

Triathlete Magazine Training Feature Article June 2007 Issue

Swim, Bike, Run ... and Yoga? Flexible Warrior – Athletic Yoga for Improved Performance By Karen Dubs

Your goal is to improve speed and performance. You're not interested in chakras, contortions and chanting much less sitting still, meditating or focusing inwardly on your breathing. Although you keep hearing about the benefits of yoga, you feel like it's probably a waste of your precious and limited training time and is either too easy or too hard, or just too weird. Yet thousands of athletes are cross training with Yoga to give them an extra edge... reducing chances of injury, muscular imbalance, and overtraining while improving endurance, focus and flexibility.

What if there was a style of yoga that offers all the benefits but without the extreme poses and strange stuff that might make you uncomfortable? What if there was an athletic yoga for specifically for triathletes?

The yoga poses featured in this article are from the Flexible Warrior: Athletic Yoga for Triathletes video which features three competitive triathletes (hey, if they can do it so can you!) This sequence of yoga-based stretches focus on the biggest race season issues: relieving stiff shoulders, sore hips, achy low backs and tight hip flexors, quads, and hamstrings.

Getting Started:

Athletic yoga will increase your flexibility, strength and balance which can all have a positive affect on performance but like all training it needs to be practiced regularly for the greatest results.

The pose sequence in this article is a great place to start and you can do it in the comfort of your own home in less than 20 minutes. You don't need any special equipment or expensive gear (although a yoga mat is suggested). The time you take to add yoga to your training routine can actually save you recovery time, get you back on the race course faster, or spare you injuries.

Skeptical at first, Hollie Kenney, Pro Triathlete and USA Triathlon Coach began to feel less stiff and more flexible within a few sessions. "Athletic yoga is a great addition to my multi-sport training. When I skip my yoga sessions because of busy training and race schedules, my body starts to ache." Kenney soon became hooked and is one of many triathletes that provided feedback for the pose sequences on the DVD.

While doing the entire sequence three times a week is ideal, think of it like training for your first Triathlon... You didn't try to do the entire distance in the first week and you shouldn't expect to touch your toes in your first yoga session either. As you gain flexibility and get more comfortable you can add poses and increase your yoga training time.

During the summer and fall while your race schedule and mileage is heavy, focus mostly on gentler flexibility poses, especially if yoga is new to you. After your race season ends, consider adding more challenging strength, endurance and core conditioning poses for cross training like the ones in the "Energy" and "Power" sequences of the Flexible Warrior video.

Ancient Yoga For Modern Day Athletes

Although yoga is thousands of years old, it provides solutions for modern day athletes and is an opportunity to try an age old form of exercise for improved performance instead of the buying into the newest invention. "Athletes are always looking for a new supplement or training device to get that extra edge and improved performance on race day", says USA Triathlon Coach Hollie Kenney. "I think it's cool that yoga has been around for thousands of years and yet is one of the best cross training techniques athletes can do for flexibility and injury prevention." As for the misconception that yoga is too weird or easy, athletic styles of yoga have evolved and are designed specifically for sports conditioning and cross training. Athletic yoga appeals to the competitive side of athletes, yet is restorative to create strength that is flexible and adaptable. John Fassel, assistant special teams coach for the Baltimore Ravens recently finished his first Ironman distance and is in training for IM Arizona and Couer D'Alene '07. He never bothered to add yoga to his training routine until the class came to his work place, and now he looks forward to it. "This athletic style of yoga is exactly what my body needs. I try to plan a run or ride immediately before class, which is a great combo. I travel a lot so now I do some of the poses when I'm on the road too."

The Benefits:

Many athletes are soaked with sweat by the end of an hour long class and leave feeling pleasantly surprised with the return on their invested time.

Todd Hesel, a four-time Ironman distance finisher who is featured in the video appreciates the blend of core strength, flexibility and recovery Flexible Warrior sequence offers. "Regular yoga makes me feel more stable and efficient, which translates into greater power and speed. The enhanced recovery from yoga allows me to train with greater consistency and come to my workouts feeling fresh."

Juda McGannon a three-time Ironman distance finisher and USA Triathlon coach likes that regular yoga sessions make her feel better physically and perform stronger mentally. "Yoga helps me in subtle ways that aren't necessarily measurable or quantifiable like my other training" says Juda. She adds, "I start every day with 10 to 15 minutes of Sun Salutations. While moving through the postures, I take inventory of how my body feels and how that may impact my planned workout for the day. Yoga has allowed me to develop a body awareness and functional strength that I don't get from any other activity."

Athletic Yoga:

Creates strength that is flexible, adaptable, and agile

Reduces injury and muscle stiffness

Improves core strength, muscular balance, and range of motion

Increases endurance, focus and stamina

Encourages mental and physical recovery to improve motivation

Decreases recovery time, tightness and soreness

Improves posture, form, alignment and awareness of movement patterns

Strengthens weak, underused muscles

Stretches tight, overused muscles

Incorporates counter poses to off set muscular imbalances

Takes into consideration that athletes are tight and aren't meant to get into extreme stretches

Is a time efficient, balanced, total body workout

The Strength and Determination of a WARRIOR. The FLEXIBILITY and Focus of a Yogi.

You Need Athletic Yoga If ...

Your toes are totally out of your reach

Standing up straight is starting to feel like an unnatural position

Your hamstring and calf muscles are screaming at you by your 3rd mile (and you have 12 more to go)

Your massage therapist finds 'knots the size of golf balls'

Sitting cross legged on the floor is harder than running 10 miles

Your transition time needs some help (Hey, learning to balance on one foot can't hurt)

The Balance Of Opposites

Although yoga and sports conditioning are opposites in many ways, because athletic yoga incorporates sport specific stretches, exercises and counter poses the two extremes compliment and balance each other perfectly.

"Tight and imbalanced muscles are the source of many injuries for endurance athletes," says Mark Dees, USA Triathlon Coach and Fitness Director for The Maryland Athletic Club. "Yoga provides a way to relieve those issues while balancing the bodies muscular system and alleviating repetitive use injuries."

For example, cycling creates forward flexion of the spine which causes a forward head posture. Swimming causes rounded shoulders. The impact of running compresses the spine. After years of triathlon training even the strongest of endurance athletes might have a hard time simply sitting or standing up straight.

Chances are you've trained through an injury, hobbled down the road and know exactly how wrong it feels to train off balance. Your intuition tells you to rest but you keep training, compensating and getting more off balance with every stroke or step.

Reza Mazhari is a sprint triathlete and says "athletic yoga acts as a regular 'tune-up' for my body, relieving all the existing aches and pains while keeping me flexible both physically and mentally for daily intense workouts and life."

Recharge And Refuel

While it's important and fun to push forward and challenge your speed, strength and endurance, recovery is equally important. Triathletes often don't stretch or rest enough... It's just not as fun as speeding down the road. If you've ever felt the mental and physical exhaustion of over training you have likely also experienced how powerful a good night's sleep can be for your motivation and body. Think of that rejuvenated run you took last winter after your recovery phase. Instead of always pushing forward imagine how invigorated you might feel if you added a few short, restorative rests into your weekly routine, allowing your muscles regular recovery time to rebuild, repair, and recharge. Athletic yoga sessions end with a "final relaxation" where participants lie still and rest. This motionless pause is truly the pose athletes need most. Taking the time to rest increases energy, strength, power and potential and instead of feeling exhausted and over-trained you feel energized, empowered and ready for what's next.

What? No Competition?! Triathlete's are determined, persistent and committed to being their best. While it's fun and addicting to compete and train hard, it is important not to be competitive with yoga poses. After the yoga session ends you can go back to being a competitive athlete.

Find Your Edge

"The edge" is the balance point between pushing too hard and taking it too easy. Just like "being in the zone" it's hard to describe but you'll know it when you feel it. Athletes are used to pushing through pain and connect with the "more is more" philosophy. A "less is more" approach often works best for athletes who are used to pushing through pain and beyond their limits. Instead of focusing on how a pose looks, athletes benefit from focusing on how a pose feels, modifying as necessary and maintaining calm, relaxed breathing. Tight, inflexible muscles come with the territory and the goal is not to get into a perfect yogi pose.

What Style Of Yoga Is Best?

First, be aware there are dozens of yoga styles practiced in the United States, ranging from slow, meditative and gentle to challenging and sweaty. Most athletes are drawn to the physical challenge of Power, Bikram or Ashtanga yoga, but also find the restorative classes very beneficial. Athletic Yoga combines the challenging power, strength and balance poses with the flexibility and recovery poses so you get the benefit of both. Consider experimenting with classes in your local area as well as practicing at home until you find the style and teacher that clicks with you.

What Are You Waiting For?

Join the thousands of athletes who have already gained an edge with athletic yoga. Create a plan, add "yoga" to your training routine, commit to being more flexible, be patient, be consistent and results will come.

Practice Tips: Stretch without Strain

Move slowly and deliberately through the sequence, listening to your body.

Sensations of quivering, frustration and pushing are NOT what you want to feel during yoga. It's your rare opportunity to not compete!

Like anything new, yoga may feel a little awkward at first, so commit to at least six weeks.

Do not force a stretch! Doing so will only tighten muscles and could result in injury, which is of course the opposite of what you want.

Hold each pose for 5-10 breath cycles before moving onto the next stretch.

Use full, diaphragmatic breathing in and out through the nose. Feeling breathless is an indicator you've gone too far.

For the best results, practice this sequence 3 to 5 times a week, or after each swim, bike or run.

If you have a training partner, try this pose sequence with them, taking turns reading the "how" instructions to guide them through.

Consider taking one-on-one training sessions or classes with a Registered Yoga Teacher (RYT) to help you with form. There are modifications for most poses to adjust around your injuries.

The Pose Sequence:

1) Balanced Knee to Chest

Why? Stretches glutes and low back while developing balance and stability

How: Balance on your right leg, holding under the left thigh and drawing it toward your rib cage while maintaining a lengthened spine. In all balance poses, find something to focus your gaze on, and keep your breath smooth and even.

Tip: If your balance is shaky, keep one hand on a wall or a chair back until you feel steadier. Working the little muscles in your feet and ankles are important too.

2) Balanced Pigeon with Chest Expansion

Why? Stretches hips, glutes, piriformis, chest and shoulders while developing strength and balance.

How? From Balanced Knee to Chest pose, keep the left knee bent, taking the left ankle across the top of the right thigh and flexing the left foot. Gently rotate the left knee out until you feel a stretch in left hip (you don't want to feel any pain in the knee). Keeping an extended spine, hinge your torso towards your left shin to feel a deeper stretch. Stay here if the pose is already challenging, or progress on adding the chest and shoulder stretch by interlacing your fingers behind your back and lifting your arms up and away from your low back. Keep your eyes focused on a still spot.

3) Pyramid Stretch

Why? Stretches hamstrings

How? From Balanced Pigeon, step your left foot back about 2-3 feet from your right foot. Your heels should line up, your right toes will be angled straight forward and your left toes will be angled out at about a 45 degree angle. Keeping your right knee slightly bent and your hips level to the floor hinge forward and support by placing your hands on your right shin. Keep your front knee bent as much as feels comfortable.

4) Forward Fold with Chest Expansion

Why? Stretches the hamstrings, chest and shoulders

How? From Pyramid stretch, knees your left foot forward and stand with feet hip distance apart and parallel. Interlace your fingers behind your back and fold forward keeping the knees slightly bent and the hips aligned over the ankles. Lift the arms up and away from the tailbone until you feel a stretch in the fronts of the shoulders and chest as well as the hamstrings. Release your torso toward your thighs.

*Before moving onto #5 repeat poses 1-3 with the left leg, followed by a second forward fold

5) Runner's Stretch

Why? Stretches hamstrings

How? From forward fold, bend your knees as much as you need to put your hands on the floor, then step your right knee back to the floor putting extra padding under the knee if it is sensitive. Your left knee is directly over your ankle. Shift your weight back into the right knee, extending your left leg straighter until you feel a stretch in your left hamstring. This is a deep stretch - Your left leg does not need to be straight!

6) Crescent Lunge

Why? Stretches hip flexors and quads

How? From Runner's stretch, shift your weight forward so your left knee is directly over your left flexor with one hand on either side of your left foot. Bring your hands to your left thigh and press your torso up extending and lengthening your spine (not leaning forward). Hinge your hips forward until you feel a stretch in the right hip flexor and quad. If you feel comfortable you can release your hands from your thigh and bring them up over your shoulders, reaching through your fingertips as you breath in, releasing the hips towards the floor as you breathe out.

7) Downward Dog

Why? This is one of the best total body strength and flexibility poses, stretching calf muscles, Achilles, and hamstrings, while strengthening and stretching the shoulders and lats.

How? From Crescent Lunge, bring both hands down on either side of your left foot and step your left knee back to meet your right knee so you are on all fours with your hands shoulder distance apart and your knees under your hips. Curl your toes under, press through your palms and lifting your tailbone up so you are in an inverted "v" position. Keep your knees slightly bent if your hamstrings are tight, working towards straightening your legs. Inhale and think of extending and lengthening your spine, exhale and allow the heels to sink down towards the floor as you continue to press through your palms.

*Repeat poses 5 & 6 on the other leg followed by a second downward dog

The featured pose sequence is from Karen Dubs' DVD, Flexible Warrior: Athletic Yoga for Triathletes Vol. 1. The video features three triathletes and three 30 minute sequences for Energy, Power, Flexibility and Improved Performance. The DVD is part of the Spinervals International multisport series by Coach Troy Jacobson.

Two new titles are coming for fall 2007:

Vol 2: Athletic Yoga for Triathletes: Flexibility & Form (The Foundation)

Vol 3: Athletic Yoga for Triathletes: Cross Train & Condition (The Challenge)

Karen's athletic yoga DVD is energizing, effective and is the missing link in many training programs and a critical component in the quest for peak multi-sport performance.

Troy Jacobson, Top Coach and Founder of Spinervals Cycling.

Karen Dubs is a Registered Yoga Teacher and ACE Certified fitness professional specializing in yoga for athletes in Baltimore, MD. She has trained a wide range of professional and recreational athletes including triathletes, runners, cyclists, swimmers and Baltimore Ravens football players. For more information visit www.flexiblewarrior.com