra agility, which helps to avoid damage, provides more strength and improves a player's ability to react to a situation. Then, yoga helps a sports person to feel and understand the body processes more accurately, thereby learning what the body needs. By understanding this, an athlete can work on areas that need attention with confidence.

Types of practices:

Yoga's role is a special one.. Yoga postures work all sides of a limb and help to knit the muscle fibers, building resilience to injury. By anticipating areas of the body that are subject to stress, sports people can use yoga effectively to pre-strengthen areas of concern. Yogic practices can be used in different ways, for different specific sporting purposes, and can be categorised as: yoga supplemental exercises (YSE), yoga compensation exercises (YCE) and yoga regeneration exercises (YRE).

Yoga supplemental exercises:

These are an important means of preparation in each sport because to a certain extent, while contributing to good health, through specialization most sports create a form of imbalance. Supplemental training means practicing activities or sports other than a particular chosen sport in order to develop overall fitness. Such a balance cannot usually be achieved with the practice of just a single sport. Being well removed from a competitive environment, yoga exercises and breathing practices address the nature of balance in a holistic way and help sports people to experience and understand their body, energy and stamina in an entirely different way.

Yoga compensation exercises :

As a result of long-term sports training, muscular imbalance can develop in the body. Muscle groups become imbalanced through a combination of overloading some, through one sided training, and weakening others, through lack of involvement or use. Such one-sided loading produces disturbance, which can lead to damage, and injury. The task of YCE is to correct and compensate for this muscular imbalance by a regular and systematic practice of compensation exercises. Yoga's practices are ideal in this respect, because integration, balance and harmony are keywords of its yoga practices. They correct the one-sided effect of training by promoting general harmonious development of the body and by improving the whole physical system.

Yoga regeneration exercises:

Sports training tends to be very intensive over an extended period of time. This again can lead to a form of imbalance where muscles or the body as a whole become weak through overexertion. Successfully completing long and intensive training for achieving top performance depends largely on the extent to which the athlete can regenerate his or her physical and mental strength after training. Regeneration is a remedial process for regaining strength and for the prevention of injuries. YRE is based on the principle that after contracting for a specific time period in an isometric movement against specific resistance, muscles will release and relax, but that this is only effective if done consciously. Yoga practices offer the natural remedy because asanas are based on the gentle stretching of muscles, which induces relaxation and increases the blood supply, which releases residual tension and speeds regeneration. It is a natural counterbalance to the muscular effort of training and competing. In these three more specialised categories of the use of yoga practice for sports people, it is necessary to consider each situation individually, so the advice of a trained yoga teacher is necessary.

Groups of yogic practices and their benefits :

Yoga many practices are beneficial for sports people. They include the three sets of preparatory practices, Pawanmuktasana parts 1, 2 and 3; backward and forward bending asanas; surya namaskar; inverted and balancing asanas; shatkarmas; pranayama; and relaxation and meditation techniques:



Pawanmuktasana 1 (PM1): This group of asanas removes stiffness from the joints and helps the muscles to become flexible. Co-ordination between bones, muscles, joints and ligaments improves so that they work naturally and spontaneously. Problems in the knee joints, hip joints, ankle joints, shoulder joints and wrist joints can all be remedied by these asanas, which minimise the injuries of different joints.

Pawanmuktasana 2 (PM2): This group of asanas strengthen the abdominal muscles and organs. They improve the digestive system, which is important for the proper functioning of other systems of the body. These asanas are also beneficial for games that require a lot of stamina.

Pawanmuktasana 3 (PM3): This group of asanas improves the energy flow within the body, and breaks the neuromuscular knots especially in the pelvic region where energy tends to stagnate. They are very important for the removal of stress from the lower back and pelvic region and are particularly useful for postwomen, because they strengthen the reproductive system and help to relieve menstrual difficulties.

Backward, forward bending and twisting asanas: These increase the strength and flexibility of the spine. The spine is responsible for posture, the free flow of energy, nervous activities and body reflexes. Balance of the whole body depends on the power and flexibility of the spine and adjacent muscles. By practising these groups of asanas, players can minimise the problem of back pain. Much accumulated stress tends to collect in the spine, especially in the lower region or at the neck and shoulders, so backward and forward bending followed by one or two twisting asanas will relax the spine and give the feeling of freshness. Psychologically, backward bending asanas prepare the players to face any situation with courage and optimism; forward bends help to let go and go with the flow and twists gently squeeze out frustration and uncertainty.

Surya namaskara (salute to the sun): This is a complete practice in itself. Players can use it for overall fitness, and as a warm up before any sport. It prepares the body for handling stressful situations. It is an effective way of loosening up, stretching, massaging and toning all the joints, muscles and internal organs of the body. It stimulates and balances all the systems of the body.

Inverted asanas:

These encourage a rich supply of blood to flow to the brain and reverse the effect of gravity on the body. During the practice of an inverted asana, the breath becomes slow and deep, maximising the exchange of carbon dioxide and oxygen, which encourages correct respiration. The liver, spleen, stomach, kidneys and pancreas receive a powerful massage, helping them to perform their functions more efficiently. Blood and lymph which has accumulated in the lower limbs and abdomen is drained back to the heart, then circulated to the lungs, purified and re-circulated to all parts of the body. The enriched blood flow also allows the pituitary gland to operate more efficiently, tuning the entire endocrine system.

Refining asanas:

These induce physical balance by stilling unconscious movement. They develop the brain centres that control how the body works in motion thus developing the connection between the mind and body. They improve the co-ordination of movements between different parts of the body, which develops the sense of poise and balance. They fine-tune the efficiency of the use of energy both in action and stillness. As the moving body attains balance it becomes increasingly free to rely on other more subtle forces to support and propel it. In this way the body conserves its own energy and achieves grace and fluidity of motion.

Cleansing asanas:

Of these six cleansing practices, four are considered important here: neti, kunjal, laghoo and kapalabhati and trataka.

Neti cleans and clears the nasal passages, giving clarity of mind and sharp reactions. It induces calmness and balances the body-mind relation by helping balance both hemispheres of the brain.

Kunjal (regurgitative cleansing) helps to reduce fear of failure and enhances courage to face challenging situations. It can induce confidence in players, so that they can express themselves properly and give their best without holding back through fear or anxiety.



Laghoo shankhaprakshalana (intestinal cleansing): Sports-people should do this practice under the guidance of a qualified teacher. It cleanses the whole intestinal tract and clears out impurities and toxins from the body. This practice induces freshness of mind and body. It keeps the digestive system functioning properly.

Trataka (concentrated gazing at one point): All games require the ability to develop one-point concentration and awareness. This practice not only enhances concentration and one-pointedness away from distractions, but it also increases awareness, intuitive knowledge and discrimination.

Pranayama:

Breathing practices are one of the most effective means of increasing lung capacity, energy and stamina, and control over involuntary muscles, enhancing concentration, and balancing emotion. When practised systematically for some time, the awareness develops that energy is not purely physical in nature and that efficient management of the pranic energy can be developed through control of the breath. Practices such as abdominal and yogic breathing, and kumbhaka (breath retention) can increase lung capacity. Nadi shodhana (alternate nostril breathing) also increases capacity as well as being the main practice for balancing the pranic energy by stimulating both hemispheres of the brain equally. Bhastrika (rapid breathing from the abdomen) generates heat and vitality and raises the natural energy level; makes the 'second wind' more accessible in sport after near-exhaustion.

Cooling practices like sheetali and sheetkari are good in a hot summer season. Bhramari (humming bee breath) and ujjayi (psychic breath) can be used before any match to induce relaxation and reduce mental stress, bringing calmness and quietness of mind. Abdominal breathing is also one of the most simple and effective pranayamas, which can be done at any time to enable one to be in the present moment.

Yoga nidra:

This is the systematic method for inducing complete physical, mental and emotional relaxation developed by Bihar Yoga. It works at three levels simultaneously - the conscious, subconscious and unconscious. Due to the depth of relaxation, the level of awareness and focus increases. The level of receptivity is also greater, so it is helpful for learning skills and techniques. For example, there are a number of stages in the practice, one of which is the process of visualisation. While the body lies in a state of physical sleep, the mind is awake and relaxed. In these circumstances it is possible to learn and rehearse moves mentally by visualising them.

There is a stage in yoga nidra where a resolve is made which can increase willpower and single-mindedness to achieve success on the field. Players can develop the appropriate state of mind, so that at the time of need they can balance their physical, mental and emotional states.

Electrical stimulation of specific parts of the hypothalamus, limbic system and amygdala, the so-called primitive brain, is found to elicit specific emotional responses, including rage, fear and aggression. For most players, these negative feelings can be hard to control during high levels of stress. In yoga nidra, players are asked to submit voluntarily to strong emotions, while preserving a state of deep relaxation and witnessing the whole process. This helps to remain balanced and in control in any situation.

Antar mouna:

This is a meditative practice that systematically develops the awareness to become all-inclusive and alert. It is particularly effective for those people whose performance is not consistent. It develops the awareness so that they can minimise mistakes and injuries. They can watch their own and others' performances with honesty, which helps them to develop themselves and their performance. Antar mouna helps one come to terms with and release fear of failure. It clears the mind and prepares it to adapt to or face any situation. After doing this practice, players feel inner stillness and most of the distractions such as spectators, performances of opponents and pressure from other players, can be dispelled.

Conclusion:

The potential of yoga in sport has not yet been fully explored. On the one hand, sports are highly demanding and competitive; on the other, yoga seems to move in the opposite direction with its apparent



emphasis on a relaxed approach and detached state of mind. However, the state of mind and physical preparedness that yoga brings is exactly the same state that the most successful players speak of when at the peak of their performance.

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