

Yoga 101

Yoga is a centuries-old Eastern philosophy that is practiced in all walks of life, all over the world. The term "yoga" translates into "yoke" or "union," describing the integration of mind and body. Initially the sole purpose of yoga was to experience spiritual enlightenment. As the practice has evolved over time and different yoga disciplines have grown, more and more athletes are becoming yoga proponents. Practicing yoga on a regular basis builds more than a strong, flexible body. It promotes balance and relaxation, increases range of motion, coordinates breathing with movement, and strengthens intrinsic muscle groups that stabilize the skeletal system.

Yoga can be a wonderful addition to any training regiment, and with its current popularity it should not be difficult to find a class in your area. The majority of the classes in the U.S. teach one of the many varieties of hatha yoga, a physical discipline that focuses on asanas (postures) and breath work. The following points should help you choose a yoga class, and then you too can be on your way to becoming a more balanced, relaxed, focused and effective athlete.

Find the right instructor:

- Check the yellow pages
- Inquire at health clubs or local Y's
- Ask friends, associates or training partners
- Find a beginner's class
- Find out the teacher's approach to yoga (some can be quite vigorous and others more mild)
- Check the size and length (generally 60-90 minutes) of the class
- Does the class provide a mat, or do you need your own?
- The cost of the class
- What kind of clothing is recommended?
- Let the instructor know of any physical problems or limitations (can the instructor meet your needs?)

Once you have found a class:

- Attend the class as much as possible (this gives the instructor time to know you so that he/she may tailor postures to suit your personal needs)
- Do not perform any postures that generate pain, especially in the knees, lower back, and neck.
- Let the instructor know that a certain posture causes pain and then ask for an alternative posture or stop and rest until the next posture is presented
- It is common for instructors to aid students with various postures. Make sure that you are comfortable with the contact, and, if the "help" is causing any pain, let the instructor know immediately

Get the most from the class you attend:

- Try to get to the class about ten minutes early to set up your mat and to get focused for the session
- As with other exercises sessions, try not to eat right before the class (eat at least 2 hours prior to the class)
- Let the instructor know if you have an injury or condition that might prevent certain postures
- Create a purpose for attending the session (why are you there?)
- Focus on the task at hand (not the list of things that you need to get done or who you need to call, or how badly your last meeting went)
- Leave your cell phone and pager behind
- If attending with a friend, keep the conversation down as others may be distracted
- If you sweat a lot make sure that you have a towel and bring your own mat
- Work at your own pace (all bodies are not created equal)
- Try not to enter late or leave class early, as it can be disruptive to others

Now is the time of year to add something new to your daily training plan. Break free from your usual routine and give yoga a try---you will be pleased with the results.

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