

## **Sport and Exercise Psychology developed through Yoga**

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Yoga is mind and body discipline developed in India some 2000 years ago. Almost three decades ago, the fitness industry rediscovered this ancient form of physical activity and a new category called mind-body exercise was created. In a more recent article, Larkey, Jahnke, Etnier, and Gonzalez (2009) proposed the term “meditative movement” to classify exercise activities which focus on physical movements, conscious breathing, a calm state of mind, and deep states of relaxation.

As a yoga practitioner for many years and a student of sport and exercise psychology, I was thinking of ways on how to better integrate these two disciplines. I practice a dynamic form of yoga called Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga. This method was taught by the late Sri Pattabhi Jois of Mysore, India, and was passed on to him by his teacher Shri Krishnamacharya, said to be a great yogi and healer (K. Pattabhi Jois, 2009). The dynamic element of the practice called vinyasa provides a light aerobic stimulus which, based on a personal experience and some published studies (Cowen & Adams, 2005; 2007), can raise one’s heart rate up to 60% of the relative maximum. Contrary to popular belief, yoga is not only for increased flexibility and relaxation. It also increases muscular endurance, decreases perceived stress, and improves overall health perception (Cowen & Adams, 2005).

Ultimately, the goal of yoga is purely psychological. As defined in the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, one of the authoritative texts in yoga, yoga is the control of the mental fluctuations and energies. In Ashtanga, the purpose of working the body out is to burn the six poisons of the heart – desire, anger, delusion, greed, envy, and sloth (The Practice, 2009). Simply put, the goal is to live a peaceful life free from hatred and negativities.

### **Yoga as physical activity intervention**

In India, the practice of yoga can be as sedentary as sitting for hours in deep meditation or as active as the jumping transitions in Ashtanga. When we talk about yoga as physical activity, we are actually focusing on the practice of hatha yoga. The practice of hatha yoga consists of several practical techniques aimed to make the body clean, healthy, and strong. These modalities include cleansing techniques, physical exercises, breath work, attention focus, and attitude training. All of which, I believe, are important to physical and psychological health and well-being.

A recent review article comparing the health benefits of yoga versus conventional exercise suggests that yoga appears to be as effective as or even superior than exercise in reducing perceived fatigue and stress in addition to improving health-related outcomes like blood glucose, blood lipids, and salivary cortisol (Ross & Thomas, 2010). This review implies that yoga, in general, can be an effective alternative physical activity intervention program which not only addresses the health/fitness triad of aerobic exercise, muscular fitness, and flexibility, but also provides a number of psychological benefits such as reduced stress and anxiety.

### **Yoga for mental skills training**

When I started teaching yoga to my university’s cheerleading team way back in 2002, I thought yoga would be a good alternative to a traditional psychological skills training program. Armed with only a 3-unit undergraduate sport psychology course and a lot of personal yoga practice, I introduced yoga to the team as a cross-training program both to enhance the athletes’

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physical and mental skills. Later on, some of the athletes informed me that yoga helped them to control their performance anxiety and cope better with both athletic and academic demands.

As I pointed out earlier, yoga techniques include not only physical exercises but also breath work, attention focus, and attitude training. Breath work is essential to developing inner awareness which is prerequisite to relaxation and imagery. One school of yoga actually teaches a technique called yoga **nidra** (yogic sleep) with preparatory exercises very similar to imagery training. Attention focus in yoga includes sense withdrawal, concentration, and meditation, which are in essence centering in sport psychology language.

Yoga also teaches positive thinking. Generally, attitude training in yoga involves the practice of ethical rules and observances called yamas and niyamas, but in the context of sport psychology, attitude training in yoga means thinking positively or applying positive self-talk.

**Summary**

Yoga as a physical activity has many physical as well as psychological benefits. It offers a holistic approach to a physical activity intervention and an alternative strategy to enhance mental skills in sports. Yoga has a wide range of techniques designed to improve health and fitness; to teach inner awareness, breathing and relaxation; and to cultivate a positive mental state. As sport psychology is still in its infancy in some parts of the world, offering yoga as a cross-training program is a good introduction to a comprehensive mental skills training program and may assist in providing a way to gain entry into an athletic team. Traditional psychological skills techniques such as centering, imagery, and relaxation, can be incorporated into a regular yoga session which makes it a great introductory mental training package. Yoga is now a mainstream discipline that even professional NBA teams incorporate it in their training programs (Stack, 2011).

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