

Spicing up SPORTS with YOGA

by MARIA SONIA G. ASTUDILLO



Limb-breaking poses used to be reserved for skinny ladies and inhumanly flexible cheerleaders. But over the years, yoga has broken stereotypes and is now being embraced by more and more people all over the world.

A quick Google search of “yoga + athletes” would lead you to some famous players, as well as teams that have included yoga in their routines.

Some noted practitioners in the NBA are LeBron James of the Miami Heat, Kevin Love of the Minnesota Timberwolves, Kevin Garnett and Joe Johnson of the Brooklyn Nets, and future Hall-of-Famer Shaquille O’Neal; the NFL has Victor Cruz of the New York Giants, Vernon Davis of the San Francisco 49ers, Steven Jackson of the Atlanta Falcons and Torrey Smith and Ray Lewis of the Baltimore Ravens. Baseball has Evan Longoria of the Tampa Bay Rays.

Then there are sports organizations such as the New Zealand All Blacks rugby team, the Tottenham Spurs UK soccer club, and the New York Giants football team who since 2004 have had a yoga instructor.

The reasons for embracing yoga always seem to be along the lines of improving on their sports, long-term fitness, faster recovery from injury or even avoiding injury, body-conditioning and strengthening, mental concentration and added focus, muscle flexibility, and self-discovery.

So what is it in yoga that makes it the ideal spice in the world of manly, all-strength sports? I will provide eight good reasons.

1. YOGA EQUALS STRENGTH. Anyone who considers yoga as too feminine has not tried it. Try holding a handstand for one minute and tell me it does not require a strong core, aided by determined concentration and focus. And yet...



2. YOGA IS NOT JUST ABOUT STRENGTH. IT’S ABOUT THE UNION OF THE BODY, MIND AND SPIRIT. This is not some New Age concept. Holding a pose—whether simple or difficult—helps you attune to your body. You get to know your body, your limits and your strengths. Knowing your body then allows you to know when you’ve had enough and need to rest.

3. YOGA IS ABOUT FLEXIBILITY. The concept of flexibility should not be limited to females. A flexible spine translates to increased blood and oxygen circulation throughout the body. It improves mobility. It also massages the internal organs and rejuvenates the glands and hormones, resulting in a balanced emotion and outlook.



4. YOGA IS HEALING. This is probably the most important reason athletes should practice yoga. Compared to physical exercises, which emphasize violent movements that produce large quantities of lactic acid in the muscle fibers, yoga is about gentle stretching. The deep breathing in yoga neutralizes the effects of the acid. This explains why more athletes are saying yoga helps them heal or recover from injuries.

5. YOGA TEACHES YOU HOW TO BREATHE. If you were in grade school at the same time as I was, your P.E. teacher probably taught you to tuck in your stomach while you inhale and expand it as you exhale. That is shallow breathing and not the proper way to breathe. To use the maximum capacity of your lungs, the abdomen and the rib cage should expand as you inhale, taking in as much oxygen as you can and contract as you exhale expelling as much stale air as possible. Any swimmer or runner will gladly tell you the importance of strong lungs.



6. YOGA TEACHES YOU BALANCE AND CONCENTRATION. Balancing a yoga pose may take time and strength but yoga goes beyond physical balance. It teaches you to balance your life and your response to different situations. It’s not an exaggeration to say that yoga may be the answer to athletes whose ill-tempered dispositions prove a hindrance to their performance.

7. YOGA TEACHES YOU TO BE IN THE MOMENT—to relax when it’s time to relax and to let go and focus when you have to. Even if strengthening your body or improving flexibility is your purpose for doing yoga, relaxation comes with the package. While holding a pose or resting in a corpse pose, the mind eventually wanders and goes within. It may not happen on Day One but sooner or later, it will. The consciousness expands and it’s like you are there but also you’re part of something bigger. Suddenly you find yourself “in the moment.” You know how many Olympic gold medalists recount how during that moment of triumph, they were just “in the moment?” It’s the same feeling. Try watching the movie “The Peaceful Warrior” and you’ll get what I mean.

8. YOGA INTRODUCES YOU TO GOOD FOOD. Yes, most yogis would choose vegetarian food and they may do so for ethical or health reasons. While most athletes would say a big “NO!” to an all-veggie diet, there are now a growing number of vegan and vegetarian athletes. I assure you, the moment you enter that yoga studio, you’ll meet new people who will show you that a vegetarian meal is a completely satisfying gastronomic experience. I’ve met some yoga practitioners who said that since they started practicing yoga, the craving for junk food naturally disappeared and they are now opting for healthier food choices. •

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