

PERFORM BETTER

# GAME ON

WHETHER YOU'RE A WEEKEND WARRIOR OR A **SERIOUS COMPETITOR**, YOGA CAN HELP TAKE YOUR PERFORMANCE TO A NEW LEVEL. BY JANET LEE

**T**he word “yoga” can strike fear into the heart of an athlete. Visions of deep stretches or held pretzel-like poses can be daunting for the flexibility-impaired. On the flip side, sometimes they think the practice is too gentle to make a difference. But yoga, whether vigorous and sweaty or quiet and restorative, can be an athlete’s secret weapon. “When people think of yoga for athletes, they usually think of flexibility,” says Kirsten Beverley-Waters, RYT, a yoga instructor and fitness coach in Old Orchard Beach, Maine. “That’s the biggest reason that athletes *don’t* want to do yoga.” Being super flexible can actually *decrease* power for some athletes; others simply feel like they’re too un-bendy to benefit. “Then there’s the Type-A, goal-oriented, high-level athlete, who looks at those slow-flow classes and you might as well call it ‘never-gonna-take-it-flow.’ They want power yoga or a heated, advanced vinyasa class.”

That mindset is changing, though. As medicine embraces more holistic approaches, so too are sports. “People used to think yoga was all about om-ing and incense and ‘hippie’ stuff, but now athletes are growing more aware of the benefits,” says New York-based yoga coach Gwen Lawrence, e-RYT, author of *Teaching Power Yoga for Sports*. College and professional teams often hire yoga instructors—Lawrence has worked with the New York Giants and many other teams—and even casual running or cycling



Yoga can help reduce the risk of repetitive motion injuries common in many sports.

YOGA ENHANCES BALANCE, FOCUS AND CALMNESS.

## WHY I YOGA LAUREL DEVORE, ULTRA-RUNNER

Longtime runner DeVore, 30, of Golden, Colorado, routinely tackles 30- to 100-mile events, but when she first started upping her distance, she injured a disc in her lower back. She stopped running and did yoga twice a day for six months. “I stayed in shape well enough, without training, that I went back and PR’d [recorded her best time] in two races,” says DeVore, who’s sponsored by Altra. “Yoga kept me mentally strong, in addition to improving my core and full-body strength. That sold me on it.”



The concentration that comes from practicing and holding different poses, not to mention the consistency of showing up regularly, have also helped DeVore with the mental aspect of logging mile after mile for hours at a time. “Having that diligence to keep practicing and trying to improve translates to running,” she says.

On Sundays, DeVore adds a 30-minute meditation before hot yoga class: “It’s harder for me than sweating through class, but that tells me it’s what I need.”



**WHY I YOGA**  
**LORENA LEE, SURFER**

An acupuncturist in San Diego, Lee has been surfing for six years and doing yoga for 10. “I like warm yoga, not the hot kind,” she says. “I like how the heat helps me get into poses that I might not normally be able to do.”



The practice has improved her balance as well as her core strength. “If

you don’t have a strong core you can get low back, neck or shoulder pain,” she says. “But yoga has also helped me work on thoracic spine mobility.” You need movement through the middle back to maintain the right stance when you surf, so spinal twists and threading the needle are helpful, she says.

The most important yoga benefit for her has been breathing. “Sometimes you feel like you’re going to drown when you’re surfing. You have to learn to breathe properly and get into a calmer mindset, and yoga helps me do that.”

**HOW TO DO IT**

**STRIKE A POSE**

Try the following poses to boost your competitive edge, all demonstrated by Gwen Lawrence from her book *Teaching Power Yoga for Sports* (Human Kinetics, 2019). They each have benefits beyond a single sport, so feel free to try a few. All you’ll need is a mat and a block or rolled-up blanket.



**CYCLING**

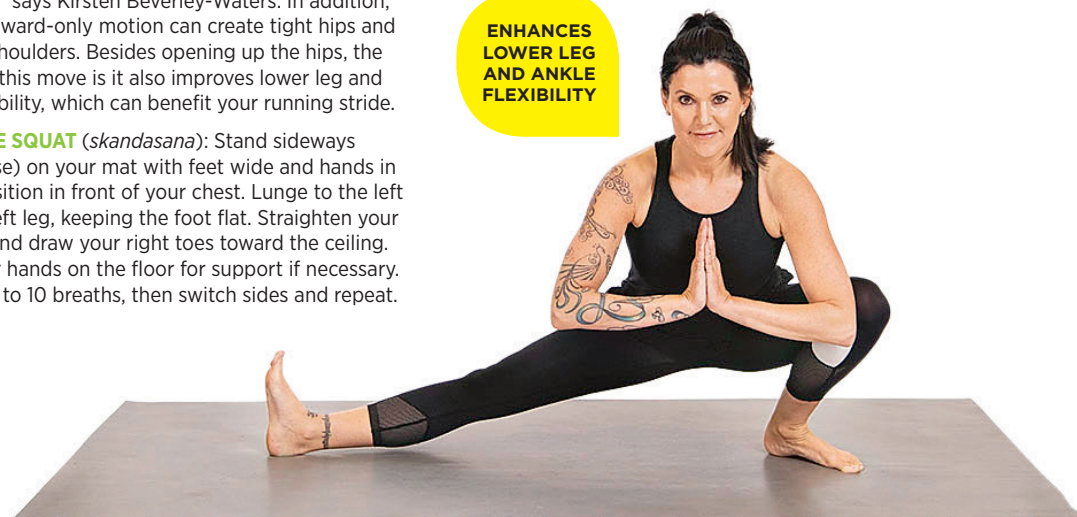
The goal is to move that constantly rounded spine, which can wreak havoc on the back and limit lower-body power.

**FACEDOWN SHOULDER STRETCH** (*eka bhujaswastikasana I*): Lie facedown on your mat with your right arm out to the side and slightly higher than shoulder level, palm down (or bend it 90 degrees if that’s easier). Place your left hand on the mat under your left shoulder and turn your head to the left. Bend your left knee and place your left foot on the mat if you can. Use your left hand to gently roll yourself off the mat to the right. You may not make it far at first and that’s fine; don’t force it. Use your breath to release any tension in your neck; let your right ear and arm sink into the floor. Hold for 5 to 10 breaths, then slowly roll facedown, switch sides and repeat.

**RUNNING**

Breathe! “A lot of runners collapse forward when they get tired, which restricts their breath, or they just rely on chest breathing, so I like to work with diaphragmatic breathing,” says Kirsten Beverley-Waters. In addition, all that forward-only motion can create tight hips and rounded shoulders. Besides opening up the hips, the beauty of this move is it also improves lower leg and ankle flexibility, which can benefit your running stride.

**HALF SIDE SQUAT** (*skandasana*): Stand sideways (lengthwise) on your mat with feet wide and hands in prayer position in front of your chest. Lunge to the left over the left leg, keeping the foot flat. Straighten your right leg and draw your right toes toward the ceiling. Place your hands on the floor for support if necessary. Hold for 5 to 10 breaths, then switch sides and repeat.



ENHANCES LOWER LEG AND ANKLE FLEXIBILITY

BUILDS STRENGTH IN LEGS AND SPINE



**SWIMMING**

Flexible yet strong shoulders and good range of motion in the neck will make freestyle and other strokes easier, but the power for your legs and arms in swimming comes through the core, says Beverley-Waters. The following pose builds strength in the legs and back while also opening up the sides of the body, which can help improve your breathing and swimming stroke.

**EXTENDED SIDE ANGLE** (*utthita parsvakonasana*): Lunge forward with your left leg, bending left knee 90 degrees; keep knee aligned over the ankle. Turn your right toes out 45 degrees and press the entire foot into the floor. Extend your arms out at shoulder height over your legs, palms facing down. Draw your right hip open so the hips are squared with the long side of your mat. Lean over and rest your left forearm on your left thigh, then extend your right arm overhead so your right arm and leg are in one long line from fingertips to toes. Look up at your right arm and press away from your left leg so your left shoulder doesn’t creep toward your ear. Hold for 5 to 10 breaths, then switch sides and repeat.

enthusiasts are flocking to classes as they start to understand that yoga can boost flexibility and strength and help counteract muscle imbalances.

“Flexibility plus strength equals power,” says Lawrence. She uses the analogy of a bow and arrow: If the string on the bow is too tight and strong, you can’t draw it back very far and the arrow will fall short. But if the string is more pliable, the arrow will go much farther. “In addition, athletes are often very one-side dominant. Asymmetries ultimately lead to injuries,” adds Lawrence. “It’s like driving from New York to Florida with a car that’s out of alignment. You probably won’t make it without some damage to your vehicle.”

Yoga’s stealth benefit is on the brain. The focus, breathing and mental toughness you develop on the mat can give an athlete the edge in competition—or just help you make it through your run without giving up. Those long holds in pigeon, frog or other poses during a restorative class can help train athletes to quiet the mental chatter, says Lawrence. “Plus, yogic breathing techniques help you overcome nerves and anxiety that can limit your performance.”

“Your brain often quits long before your body has to,” says Beverley-Waters. “The same holds in yoga class. Your brain starts fighting you in those long, held poses. Yoga teaches you how to work through that.”

If you truly want to improve how you play, run, ski, bike or anything else, you should seek out a yoga instructor who can work with you to evaluate imbalances and recommend poses designed for *your* body. “I used to watch training sessions in the NFL and they were all doing the same thing. I always wondered why the quarterbacks were doing the same exercises as the linemen, when they have different roles, strengths and weaknesses,” says Lawrence, who trains yoga teachers how to work with athletes based on their sport and unique challenges. “After one to three months of consistent sport-specific yoga practice, you’ll see better joint mobility and functional strength, improved symmetry and better breath control,” notes Lawrence. Nothing to fear there.

YOGA CAN OFFER MENTAL TOUGHNESS THAT CAN BE KEY TO VICTORY.



LET YOUR SPORT DETERMINE THE POSES TO ADD TO YOUR PRACTICE.



IMPROVES BACK EXTENSION

**TENNIS**

Tennis players tend to have extreme one-sided dominance and are susceptible to wrist and elbow strains and sprains. Improving back extension can help take some of the work off the shoulder, says Lawrence. The following move is beneficial for almost every athlete as well as for “desk jockeys.”

**SUPPORTED FISH POSE (salamba matsyasana):** Lie face up with a block under your spine so your middle back rests on it but your hips and head are on the floor. (Rest your head on a blanket if necessary for comfort.) Extend your arms at your sides, palms facing up. Hold for 5 to 10 breaths.



**DOWNHILL SKIING**

A strong back, core and lower body, including the hips (glutes), quadriceps and hamstrings, are important for this speedy sport that takes control and finesse. Good flexibility through the calves and ankles will help improve your form and ward off fatigue as well.

**WARRIOR 2 (virabhadrasana II):** Stand with feet wide, lengthwise on the mat. Turn your left foot forward and angle the right toes in about 45 degrees. Bend the left leg 90 degrees, knee aligned over ankle. Extend arms out to sides over legs, palms down and fingers long. Draw your shoulder blades down. Hold for 5 to 10 breaths; switch sides and repeat.

BOOSTS LEG STRENGTH AND ANKLE FLEXIBILITY

**SURFING**

Better stability and balance are key for this sport, where you're just trying to stay on the board as you catch and ride waves. “You're never standing upright and rigid on a surfboard,” says Lawrence. “You need strong leg muscles and all those tiny stabilizing muscles need to be firing as well.” Balance poses, such as Tree and King Dancer, are helpful, too. This pose strengthens the lower body and opens the chest, improving breathing, which is important when you have to dive under waves.

**INVERTED TABLETOP (ardha purvottasana):** Sit on the mat with knees bent, feet flat and hip-width apart. Place palms several inches behind you on the mat with fingers pointing toward hips. Press your hands and feet into the mat and lift your hips until your thighs and torso are parallel to the floor with knees aligned over ankles and shoulders over wrists. Look up toward the ceiling (or forward, if it's easier on your neck). Hold for 5 to 10 breaths.

OPENS CHEST AND IMPROVES



STRETCHES THE INNER THIGHS



**GOLF**

“What many people don't realize is golf is very lower-body driven,” says Lawrence. “That's where your power comes from. You want the hips to be open and supple, otherwise some of that torque from the swing will go to your knees.” Besides making sure the back muscles are symmetrical and strong, Lawrence likes to prescribe strength and flexibility work for golfers' hips and legs.

**FROG POSE (mandukasana):** Start on all fours, wrists under shoulders and knees under hips. Lower onto your forearms and slowly walk your knees away from each other, keeping them even with your hips (don't shift forward or back). Knees, hips and ankles should all be bent 90 degrees (feet are flexed). You may need a block under your chest to fully relax into the pose. Hold for 5 to 10 breaths.

**WHY I YOGA ZACHARY MELLION, CYCLIST**

As the weather starts to warm up this spring, Mellion, 39, will be out on the road again racking up 130 to 150 miles a week on his bike. An orthodontist based in Akron, Ohio, he's been an athlete his entire life and wants to continue that trend for as long as possible.



“Yoga has helped me develop body awareness over the years,” he says. “Now, I can start to feel asymmetries and imbalances, and I use yoga to address those.”

He was introduced to the practice 14 years ago when he and his wife, also an athlete, received a gift certificate to a Bikram yoga studio, but he still doesn't consider himself a yogi. “It has definitely helped with my recovery and I feel more stable on the bike when I do yoga. I don't get fatigued as fast now, either,” says Mellion, who notes that his whole family—including his three young kids—hits the mat.