

yoga gives athletes

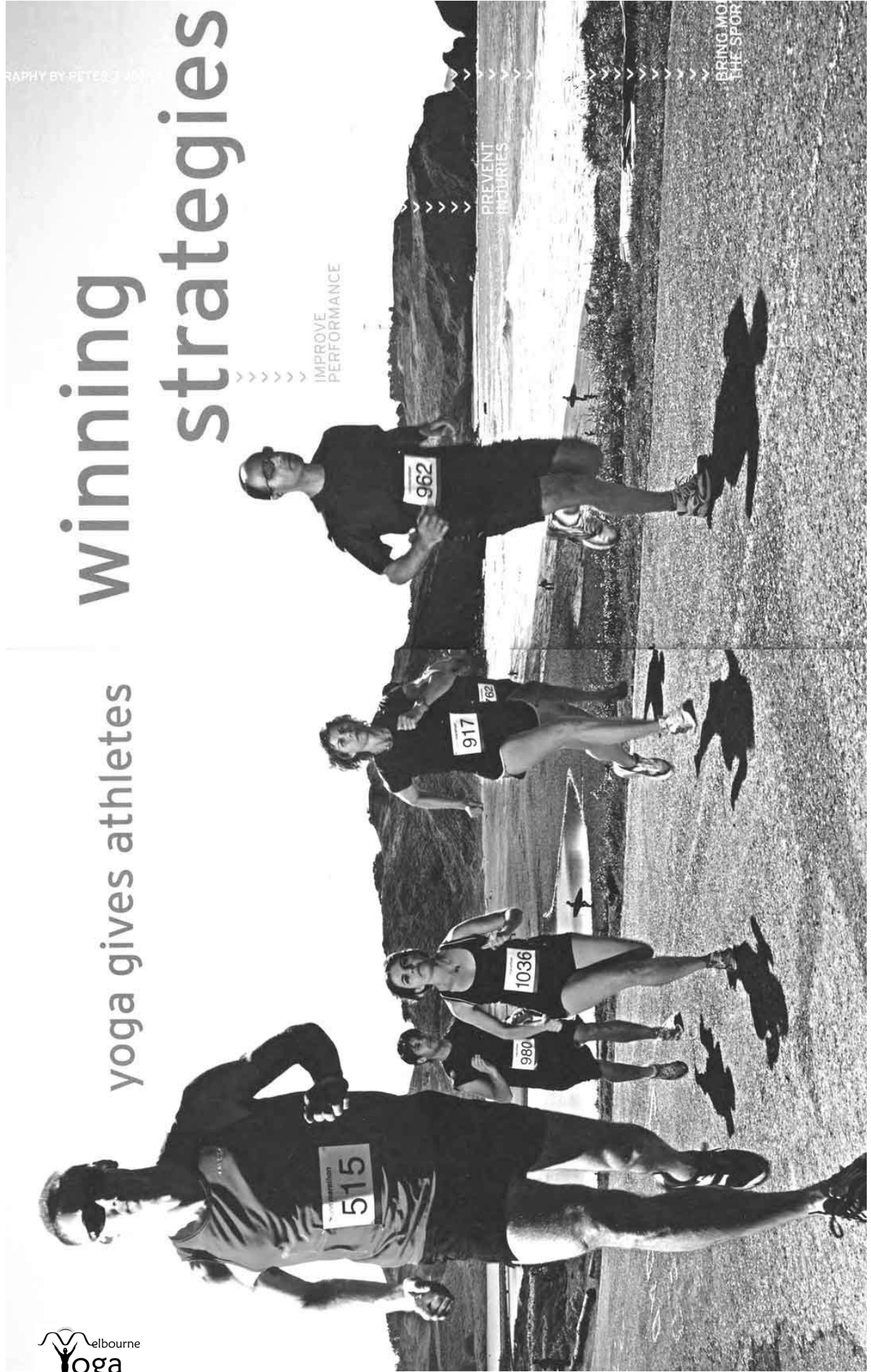
winning strategies

GRAPHY BY PETER J. JOHNSON

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BRING MORE TO THE SPORT



Yoga Gives Athletes Winning Strategies

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Lentine Zahler had always dreamed of doing an Ironman triathlon and now she was in Kona, Hawaii, at the World Championship. She had completed a little more than half of the 180-kilometre cycling portion, which took her from a lush green neighbourhood of downtown Kona up a hill to brutally hot black-rock lava fields. Fierce winds were blowing cyclists sideways on their bikes and Zahler, unable to let go of her handlebars for fear of toppling over, had gone the whole distance without solid food. She was achingly hungry, irritable and exhausted. She couldn't remember why she had signed up for this torture and thought about giving up. But then she turned her focus inward, deepened her breath and felt a sense of calm come over her. She directed attention to the areas of her body where she was holding tension and released them. Finally, she arrived on flat ground and was able to free up one hand to eat. Instead of dwelling on the frustration of the previous 70 miles, she found she was able to be in the present moment and let the past go. In short, she tapped into everything she'd learned through her yoga practice, and she finished the race in good time - and with a feeling of ease.

Her story is inspiring, but not unusual. Zahler, who is also a yoga teacher in Oregon, USA, is part of a growing number of endurance athletes - marathon runners, cyclists and triathletes - who have found that the physical and mental practices of yoga can help them prevent injuries, improve their performance and bring a whole new dimension of awareness and joy to the sports they love.

PUTTING THE BODY AT EASE

One of the things many athletes love about sports like running, cycling and swimming is that rhythmic, repetitive motion over long distances can be deeply meditative. But the downside of this action from a physical point of view is that the continuous cycles of repetitive motion tax one set of muscles while underutilizing the rest. Over time and distance, this creates muscular imbalances that can lead to misalignment and injury.

"If you have even a minor misalignment in your stride, when you repeat that action over and over, it can cause injury," says Sage Rountree, a yoga teacher, triathlon coach and author of *The Athlete's Guide to Yoga*. Runners, she says, tend to have overworked hip flexors and quadriceps and underworked glutes. Rountree teaches lunges as a way for runners to release the hip flexors in their back legs while stretching and strengthening the hamstrings of their front legs. And because the shape of a lunge mimics the runner's stride,

she says, it is a good way for runners to examine their alignment and balance.

ASANA FOR ATHLETES by Sage Rountree

If you run, cycle or swim, practise this sequence three or more times a week after your easier workouts. Begin with Adho Mukha Svanasana (Downward-Facing Dog Pose) and stay for a few breaths, turning your focus inward. Notice your energy level, and register any areas of tightness or openness in your body. Just as you begin a training session with a sense of purpose, take a moment to set an intention for your practice.

Experts agree that cyclists develop similar kinds of imbalances too. Because cyclists are constantly in a crouched position on the bike, their quads and gluteus muscles tend to be strong, but their hip flexors are tight and weak.

In addition to the stresses of repetitive motion, there's also the matter of holding the body in one position for a long time, whether it's crouched down over a bike or in a running stride. The body becomes contracted, with the shoulders and the back rounding forward. Most of us already have a somewhat forward-leaning posture, simply from daily activities like sitting at a desk. Assuming a similar position while running or cycling exacerbates the contraction and can lead to back pain and postural issues. Poses like Anjaneyasana (Low Lunge) that open the front body, including the hip flexors, can counteract this.

And to strengthen the core muscles needed to support the posture during training, Rountree teaches poses like Virabhadrasana III (Warrior Pose III) and One-Legged Plank Pose. "When the core muscles tire while you're running, you wind up slouching," she says.

BODY CONSCIOUS

In addition to correcting muscular imbalances and misalignment, yoga offers athletes another tool for preventing injuries: increased body awareness. "With yoga, you begin to feel your body more," says Ed Harrold, the director of yoga and sports training for the Kripalu Institute for Extraordinary Living in Massachusetts, USA, and the originator of the Flexibility for Athletes performance training program. Harrold recommends that athletes hold poses for 10 to 20 breaths at a time to develop body awareness. By doing so, he says, you can learn how the body feels when uninjured and become much more aware of "yellow lights" (twinges of pain or discomfort that could signal the beginnings of an injury) when engaging in a sport.

Increased body awareness also means learning how to isolate the muscles you need so that you

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can relax the ones you don't. "In an endurance sport, you need to have the most efficient form you can," says Rountree. "You don't want to be running with your elbows out by your shoulders or your shoulders hunched up to your ears. That's inefficient. You want to save that energy because you are going to be out there for a long time." Rountree suggests standing in a lunge and scanning the body. If you are engaging muscles in places like the shoulders or neck, practise releasing them. You'll then be able to repeat this on the track.

Recreational distance cyclist Greg Merritt says that learning this principle through yoga has been a huge benefit. "Holding tension unnecessarily for 5, 15 or 25 hours on the bike will lead to no end of trouble and can even result in the dreaded 'DNF' - did not finish," he says. "Now, as I ride, I do continuous self-checks about how I'm holding myself on the bike. It's kind of like learning to drive a car and building the habit of watching the road ahead, your mirrors, your speedometer and so on, but this is a habit of internal monitoring, keeping check on my body from the inside." Adds Zahler, "If I am on the race course and I feel discomfort someplace in my body, my yoga practice has taught me to check for compensation in other areas." She says that this body scanning has also taught her to take an inventory of how everything feels in general. "My work on the mat has given me the opportunity to explore the way that my body acts as an interconnected system and use that interconnectivity as a tool anywhere I might be."

SPORTING MIND

By definition, endurance athletes need to endure, whether you're participating in a triathlon, running a marathon or even going out for a weekend 10k bike ride. But your mind often tells you that you've had enough before your body is really ready to quit. By practising mindfulness on the mat, says Rountree, endurance athletes can learn to be present with any number of sensations - discomfort, boredom, anxiety, resistance - while training or competing. "There are always moments in a yoga class when we feel restless," says Rountree. "Sometimes it's tough to stay in Utkatasana (Chair Pose) for another few breaths, but we learn to do it anyway. We learn that restlessness is just an aversion that the mind is throwing at us and we keep going." Taking this skill into endurance sports can give an athlete a tremendous edge.

Jason Magness, AcroYoga teacher and co-founder of Yoga-Slackers, says that the mindfulness he's learned through his yoga practice has gotten him through his hardest endurance-sport experiences. While on a multiday expedition trekking race in Moab, Utah, he started to panic. He was exhausted and anxious about what was to come - and he was only halfway through. "I was already miserable and everything seemed so far away. I thought, 'I am never going to finish.'"

But he was able to tap into what he learned on the yoga mat to bring him back into the present moment. He thought about what he does at the beginning of his Ashtanga practice when he gets anxious about the backbends that come at the end. "In my practice, I would say, 'I am just going to feel what it's like to be in this asana, in this breath.' So I started to do that during the race and I was able to pretend that all I was doing was a long practice." Suddenly, he says, the future didn't matter. "I was just able to feel what was going on now - and keep going."

Seated meditation is another way to practise stilling the mind, which can help athletes stay focused while competing. If you can take this calm state with you into activity, your effort becomes effortless, says John Douillard, former professional athlete, Ayurvedic expert and author of *Body, Mind and Sport*.

"It's all about the ability to be calm in the midst of dynamic stress," he says. Douillard compares the stillness of the mind during a long run or ride to the still eye of a hurricane. "This is the runner's high. For most athletes, this state is a random event that they sometimes stumble into. Yoga gives you the ability to enter into it on a regular basis."

LEARNING TO BREATHE

Many yoga teachers will tell you that the breath is everything - a tool for meditation, a way of directing energy throughout your body and an astute indicator of your physical and emotional state during practice. Similarly, the breath is an essential part of any endurance athlete's training. The breath dictates athletic performance and performance dictates the breath - when you are losing steam, you'll notice your breath becoming shallow and laboured. Shallow breathing, says Douillard, stimulates the sympathetic nervous system, which makes you anxious. That zaps your energy even more. If you can find a steady, even pace of deep breathing while moving through an asana practice, you can take that skill and apply it while running or riding.

Douillard suggests practising Ujjayi Pranayama (Victorious Breath) while training, which triggers the parasympathetic nervous system and establishes a neurological calm in your brain. Deep nasal breathing brings the mind into a steady alpha state, he says, which is ideal for grappling mentally with long distances. Simply bringing attention to the breath also helps athletes to stay focused when going long distances, which is a great antidote for something that even the most enthusiastic and dedicated endurance athletes say they suffer from on occasion: boredom. "You see everyone out there running with their iPods," says Rountree. "They need some kind of distraction. But there's so much inside to pay attention to. Focus on the breath and you don't ever have to be bored again."