

Yoga for Runners

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This may sound strange, but yoga and running actually have a lot in common. They both require regular practice, strength, flexibility, endurance, mental focus and a structured breathing method. That's why yoga is a perfect cross-training tool for runners.

What is yoga? Yoga is actually a philosophical and spiritual system that has been around for thousands of years. In its complete form, it is a way of life. The physical practice of yoga that we are most familiar with in the west, is only one very small part of this broader system. For the purposes of this article, I will only be referring to the physical aspect of Yoga, and not the other vast dimensions of this system.

So why is yoga helpful for runners? In a nutshell, yoga builds strength and stamina, increases flexibility, teaches us how to breathe more efficiently and deeper, improves our mental focus, and ultimately teaches us how to remain calm and centered during physically and emotionally challenging situations (i.e.: like running!). It is also one of the few activities that works out the entire body from head to toe, inside out.

One of the most important and subtle keys to doing yoga properly is learning how to breathe. This may sound odd, since you are probably breathing right now... But breathing in yoga means bringing your conscious awareness to your breath by slowing it down considerably and keeping it steady and rhythmic, even while you are exerting yourself in a challenging pose. Training yourself to breathe like this ultimately makes the breath more efficient. This is critical for runners because you want to be able to pump large amounts of oxygen-rich blood to the working muscles. Maximum oxygen intake is a crucial variable that can determine your performance and endurance.

However, it is hard to take a nice deep breath when your body won't let you. If your rib cage, diaphragm, or spine is stiff, lung capacity is reduced by your physical limitations. By practicing yoga on a regular basis, and becoming more conscious of how you breathe, you will be able to increase your flexibility in these key areas, therefore deepening your breath, and ultimately improving your running endurance. There are several yoga poses that enhance both range of motion and lung capacity by opening the chest and rib cage (eg: bow pose, camel pose, upward facing dog, and pigeon). To learn how to breathe deeply, your best bet is to find a yoga teacher you trust and like who can teach you some breathing exercises, also known as *Pranayama* exercises.

How does yoga build strength and stamina? For those who have never tried yoga, it's easy to assume that it is nothing more than a bunch of stretching. Indeed, yoga definitely involves a lot of stretching, which is why it increases overall flexibility. However, the strength building happens when you are asked to hold challenging poses for several breaths, and then move on to another equally challenging pose and do the same thing. In more advanced yoga classes, you will move through a number of poses that require you to support your own body weight in unusual positions (don't fret – if you are new to yoga

and you wisely choose to take a beginner level class, you will gradually work your way up to this level when the time is right for you.). Running alone will increase your strength and stamina, but it is only “sport specific” strength. Cross training with yoga ensures that your body stays balanced and strengthened in all areas, not just those involved in running. Maintaining a well-balanced body is crucial for avoiding injuries that could side-line you from your sport.

Why does yoga lead to greater mental focus? In effect, yoga is a form of meditation – a moving meditation, actually. The goal in yoga is to only think about or notice your breath throughout the entire class, and let all other thoughts be on hold. Naturally, this is quite challenging and takes a lot of practice. But in time, if you stick with it, you will find it easier to do. Being able to put a stop to the incessant mind chatter brings mental and emotional tranquility, relaxing the mind and body. In a wider sense, it allows us to become a little bit more detached from our thoughts, and stand back and observe ourselves and our patterns. Having mental clarity and focus is essential for runners as you strive to achieve your goals.

Danielle teaches yoga classes and private sessions for all levels at Vitality Clinic, in Yaletown. Classes are always small (no more than 4 at a time) and tailored to student needs and abilities. Classes are scheduled around your availability. Danielle is also a certified Yoga Therapist, which is a combination of Psychotherapy and yoga designed to heal the mind and body simultaneously. To schedule a yoga class or learn more about yoga or Yoga Therapy, please call Vitality Clinic at (604) 687-7678 or email Danielle at yogatherapy@vitalityclinic.ca Vitality Clinic website: www.vitalityclinic.ca