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Importance of yoga in sports

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to evaluate how Yoga can be beneficial for both physical and mental benefits to the body and mind of a sports person. Yoga has been practiced from ancient years. It can be overwhelming at first to find a style of yoga that resonates with you. If you are a competitive athlete, it is best to tailor your yoga practice to your training schedule because a particular sport can develop certain muscle groups while ignoring others. Over time, this process causes imbalances in the muscles and joints, leading to overuse injuries. Yoga helps the muscles, tendons, and ligaments move through a full range of motion, thus cultivating balance and core strength which is a huge benefit to athletes in their chosen sports. Another essential element in yoga is breath work (pranayama). The attention to breath during yoga can be considered one of the most important benefits to athletes. Learning to stay focused and centred through uncomfortable poses by concentrating on even inhalations and exhalations sets up the athlete to stay focused during a race or challenging workout. The mind-body connection in yoga is essential to helping athletes develop mental acuity and concentration. In addition, yoga helps you to relax not just tight muscles, but also anxious and overstressed minds. Being more relaxed will also aid in athletic performance. So, by adding yoga to the training plan will enhance the performance and prevent injury to a sports person.

Keywords: Yoga, physical and mental benefits, sports person

Introduction

Definition of Yoga

Yoga is a discipline to improve or develop one's inherent power in a balanced manner. It offers the means to attain complete self-realization. The word "Yoga" originates from Sanskrit and means "to join, to unite". Yoga exercises have a holistic effect and bring body, mind, consciousness and soul into balance. The main goals of "Yoga in Daily Life" are Physical Health, Mental Health, Social Health, Spiritual Health, Self-Realization or realization of the Divine within us. These goals are attained by Love and help for all living beings, Respect for life, protection of nature and the environment, A peaceful state of mind, Full vegetarian diet, Pure thoughts and positive lifestyle, Physical, mental and spiritual practices, Tolerance for all nations, cultures and religions. Yogic techniques are known to improve one's overall performance. Pranayama is an important, yet little known part of Yoga. Until recently, this art and science of yogic breathing was almost completely unknown to the common man like many other ancient Indian arts. Pranayama techniques act to purify the nadis including these three main energy channels.

The concepts and practices of Yoga originated in India about several thousand years ago. Its founders were great Saints and Sages. The great Yogis presented rational interpretation of their experiences of Yoga and brought about a practical and scientifically sound method within every one's reach. Yoga today, is no longer restricted to hermits, saints, and sages; it has entered into our everyday lives and has aroused a worldwide awakening and acceptance in the last few decades. The science of Yoga and its techniques have now been reoriented to suit modern sociological needs and lifestyles. Experts of various branches of medicine including modern medical sciences are realizing the role of these techniques in the prevention and mitigation of diseases and promotion of health.

Yoga is one of the six systems of Vedic philosophy. Maharishi Patanjali, rightly called "The Father of Yoga" compiled and refined various aspects of Yoga systematically in his "Yoga Sutras" (aphorisms).

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He advocated the eight folds path of Yoga, popularly known as "Ashtanga Yoga" for all-round development of human beings. They are:- Yama, Niyama, Asana, Pranayama, Pratyahara, Dharana, Dhyana and Samadhi. These components advocate certain restraints and observances, physical discipline, breath regulations, restraining the sense organs, contemplation, meditation and samadhi. These steps are believed to have a potential for improvement of physical health by enhancing circulation of oxygenated blood in the body, retraining the sense organs thereby inducing tranquility and serenity of mind. The practice of Yoga prevents psychosomatic disorders and improves an individual's resistance and ability to endure stressful situations.

Importance of yoga in daily life

Yoga in Daily Life is a system of practice consisting of eight levels of development in the areas of physical, mental, social and spiritual health.

When the body is physically healthy, the mind is clear, focused and stress is under control. This gives the space to connect with loved ones and maintain socially healthy relationships. When you are healthy you are in touch with your inner Self, with others and your surroundings on a much deeper level, which adds to your spiritual health.

Yoga increases the flexibility of the spine, improves body's physical condition and heightened awareness to the importance of relaxation. It has been emphasized that each exercise be practiced slowly, coordinating movement with the breath, pausing motionless in each position and always with full concentration.

Yoga is both preventive and therapeutic and has shown to offer both physical and mental benefits to the body and mind.

Yoga is distinctly different from other kinds of exercise as it generates motion without causing strain and imbalances in the body. Therefore the practice is an ideal complement to other forms of exercise and an extreme advantage to any sport. The "postures" are the physical positions that coordinate breath with movement and we hold these positions to stretch and strengthen different parts of the body. They systematically work all the major muscle groups, including the back, neck, and shoulders, deep abdominals, hip and buttock muscles and even ankles, feet, wrists and hands. Although most poses are non aerobic in nature, they do in fact send oxygen to the cells in the body by way of conscious deep breathing and sustained stretching & contraction of different muscle groups. Yoga can help to check any imbalance in muscular development and will enable the body to function more efficiently. If the body is flexible and supple, it will be less prone to sports injuries as the joints will be kept lubricated. "When the surface of a lake is still, one can see to the bottom very clearly" this is impossible when the surface is agitated by waves. In the same way, when the mind is still we can control mental agitation by focusing on perfect concentration. When a player, in any sport, is trying to fulfill thousands, hundreds of thousands or if playing for their country, millions of people's expectations their minds are completely stressed, and their natural efficiency diminishes. No amount of coaching or training can prepare for doubt or worry entering the mind of a player during a game. By holding steady postures and concentrating on deep abdominal breathing we can increase body awareness, relieve chronic stress patterns in the body, relax the mind, center ones attention, sharpen concentration and "stay in the zone!" Many athletes are having more injuries that require surgery because of the increased focus on strength training with weight resistance. This method for increasing

strength and muscle mass is highly effective and efficient, yet it dramatically decreases flexibility. However, if yoga or other types of prolonged stretching are practiced in combination with strength training and practical application exercises (using the body in a way that mimics the movements of their particular sport, while performing a balancing or core movement), injury can be minimized during engagement in other competitive sports that call for the athlete to be more spontaneous with their bodies, calling for overextended reaches, lunges, falls, etc., all of which increase the odds of injury, opposed to the safety of controlled mechanical motion used in weight room workouts. With yoga, the athlete will not only increase flexibility, but also increase poise and balance from the practice of the yoga holding/balancing poses. When balancing poses are mastered the athlete is then conditioned to unconsciously recover from any imbalances their body may experience, staying centered in action, moment by moment during play. This is when the athlete begins to perform miraculous stunts. He is able to use his body in ways he never thought possible while remaining centered and injury free. Yoga also helps strengthen connective tissue, break down adhesions (tiny scar tissue) from old injuries and over-training that have tightened as we age, thus helping create mobility of the joints and an anti-aging posture. The deep rhythmic breathing performed in yoga also creates and builds up one's life force energies or Prana.

Meditation

Meditation is somewhat synonymous with self-reflection, or turning our gaze inwards helping us to transform our mind (I almost think of it as exercise for our brain). Through controlled breathing, visualization, and clearing of the mind we gain all sorts of insight as to who we are. Increased self-awareness, concentration, and mental clarity are all benefits we typically see with consistent (this is the part I know I always struggle with) meditation practice. By simply being in the space and body that we are, we not only help ourselves to better understanding our self, but our behaviors as well (this includes the habits we may practice).

Yoga and meditation have fit together over hundreds of years, helping people stay both physically and cognitively fit. By bringing these two practices together, we become better informed and in tune with our bodies and mind – ultimately it connects us with ourselves, helping us to become a more well-rounded individual. Through bringing these two aspects of ourselves together we see greater success with developing and maintaining healthy habits over time

The role of yoga in sport and exercise

Yoga is a discipline that seers and saints have been practicing since ancient times to bring flexibility to the spine and joints, to keep the muscles of the body pliable and youthful, increase circulation in arteries and strengthen internal organs. And yet, yoga is so much more than this. Yoga has been said to help strengthen the power of concentration, to banish constipation, to relieve stomach disorders, improve muscle coordination and reduce excess body fat. Yoga has also been said to strengthen the mind-body connection, bring calmness and relaxation to mind, enhance self-confidence, strengthen self-discipline and self-resolve, reduce stress / anxiety and increase vitality and energy throughout the body. Evidently, it would appear that yoga has extensive benefits and can help us to be a more balanced, relaxed, focused, efficient and effective person. The benefits of yoga can thus be applied to a variety of disciplines including professional sporting athletes.

In order to understand how Yoga can benefit professional sports persons, it is necessary to explore what is required to play a sport and play it well. It is well acknowledged that to play any sport, whether it be tennis, volleyball, surfing, swimming or running, we must develop the basic skills and continually train the body so that we can apply the skill in a refined and polished way. This of course requires considerable time, energy and commitment to practice the skill at hand. Having a body that is flexible, strong and controlled is also another important consideration, if one is not able to move the body with the grace, velocity and speed required, then performance will be lackluster. Similarly, if a person is not able to maintain endurance or stamina for the required duration, the performance will be diminished. In order to play a sport well, it is also necessary that a person is able to focus and concentrate with confidence on the task at hand without distraction or timidity. As such, dealing with distractions, adversity and stress is an important component. As such, in addition to being able to maintain mental poise and balance, it is essential for a professional athlete to have a high degree of alertness, concentration and focus throughout the sporting match / event. How then can yoga assist in strengthening the mind and body to allow a sports person to perform at their highest potential?

Yoga is the application of physical postures, control of breath, purification and relaxation of mind / body and spiritual principles aimed at bringing greater unity and balance to the mind and body. Yoga teaches a person how to link the mind and body and to come into the present. The use of pranayama and breathing techniques prescribed in Yoga enables a person to focus on breath and helps to calm and still the mind and cultivate concentration ability. Swami Vishnudevananda mentions the importance of pranayama for strengthening concentration and calmness of mind through stillness of breath, he states “through pranayama, man’s will-power, self-control and concentration power can be increased”. Internal cleansing methods prescribed in Hatha Yoga are beneficial for professional athletes to not only improve purity of body and overall physical wellbeing, but to also enhance one’s concentration ability as well. Swami Vishnudevananda highlights this point, he states “when the body is free from physical impurities, the concentration power of the mind increases to a very high degree.” Pranayama can also help to energise and revitalize the body.

The prescription of Yoga asanas also help to develop the control and concentration of the mind. Being able to hold a posture with steadiness, relaxation and comfort requires that a person is able to focus their mind for an extended period of time. This helps for developing strength and concentration in mind / body and is beneficial to playing sports at highly competitive levels. Asanas also help to create harmony and balance between the mind and body and help to achieve a healthy body and stable mind, they are aids for controlling the mind through physical discipline. Through asana the functioning and efficiency of internal organs is improved and this consequently effects all other parts of the body in a positive manner. Cells are nourished and revitalized and the internal functioning of body organs is enhanced.

Conclusion

Yoga is able to mobilize joints, stretch tissues and ligaments, tone muscles, bring flexibility to the spine and strengthen internal organs. Yoga exercises are based on the formula of stretching, relaxation, deep breathing, increasing circulation and concentration. As such, yoga is beneficial to a

professional athlete as it enables them to strengthen their concentration ability, foster a calm and relaxed mind, enhance the mind / body connection allowing an athlete to have greater muscle coordination and fluidity of movement. Yoga is also beneficial to a professional athlete as it positively contributes to the health and vitality of the body, strengthens internal organs such as the heart, lungs and liver and helps to maintain fitness and agility. Yoga also helps to reduce stress and anxiety, cultivate self-confidence and self-belief. All of these elements are pivotal to sporting excellence and peak performance. As highlighted above, in order to perform a sporting action efficiently and effectively, a person needs to have a high degree of concentration and focus with a mind that is calm and controlled. Swami Sivananda states the importance of mind control; he asserts “without concentration you cannot have success in any walk of life”. Yoga can help a sportsperson to have evenness of mind and control of their thoughts even during stress and/or adversity. Yoga is able to help a person have control over their body through control of their mind. As such, Yoga can play a key role in cultivating mind control and concentration which helps a sportsperson to perform at their peak level.

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