

Yoga for Peak Performance

By Dario Fredrick

You put in the training and eat right. Yet you still look for ways to improve your athletic performance. Putting in more hours may seem like a logical way to go faster or further, but if you were to change nothing but improve the quality of recovery, your performance would also improve.

As endurance athletes, we ask much of our bodies. Moderate to intense exercise stimulates our sympathetic (“fight or flight”) nervous system, which literally breaks down muscle. Every workout we do challenges the body, and when the body adapts, it becomes stronger.

However, the adaptation or recovery phase is just as important as the workout itself. Without recovery, there would be no gains in power, strength or endurance.

One way to enhance your recovery is by practicing restorative yoga. Many athletes view yoga as an alternative means of exercise or physical training, but if practiced in its true spirit, yoga can balance body and mind, which enhances both athletic performance and well-being.



Training, Yoga and the Nervous System



Restorative yoga works by counter-balancing the effects of the sympathetic nervous system. Essentially, restorative practice tones its opposite: the *parasympathetic* nervous system. This is the side of us that is active during resting and digesting. No wonder we feel so much better after a warm shower, a big meal, and a nice, long nap.

During parasympathetic activity, the body shifts into an anabolic state, rebuilding damaged cells and tissue, and allowing the mind to enter a deeper level of rest and restoration.

Vigorous styles of yoga that intend to provide a “workout” are simply more of the same in an athlete’s sympathetic training regimen. There are certainly benefits to be found in most any style of yoga, but why not improve your athletics with a more complementary practice? Only a practice that is methodical and restorative (with plenty of relaxation) will maximize the benefits of parasympathetic activity. And when muscles are able to relax, you can safely increase the range of motion

in your joints and muscles, which can protect against injuries in the future. There are also the deeper-level effects to the nervous system that are not immediately apparent until we are willing to slow down and examine the practice.

Stress and the Mind

Often underestimated, the mind affects the body in significant ways. It is possible to mimic sympathetic response of intense training simply by experiencing mental stress or anxiety. Mental anxiety also “stresses” the immune system, requiring increased energy for this important protective system. We can train the nervous system response in a similar way that we train our bodies. By practicing relaxation via restorative yoga, the mind learns to reduce sympathetic stimulation. The more consistently we practice relaxation, the easier it is to avoid the stress response when unnecessary. Sport psychologists also recommend relaxation as an effective performance enhancement tool.

Summary

Our bodies are integrated systems. Optimal athletic performance means considering the *whole* athlete. Musculoskeletal alignment and flexibility can improve physical performance while calming the mind and enhancing parasympathetic activity have a profound effect on recovery. If the mind experiences stressful conditions, the response in the body is similar to that of intense training. Practicing restorative yoga trains the mind and body to reduce sympathetic drive, enhancing the quality of the often-limited time we have for recovery. Whether your goal is injury prevention or simply to be a better athlete, yoga can enhance your performance.



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