

Yoga helpful in managing an athlete's response to stress

By Sarah Neal

For the young skater, learning as many sports and movement types as possible is important for developing muscles, coordination, awareness and especially for preventing burnout. Time for the young athlete is limited though, and some activities are more efficient cross-training activities than others. Complementary activities such as yoga can and often do become part of a skater's regimen. Often, this is because of the similarity in movement patterns between the systems.

Yoga is much deeper than copying a pose. Indeed, articles and reports in recent years have revealed that many professional athletes have noticed the impact of yoga on their game. Professional teams including the NFL's Seattle Seahawks and the NBA's San Antonio Spurs have mandatory team yoga practice. Tennis stars such as Andy Murray practice yoga, and NHL goalie Sean Burke once stated that, "When things aren't going well during a game and I need to refocus, I think about yoga and what I've learned."¹ NBA great LeBron James has said, "Yoga isn't just about the body, it's also about the mind, and it's a technique that has really helped me."

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While the traditional yoga of the past encouraged hours of daily practice, one does not need to practice and meditate for hours to reap the benefits of the yoga systems. There are countless physical and mental benefits for skaters who maintain even a short yoga practice grounded in asana, meditation and breathwork. Some of the most obvious physical benefits of an asana practice include improved posture, strength, flexibility and balance; foot and ankle health; and heightened coordination and muscular awareness. Yoga goes deeper than this though, as it helps balance the brain to manage the body's stress response.

In early humans, the sympathetic ("fight or flight") nervous system functioned to help us escape real, immediate dangers, such as predators. However, when we tap into these reactions for long periods of time, the body and mind can suffer greatly. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, "those same lifesaving reactions in the body can disturb the immune, digestive, cardiovascular, sleep and reproductive systems. Some people may experience digestive symptoms, while others may have headaches, sleeplessness, sadness, anger, or irritability. Over time, continued strain on your body from stress may contribute to serious health problems, such

as heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes and other illnesses, including mental disorders such as depression or anxiety.”³

While figure skaters are used to handling a good deal of short-term performance stress, the modern lifestyle is consistently and continuously stressful. Many activities can help us cope with stress, but in my experience, nothing is as powerful as a regular yoga practice. Other forms of exercise can help lower anxiety by removing excess cortisol and adrenaline from the bloodstream, but as yoga teacher Eddie Stern explains in his book titled *One Simple Thing*, yoga is especially effective: “Yoga appears to modulate stress response systems. This, in turn, decreases physiological arousal — for example, reducing the heart rate, lowering blood pressure, and easing respiration. There is also evidence that yoga practices help increase heart rate variability, an indicator of the body’s ability to respond to stress more flexibly.”⁴

Stern goes on to say this is because yoga “has the added benefit of allowing us to access our nervous system ... through our breathing and direct it toward perceiving balance, safety and steadiness.”⁴ An athlete that feels balanced, safe, and steady is a more confident athlete, and a more confident athlete learns and performs better.

How does yoga do this? Yoga begins by calming the breath, because it is much easier to calm the breath than the mind. Stern says, “If stress levels are high, yoga practice will down-regulate, particularly through breathing, the parts of the brain and endocrine system that are responsible for hormonal release of adrenaline and cortisol. ... [Yoga] restores the functions that are out of alignment toward a state of balance.”⁴

In fact, the name hatha yoga itself and the two parts of a physical asana practice — activity and stillness — directly correspond to the two nervous systems.⁴

Because of its deep impact on the nervous system, yoga brings additional mental and emotional benefits beyond the above listed physical ones. Some of these include:

1. **Arrival and goal setting** — The first step for a dedicated yoga practice is to arrive, clear the mind and set an intention. A great practice for busy skaters.
2. **Focus** — Stern says that different systems of yoga “have different end goals, but all of them have one thing in common, namely the idea that in order to achieve your goals, you need to be able to focus the mind.”⁴ In other words, yoga is not about mastering the postures, but it is about controlling the mind.

3. **Resilience** — Yoga can help skaters, as well as parents and coaches, weather the challenges of life toward the proverbial finish line. As Stern says, “The ability to stick with something that is difficult, and to do it with a calm mind, is one of the primary principles of yoga practice. Through gradual mastery we develop an ease of effort, and by keeping the mind focused in a relaxed way on the breath in difficult postures, we learn to bear difficulty. ... [By practicing the postures], we will be able to withstand the ups and downs of life with a calm mind and fortitude.”⁵
4. **Courage** — Sometimes athletes come to the rink with so much fear of failure and anxiety, that they are not truly open to learning. One might think that yoga is easy, but as any dedicated practitioner will say, it takes courage and honesty to practice good yoga — in other words, to perform difficult postures and to let go enough to breathe smoothly through the challenges. Since yoga provides a relaxed space in which to learn — inward focus, slow pace, distraction-less environment, focus on the present moment — skaters can tackle their fears off the ice first.
5. **Gratitude** — Science overwhelmingly states that practicing gratitude can have numerous physical, psychological and social benefits. Many yoga teachers end class with a saying or mantra that reminds students of the importance of looking inward and expressing gratitude for the practice, the teachers and everything that allows us to practice.

Through a consistent yoga practice grounded in postures, meditation and the breath — even if it is just a few minutes a day or one longer weekly session — skaters can reap countless benefits as outlined above. Taking the stress of new skating elements, crowded skating sessions, loud music, and external pressures out of the equation to focus on the yoga postures and the breath, skaters can work to refine the most specific of muscles and learn to breathe through the challenges. The wisdom of the yoga system is that practitioners don’t need to think about the end goal — they need only to focus on the breath and let the postures themselves work their magic on the different systems of the body. In this way, the skater who practices yoga regularly can become a much happier, healthier, well balanced, mindful and stronger skater.

Yoga is absolutely for everyone — no flexibility, specific body type, or age is required — but skaters, parents, and coaches should be aware that not all yoga is created equal. Practices that focus more on extreme flexibility, pushing oneself to the limit, or “purification” are not the

same as practices designed to focus on the breath and meet the body where it happens to be at any particular moment. For this reason, it is important to do a little research when choosing where to practice, and skaters may need to try a few teachers to see what clicks. Also, please be advised that while yoga has been shown to help with anxiety and depression, it is *not* a replacement for treatment from a medical or mental health professional. If you are experiencing disordered eating or depression or have any health concerns, please seek advice from a health care professional.

For a list of additional studies that show how yoga helps reduce anxiety and regulate stress visit <https://www.elsevier.com/connect/the-science-of-yoga-what-new-research-reveals>.

References:

¹ Hughes, Johnny. (2015). Retrieved from: <https://www.thesportster.com/entertainment/top-15-athletes-who-do-yoga/>.

² Mahoney, Rob. (2014). LeBron James credits yoga class for helping alleviate cramping issues in Game 2. Retrieved from <https://www.si.com/nba/point-forward/2014/06/09/lebron-james-yoga-class-cramping-heat-nba-finals>.

³<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/stress/index.shtml>

⁴ Stern, E. (2019). One simple thing: a new look at the science of yoga and how it can transform your life. New York: North Point Press, a division of Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux.

⁵ Iyengar, B.K.S. (2002). Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali. London: Thorsons, an imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers. P. 63.