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UNLOCKING POTENTIAL: EXPLORING YOGA'S ROLE AS SUPPLEMENTARY EXERCISE FOR ELITE ATHLETES

Dr. Jayakumar. K.*

ABSTRACT

In the realm of high-performance sports, athletes are regularly looking for advanced means to enhance their physical prowess and mental fortitude. Amidst this pursuit, the incorporation of yoga as a supplementary exercise has garnered significant attention. The symphony of strength, flexibility, and mindfulness that yoga offers, presents an exceptional approach to reinforcing the capabilities of top sports performers. This exploration delves into the rationale behind integrating yoga into the training schedules of elite athletes. Its adaptableness and accessibility further accentuate its suitability for individuals of different age groups and fitness levels. Incorporating yoga into one's routine can lead to a more balanced and harmonious method to physical and mental fitness in today's fast-paced world. Yoga's benefits include flexibility, injury prevention, mental resilience, and enhanced recovery, making it an precious supplemental exercise for elite athletes. By examining the physiological, psychological, and holistic approach aligns with athletes' multifaceted needs, aiding them in attaining optimal performance, physical health, and overall well-being, this article aims to throw light on the justified role that yoga can play in uplifting the performance of top-tier athletes.

Keywords : Yoga Supplemental Exercises (YSE), Yoga Compensation Exercises (YCE), Yoga Regeneration Exercises (YRE), Elite Athlete

Introduction

"Human beings are intricate psychosomatic entities, where the demarcation between the mind and the body blurs, and they are deeply interconnected, each influencing the other significantly. This universal principle applies seamlessly to athletes, regardless of whether they are striving for peak competitive performance, overall well-being, or seeking the harmonization of their mental and physical faculties. A comprehensive approach for athletes encompasses a focus on physical conditioning to achieve optimal fitness levels, honing technical skills to enhance performance, and strategic training to develop effective tactics. In addition to these aspects, mental skills such as relaxation techniques, concentration, and imagery are vital for maintaining a positive mental state. Among the myriad

methodologies available, yoga stands out as an exceptionally effective tool. It wields influence in a simultaneous and harmonious manner over both the mental and physical domains, rendering it invaluable for athletes. Yoga exercises yield indirect benefits by positively affecting tactical and technical readiness. These exercises can be adapted for various purposes, including serving as warm-up routines, aiding in post-exercise cool-downs, addressing muscle imbalances, activating or deactivating specific muscle groups, and fostering a profound sense of unity between the mind and the body."

"In an era characterized by increasingly sedentary lifestyles and escalating stress levels, the importance of exercise in maintaining both physical and mental well-being cannot be overstated. Amidst the multitude of

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exercise options available, yoga has emerged as a potent and holistic supplementary regimen. The practice of yoga induces a physiological state that counters the fight-or-flight stress response, thereby fostering a profound sense of equilibrium and unity between the mind and body (Woodyard 2011, 49). With its roots deeply embedded in ancient Indian traditions, yoga presents a unique fusion of physical postures, controlled breathing techniques, meditation, and mindfulness. This essay embarks on an exploration of yoga's role as a supplementary exercise and the myriad benefits it bestows upon overall health. Yoga, in its diverse forms, stands as an excellent complement to a spectrum of physical activities. While high-intensity workouts predominantly target cardiovascular health and muscle strength, yoga places a premium on flexibility, balance, and mental acuity. Its assortment of postures, known as asanas, serve to both elongate and fortify muscles, yielding improved posture, reduced susceptibility to injury, and heightened bodily awareness. Consequently, yoga emerges as an ideal companion to more vigorous exercise routines, effectively countering muscle tightness that may result from repetitive movements."

Moreover, yoga places a significant emphasis on controlled breathing and relaxation techniques, making notable contributions to stress reduction. In a world characterized by relentless demands and pressures, the practice of deep breathing and mindfulness during yoga sessions equips individuals with enhanced stress management capabilities. This not only elevates their mental well-being but also exerts a positive influence on their physical health by diminishing the risk of stress-related ailments such as hypertension and digestive disorders. Mindfulness "predisposes individuals to increase their use of acceptance coping versus problem-focused coping in relatively uncontrollable situations, with greater increases in problem-focused approaches when a stressor is appraised as more controllable". Beyond its contributions to physical and mental health, yoga extends its benefits into the realms of spirituality and emotional growth. The meditative elements inherent in yoga practice foster self-awareness, introspection, and an amplified sense of presence. This facet of yoga

assumes particular significance when used as a supplementary exercise, encouraging individuals to cultivate a profound connection between their minds and bodies, thereby enriching their overall exercise journey.

Yoga, as a therapeutic practice, offers unique advantages. Specific yoga postures have the ability to both contract and stretch the muscles of the back. This dual action serves to elongate muscles that have chronically shortened on the concave side of the scoliotic curve while simultaneously fortifying them on the convex side. Such an approach aids in redressing perceived imbalances in limb length and holds the potential to enhance nerve conduction (Long 2006, 21). Furthermore, the inherent accessibility of yoga renders it a versatile option suitable for individuals of all ages and fitness levels. In contrast to certain high-impact activities that may entail a heightened risk of injury, yoga provides a gentle yet highly effective approach to physical fitness. Whether one chooses to practice in a dedicated studio, the comfort of their own home, or amidst the serenity of outdoor settings, yoga's requirements remain minimal, and its routines can be tailored to suit individual needs. Contemporary wisdom, espoused by both coaches and psychologists, underscores the efficacy of yoga in facilitating daily mental skills development. By seamlessly integrating a few yoga asanas into their regular warm-up and cool-down routines, athletes can reap not only physical advantages but also psychological benefits. This seamless fusion, combining attention-concentration relaxation with stretching and warming-up, concurrently promotes flexibility and body awareness. Additionally, yoga has been acknowledged for its capacity to strengthen the mind-body connection, instill a sense of calmness and relaxation, bolster self-confidence, fortify self-discipline and determination, alleviate stress and anxiety, and infuse the body with renewed vitality and energy. Clearly, the extensive benefits of yoga are far-reaching and have the potential to transform individuals into more balanced, relaxed, focused, efficient, and effective beings. These benefits extend across various disciplines, including those inhabited by professional athletes (Belcourt).

Yoga boasts a plethora of both mental and physical

advantages that have the potential to elevate an athlete's performance to new heights. Moreover, it serves as a valuable tool in alleviating stress, promoting relaxation, and fostering healthy sleep patterns—attributes of particular significance for athletes susceptible to overexertion. Beyond these benefits, yoga encompasses a holistic approach to improving an athlete's well-being. It contributes to increased flexibility, enhanced balance, and improved coordination—essential elements that have a positive and direct impact on athletic performance. Additionally, yoga plays a pivotal role in specific psychological training tailored to prepare athletes for upcoming competitions. The ultimate objective of such training is self-mastery, which encompasses the domains of emotional and mental control. The journey towards self-mastery unfolds through a series of transformative phases. It commences with the foundational step of recognizing and comprehending one's own mind and body. Achieving self-awareness follows, facilitated by introspection and self-observation.

Learning yoga revolves around the cultivation of mindful attention—a skill of utmost importance in any sporting endeavour. Sage Rountree, an athlete herself, shares her insights into the transformative benefits that yoga has brought to her life and, in turn, offers accessible yoga postures and breathing techniques. These resources are designed not only to facilitate athletes of all disciplines in initiating a safe and effective yoga routine but also to assist them in averting or recovering from injuries (Rountree 2008). Central to this journey is the art of tuning in to one's body language, deciphering the subtle cues the body provides, and delving into the intricacies of the mind. The path to self-mastery unfolds through four fundamental steps: body awareness, breath awareness, attentional focus, and concentration. These steps act as guiding principles, leading athletes toward an acute awareness of their bodies, a deeper understanding of their bodily expressions, and mastery over their mental terrain. In essence, this odyssey entails the recognition of body awareness, the attainment of precise body control, the comprehension of the profound influence of breath, and ultimately, the achievement of mastery over the realm of the mind. A remarkable outcome of this

transformative process is the revelation that autonomic or unconscious functions of the body can indeed be influenced and harnessed.

Yoga Supplemental Exercises (YSE)

This aspect of hold a pivotal role in athletic preparation, serving as a cornerstone across various sports disciplines. These exercises encompass a holistic approach to fitness, extending beyond an athlete's primary sport, and thus contribute to comprehensive physical conditioning. They become particularly significant, as dedicated training within a specific sport may inadvertently neglect certain muscle groups. Supplemental training, such as YSE, serves to bridge these gaps and ensures a well-rounded foundation for specialized skills. This aspect assumes even greater importance for young athletes, as it safeguards against lopsided physical development while nurturing a robust base for honing their sport-specific talents. Additionally, supplemental training, including yoga, plays a pivotal role in offering a much-needed "switch-off" mechanism. This counteracts the physical and mental strains associated with heightened training loads and prolonged competitive periods. Yoga, in particular, stands out as an invaluable supplementary exercise for elite athletes, supported by compelling reasons. While rigorous physical training remains an indispensable aspect of an athlete's regimen, the integration of yoga into their routine yields a multitude of benefits that synergize with their overall performance and well-being. Notably, yoga equips athletes with an array of strategies and techniques that prove advantageous not only in their athletic pursuits but also in academic, personal, and social aspects of life. Moreover, the practice of yoga contributes to enhanced memory and cognitive functioning, making it especially beneficial for athletes who contend with high levels of stress. Over time, consistent yoga practice manifests in heightened social-emotional competence, further enriching an athlete's holistic development.

Achieving such comprehensive fitness typically involves incorporating the following supplemental training exercises and activities:

Some sports primarily target a limited range of muscles, such as fencing, which predominantly develops

a specific group of muscles while neglecting others.

Commencing competitive involvement at an early age can have adverse effects on the well-rounded development of young athletes. To ensure harmonious growth, supplemental training becomes essential, and incorporating supplemental exercises early on proves to be a valuable practice. These exercises instill a strong foundational base upon which athletes can build their specific skills.

Yoga Supplemental Exercises (YSE) offer an effective remedy for combatting monotony and warding off boredom within a training regimen. Furthermore, they play a crucial role in preventing overtraining while injecting a refreshing dose of variety and enjoyment into the training routine. YSE, functioning as a form of "active rest," serve to rebalance the training load, ensuring that it remains sustainable and diversified. The demands of competition, coupled with the stress of daily life, can place significant strain on the nervous system and deplete mental stamina. Herein, YSE step in as a potent means of replenishing both physical and mental energy while restoring equilibrium. Simultaneously, they actively promote health and facilitate a harmonious development of the physical and mental faculties. (Kogler 2006, 34).

In essence, YSE address the twin challenges of monotony and overtraining, infusing vigor and diversity into training regimens. They perform the vital function of recalibrating training loads, countering the cumulative stress experienced in competitive and daily life, and rejuvenating both the body and mind. This practice aligns seamlessly with the pursuit of holistic health and balanced development.

The combination of increased training intensity, extended preparation periods, and prolonged competitive seasons exerts significant pressure on the nervous system. Supplemental training serves as a beneficial "switch-off" mechanism, effectively alleviating the physical and mental stress that accumulates under these conditions.

The section dedicated to Yoga Compensation Exercises (YCE) underscores the enduring impact of sport-specific training on muscle imbalances. Although the cardiovascular and pulmonary systems often work in

concert, certain muscle groups may remain underutilized. This selective loading can lead to muscle imbalances, a consequence of either an excessive emphasis on specific muscle groups or the neglect of others (Kogler 2006, 35). YCE, as a systematic approach, aims to rectify and counteract these imbalances through a series of well-designed compensation exercises. By promoting a harmonious development of the body's various systems, YCE effectively restores equilibrium and mitigates the adverse effects of asymmetrical training. Yoga Regeneration Exercises (YRE) assume a pivotal role in the routines of athletes engaged in rigorous training. The attainment of peak performance hinges significantly on the ability to facilitate effective regeneration following demanding workouts. YRE assumes a crucial function in this context. Notably, studies have demonstrated that the diligent implementation of regeneration techniques results in a substantial reduction of muscle fatigue, amounting to a 30% decrease, and an impressive 20% increase in training intensity. These exercises facilitate the restoration of strength, accelerate recovery from fatigue, and serve as a preventive measure against injuries stemming from sustained muscle stress (Kogler 2006, 36).

An elite athlete attains the pinnacle of performance within a specific sport or physical activity. These individuals have typically undergone extensive years of rigorous training, meticulously honed their skills, and achieved exceptional levels of physical fitness, mental resilience, and expertise in their chosen discipline. Their journey often leads them to compete on national and international stages, where they proudly represent their country or team. Elite athletes adhere to meticulously structured training regimens, which encompass specialized exercises, drills, and practices tailored to their specific sport. This comprehensive approach includes elements of strength training, conditioning, skill refinement, and strategic mastery. The importance of proper nutrition and recovery cannot be overstated in the lives of elite athletes. They adhere to meticulously planned dietary regimens, ensuring they receive the precise fuel necessary to optimize their performance and facilitate swift recovery following strenuous training.

sessions or competitions. Achieving elite athlete status demands an extraordinary commitment of time, effort, and personal sacrifice. It is not a journey taken lightly. Elite athletes often collaborate with seasoned coaches, trainers, physiotherapists, and an array of support staff to fine-tune their performance. This dedicated team assists with skill development, strategy formulation, injury prevention, and the overall well-being of the athlete. Even at the elite level, the pursuit of improvement remains an ever-present driving force. Elite athletes continuously seek methods to enhance their skills, adapt to emerging trends within their sport, and continuously push their own boundaries. It is important to recognize that not all individuals who participate in sports will ascend to elite status. The journey to becoming an elite athlete necessitates a unique blend of natural talent, unwavering dedication, relentless hard work, and the alignment of the right opportunities.

Within the realm of athletics, the adoption of yoga as a supplementary exercise finds solid justification in its multifaceted advantages. Its assimilation into training regimens is firmly rooted in its capacity to enhance physical, mental, and physiological facets. The ensuing points provide compelling evidence as to why elite athletes wholeheartedly embrace yoga:

- Flexibility and Range of Motion: Yoga places a premium on flexibility, directly contributing to heightened joint mobility and an expanded range of motion. This is particularly advantageous for athletes whose success hinges on fluid, agile movements.
- Injury Prevention: Yoga's unwavering focus on cultivating balanced muscle development and heightened body awareness serves as a proactive measure against injuries arising from muscle imbalances. This aspect assumes paramount importance in sports characterized by repetitive motions.
- Core Strength and Stability: Numerous yoga poses actively engage core muscles, thereby elevating both stability and posture. A robust core is pivotal for generating power and safeguarding against injuries.
- Balance and Coordination: Yoga fosters superior balance and coordination through poses that consistently challenge stability. This attribute proves indispensable in sports like surfing and gymnastics.
- Mind-Body Connection: Yoga serves as a nurturing ground for mindfulness, concentration, and mental fortitude. Athletes who incorporate yoga into their routines exhibit marked improvements in focus and mental resilience.
- Stress Reduction: The relaxation techniques imparted by yoga equip athletes with invaluable tools for stress management—an imperative skill for individuals navigating the rigors of intensive training and high-stakes competition.
- Recovery Enhancement: Yoga plays a pivotal role in the recovery process by alleviating muscle tension and promoting relaxation. This, in turn, expedites recuperation between grueling training sessions.
- Breath Control and Endurance: Yoga's unwavering emphasis on controlled breathing can measurably enhance lung capacity and endurance, offering a distinct advantage to endurance athletes.
- Injury Rehabilitation: For athletes in the process of recovery, yoga provides a gentle and effective avenue for regaining strength and flexibility without imposing undue strain on injured areas.
- Longevity and Performance: The low-impact nature of yoga, coupled with its focus on flexibility and balance, has the potential to extend an athlete's career by bolstering joint health and mitigating wear and tear.

In summation, yoga stands as a multifaceted ally for elite athletes, aligning its myriad benefits with the demands and aspirations of their sporting pursuits.

Conclusion

In the dynamic world of sports, where every advantage counts, the incorporation of yoga as a supplementary exercise for top sports performers is a choice rooted in science and centuries-old wisdom. The physiological, psychological, injury-preventive, and mind-body connection benefits of yoga collectively

contribute to an athlete's overall performance enhancement. Its unique combination of physical postures, controlled breathing, meditation, and mindfulness sets it apart as a comprehensive exercise regimen. Flexibility, strength, endurance, mental resilience, stress management, injury prevention, and the refined mind-body connection all position yoga as a comprehensive tool for athletes striving for excellence. Its adaptability and accessibility further underscore its suitability for individuals of various ages and fitness levels. Incorporating yoga into one's routine can lead to a more balanced and harmonious approach to physical and mental fitness in today's fast-paced world. As the sporting landscape continues to evolve, the integration of yoga into training regimens can be seen as an evolution in itself - an evolution that harnesses the power of both ancient tradition and modern science to foster the holistic growth of elite athletes.

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