

A Theoretical Study on Role and Importance of Yoga in Sports

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Abstract – *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. This paper will highlight the benefits for professional athletes through the practice of Yoga and explore how Yoga can significantly enhance their performance. 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. 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 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.

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INTRODUCTION

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. This paper will highlight the benefits for professional athletes through the practice of Yoga and explore

how Yoga can significantly enhance their performance.

IMPORTANCE OF YOGA IN SPORTS:

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. Sporting mentor B.P Bam highlights this point by stating “*sporting skills require the attainment of deep focus*”, “*living in every moment*” and emphasizes that “*the toughest part of any achievement is the handling of distractions and adverse conditions*”. If one is not able to ‘score the goal’ or ‘serve the ball’ at the critical match point or deal with crowds who are ‘cheering or booing’, victory will be far away.

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, mans will-power, self-control and concentration power can be increased*”. B.P Bam also highlights this point, he states “*coming into the present by focusing on breath is one of the best habits to be cultivated. That marks the beginning of concentration.*” He also mentions that a recent study of pranayama from the Nath sect served the “*purpose of improving the focus admirably.*” 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. Swami Sivananda highlights this point, he highlights that steady and systematic practice of yoga will “*make the mind very obedient*

and faithful” and make the practitioner “*successful in every attempt*”.

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 affects all other parts of the body in a positive manner. Cells are nourished and revitalized and the internal functioning of body organs is enhanced. According to Yogic authorities, “*yogic exercises are mainly designed to keep the proper curvature of the spine and to increase its flexibility*”, they also state that “*balancing asanas develop the function of the cerebellum, the brain centre that controls how the body works in motion, improve muscle coordination and posture including physical and nervous balance which helps to achieve grace and fluidity of movement.*”

Inverted asanas can be particularly beneficial to break bad habits and old patterns of behaviour, for example, an inefficient swimming stroke or volleyball swing. For a professional athlete wishing to optimize their performance, it is essential that they have the ability to change body movements and behaviours as required to maximize efficiency and effectiveness. Inverted asanas change the normal patterns (both the emotional and psychic state) throwing a new light on old patterns of behaviour and being. Inverted asanas can also help to improve health, reduce stress and anxiety and increase self-confidence.

The use of Yoga Nidra and visualisation can assist in the development of a skill and to reinforce a new pattern of behaviour or beliefs. B.P.Bam highlights this point, he states “*all of the top Indian sport persons who have worked with me have been making extensive use of various techniques of visualization*”. “*Purification of memory or reinforcing the best from the past, by remembering it again and again, makes a major contribution to the perfecting of a skill.*” Meditation and chanting can also help to reduce stress and anxiety and create a mental calmness and poise beneficial for performing at peak times.

CONCLUSIONS

- 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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