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Yoga helps runners run smarter

BY BETH RIFKIN



Mention yoga to a runner and their response is often accompanied by a rolling of the eyes. Believing that yoga is passive or simply stretching, some runners do not understand how it can become a vital tool for their training.

“Yoga can lead to longer and faster runs, reduction in injuries and the ability to extend your running life. It helps to evenly build strength throughout the entire body while also increasing structural flexibility. Together this can help prevent injury from the repetitive motion of running,” explains Kerri Kelly, yoga instructor, with a specialty in yoga for runners. “It’s about running with more ease and running stronger. Overall, yoga can help runners perform better.”

In her *Yoga for Runners* workshops taught at the Yoga Tree studios in San Francisco, Kelly emphasizes these fundamentals:

Prevent injuries

With such an incredible demand on athletes’ feet, legs and hips, running without injury may seem impossible. By using yoga as a cross-training tool and resource, the entire body plays a part in preventing injuries. Yoga promotes physiological stability and helps to build balanced strength while increasing structural flexibility. Yoga strengthens weak muscles while helping to elongate overly tight ones. Balance in strength is crucial to preventing injuries.

The most common reason runners come to yoga is flexibility. “Stiff muscles don’t feel very nice so runners turn to yoga. But it’s important to remember that flexibility isn’t just about feeling good—it actually improves performance by enabling your muscles to work more effectively and efficiently,” says Kelly.

Yoga practice teaches athletes to respect structure; strength and flexibility are built

from the ground up reinforcing alignment, which supports posture and biomechanics when running. Yoga also teaches the body to work as a whole. As Kelly explains, “While the action of running is repetitive, emphasizing specific muscle groups, yoga is holistic, requiring the entire body to work in balance, promoting equal opportunity among all muscles.”

Crucial to this is having a strong core. “Strengthening our core allows us to more effectively integrate the upper and lower body and move as a unit,” says Kelly.

Become a stronger athlete

Longer strides, faster paces, increased endurance and improved turnover rate are the goals of every runner. Balanced strength and flexibility not only prevent injuries, they can make for a stronger, healthier, more focused and successful athlete.

“Often what surprises runners the most about yoga is that it is a full body strength building process,” explains Kelly. Despite the focus on feet, legs and hips, in actuality every muscle in the body is engaged in helping the athlete to reach their goal.

The erector spinae straightens the back and supports the spine in the upper body. The biceps enable a strong arm swing, while the deltoids/traps/lats help drive the body forward. Poses such as Dolphin and Plank improve strength in the entire upper body including biceps, triceps, shoulders and back.

Kelly emphasizes that when the core is strong, everything else follows; it’s “mission control” for a runner. Working in union, the transversus, rectus, obliques, psoas and glutes support your back and posture while also enabling acceleration and speed. Balancing poses such as Tree or Warrior III increase the stability of your core, especially around the joints.

In the lower body, the calves work to stabilize your base when you push off, the quads help your front leg push off the ground, and the hamstrings and glutes bring the leg back and restart leg turnover, which keeps the running cycle in motion. Poses such as Warrior I & II strengthen your entire lower body, the abdominals, and also work to support an upright spine and lengthen shoulder and upper back muscles.

Yoga helps runners maximize their efficiency and performance by promoting more integrated, coordinated movements. Consequently, students learn to move the body as one—more freely—encountering less resistance and exerting less energy. Joints are able to move in their full range of motion when surrounded by more balanced muscles.

Flexibility and elasticity in the muscles also allow the breath to move more efficiently and effortlessly through the body, requiring less exertion and enabling the athlete to run with more ease and for longer periods of time.

Receptive

There is a softening to yoga—it helps athletes listen to their bodies and become more in tune and receptive to what their muscles, joints and tendons really need. Running and yoga are a meditation in movement with the key to that meditative quality being the breath. Once you are able to use the breath to stay relaxed, you are able to move with fluidity and confidence. AF

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