

Yoga For Runners

STRIKE A POSE

Pair yoga with running to get stronger, sharper, and less injury-prone

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Five years ago, Angie Stewart, a Los Angeles-based personal trainer, suffered from **iliotibial band (ITB) pain** so severe she couldn't run longer than 40 minutes. "The outside of both of my legs would hurt to the point that I would have to sit down," says Stewart, who had been accustomed to logging 40 to 50 miles a week. "Once I even had to get someone to drive me home." For six months, she tried all the usual antidotes--icing, stretching, cutting her mileage, doing physical therapy, self-massaging with a **foam roller**. Nothing worked. Finally, Stewart tried yoga.

"I hated it at first," she says. "All I could think about while I was there was that I'd rather be running. I felt like I was wasting my time. I didn't see how something so noncompetitive and calming in nature could provide me with any athletic benefits."

But after two months of five sessions a week, Stewart says her ITB syndrome disappeared. And with the conviction of the converted, she founded Runner's Yoga 90210, where marathoners, beginner runners, and even members of UCLA's track team gather in Beverly Hills's Roxbury Park for a 20- to 30-minute run followed by 45 to 55 minutes of yoga in a nearby studio.

"Yoga improves strength and balance, but one of the best things it can do for runners is increase flexibility," says Bruce Dick, M.D., a partner of Orthopedic Associates of Saratoga in Saratoga Springs, New York, who has been doing sun salutations since the early 1980s, when he needed to improve his flexibility for triathlon training. He still recommends yoga to his patients, especially those who think running a marathon is easier than touching their toes. "If you don't have the flexibility in your **hip** flexors and hamstrings to create an adequate range of motion, your body will ask that motion to come from other joints--joints not meant to produce that motion. So you get early fatigue, early breakdown, and you expose yourself to injury."

Best Practice

Just as your running workouts vary in intensity--from easy run to the tempo sweat-fest--so should your yoga routines, says Sage Rountree, author of *The Athlete's Guide to Yoga* and USA Triathlon coach, who was planning to run the Boston Marathon in April. After a long run or during a week of peak mileage,

gentle stretches enhance recovery. On a rest day or during a period when you aren't training heavily, a challenging class like power yoga, or Ashtanga, builds strength and improves flexibility (see "On Miles and Mats," below). Rountree recommends developing a home-based practice that you can adjust to your schedule: Poses that stretch your muscles post-run; others that strengthen your core at least three times a week; a longer routine that targets the entire body on a rest or easy day.

"You want to maximize the results of time spent on the mat," says Rountree, who teaches Yoga for Athletes in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. "While it wouldn't hurt to do gentle yoga on your rest day, power yoga might be better for building strength. You wouldn't want to do power yoga during a taper, when you have pent-up energy. It might tempt you to push yourself harder than you should."

Beyond balance, strength, and flexibility, yoga offers an added benefit that can enhance performance: improved mental focus. "It teaches you to be in an intense situation--perhaps deep in a back-bending pose--and to bring awareness to your form and your breathing to make the situation manageable," Rountree says. "This skill is invaluable when at mile 18 of 26.2. You'll learn ways to cope, which will benefit you as an athlete and in life."