

Your Next Ultimate Soccer Training Tool May Be...

Big name national, professional league, and collegiate soccer teams use it. Those who practice it, such as Alex Morgan, Christen Press and Ryan Giggs, among countless other athletes, make no secret about how it has positively changed their performance, bodies, and minds. Coaches testify to the benefits and willingly trade practice time to ensure mandatory regular team participation. It efficiently addresses the needs of the whole athlete by supporting the very areas that tend to be depleted. Research illuminates the far reaching benefits and is even further evidenced by testimony. Now it is trickling down to high school athletic programs and youth clubs who want to provide it for their athletes and are finding avenues to do so.

“It” is Yoga, an ancient Eastern practice now being embraced by numerous Western soccer teams and players as well as athletic programs across the sport spectrum. The potential benefits of a quality yoga regimen are both physiological and mental, as the inclusion of both aspects is inherent to the practice itself:

- Increase core strength
- Build athletic and mental resiliency
- Improve pulmonary efficiency and bilateral muscle balance
- Improve concentration and oxygenation
- Improve response and reaction time
- Increase flexibility & range of motion
- Develop balance and focus
- Increase muscle endurance
- Improved relaxation capability on demand

A deeper examination of yoga within the context of modern soccer coaching and program philosophy bolsters the case for incorporation even further. ***The right kind of Yoga for Athletes programs can help all levels of soccer leadership, youth and high school included, to make concrete the beliefs we are now espousing and promoting by:***

- 1. automatically providing an invaluable periodization and physiological differentiation tool***
- 2. providing a benefit to and care for the individual as well as the team and the result– now and for our players into their adult lives***
- 3. teaching a highly effective method of using efficient breath to calm and focus the mind and the body, control anxiety and aid recovery***

Yoga provides a built-in periodization tool. “Formal periodization is the systematic process of planned variations in the training program, changing volume, duration, intensity, mode, and kinds of recovery in order to have enough variability to reach a plateau, prevent overtraining and injury, and maximize performance.”¹ “Periodization” is a popular soccer term presently, as we seek overall balance to the rigors of year round competition and training. Looking back at the yoga benefits listed above, you can understand how the movements, the isokinetic strengthening, fascia stimulation, motion enhancement, stretching, balancing, energy flow, relaxation and breathing can provide positive and effective periodization when done on a regular basis at chosen times in your seasonal schedule of practice and play. Consider a team deep in the fourth game of a weekend tournament or a Premier. Now picture that team having done some appropriate recovery and rebalancing yoga rejuvenation during the tournament weekend. It’s a good picture.

Yoga is differentiation within the sport. Sometimes we, as administrators and coaches, speak out of both sides of our mouth. We know and verbalize the importance, particularly for youth, of participating in and

¹ Karla Thomson, “Playing, Practice, Training – How can we do it all?”

enjoying different physical activities so as not to overuse muscles and joints that are still developing and to be able to simply experience different youthful pursuits. Yet, in practicum, many of our programs are not constructed to allow such ability to play different sports, particularly our older youth travel and Club programs. Yoga, designed for a particular sport and time within the season, can target specific areas and functions. For instance, soccer players tend to have strong, overdeveloped quadriceps, while the inner leg, glutes and hamstrings are weaker, and the IT band on the outside of the leg is very tight. Studies have shown the effects of such muscle imbalance.² You have most likely seen the injuries that can result from this imbalance in your players and/or yourself.

Weight room work can certainly help to address some strength imbalances. But what about range of motion, tight fascia, focus, physical balance ability, breath? Athletes want benefits beyond pure strength. An article by yoga instructor Julie Rader discusses the timing and type of yoga our athletes may need:

For the last couple weeks, I've had the honor of teaching the U.S. women's soccer team during their training camp. **It is the third year I've worked with them, and what amazes me is how similar all athletes are when I work with them.** I have also taught yoga to the U.S. women's indoor volleyball team, the U.S. men's and women's sprint cycling teams, and several professional beach volleyball players. In my public yoga classes, NFL and NHL players often come to the mat during the off-season. These athletes play different sports and have different body types, but their needs and requests are similar. There is a misconception that athletes want a challenging and power-based yoga practice. While this is often true during the off-season (as I see with the professional football and hockey players who attend my power yoga classes in the spring and summer), when athletes are training or in-season their bodies are challenged to the limit during practice, weight lifting, and competitions or games. I always ask my athlete class members what they need before every yoga session and it is always a unanimous response of stretching and meditation...For athletes, most training regimens include strength training, agility, power, and cardio (depending on the sport). Flexibility training and yoga is often minimized or skipped all together...

Yoga provides differentiation within the practice, the season, the sport.

Secondly, experiencing the practice of yoga within the practice of soccer can benefit the team via individual growth in ways that extend beyond immediate performance and game result. The importance of caring for the individual, recognizing the unique needs of today's athletes, promoting process over product, and building that critical trust relationship have all taken a place center stage in youth soccer coaching, philosophy and education. John O'Sullivan's "Beyond the X's and O's" and Lynn Kachmarik's "Grit, Accountability, and Caring" presentations at the recent NSCAA convention this last January in Baltimore attest to the amount of focus and interest in these areas. When you do your "gut check," as we coaches do so often to gauge how we ran a practice, treated our players, imparted a technique or tactical concept, taught the future citizen as well as the current role player, or reacted during a game, this part is an almost guaranteed check in the proverbial success box. Providing yoga will feel right.

It is incorrect to believe that all yoga promotes a particular religion. Yoga is for everyone, and yes, it can be spiritual. The third simple definition of spiritual in the Merriam Webster on-line dictionary is, "having similar values and ideas: related or joined in spirit." Yoga can bring a team together in common endeavor and experience. No one is talking except the instructor, yet everyone is listening, following and moving together. Yoga, more so than soccer, is a highly beneficial exercise regimen that an individual can enjoy **throughout their lives**. Again, an opportunity to provide

² Does muscle imbalance affect fatigue after soccer specific intermittent protocol?, de Abreu Camarda SR¹, Denadai BS., ¹Human Performance Laboratory, São Paulo State University, UNESP, Rio Claro-SP, Brazil.

benefit beyond the game but that enhances the game simultaneously. In the yoga class I attend here are at least three individuals over 75 that can hold balancing poses on one leg twice as long as I can. Additionally, the flexibility and resiliency of these long time yoga practitioners is impressive and certainly preserving. We hear over and over, and rightly so, that as coaches of youth and young adults we have the enormous opportunity to teach life *philosophy* lessons in addition to soccer lessons. Likewise, yoga also provides a highly beneficial *physical* practice that can help enormously now and in the future.

Thirdly, we live in an age of self-driven or pushed, neglected or “helicoptered,” stressed kids.³ Many school districts, social services and other support systems are beginning to study and employ new techniques to try and address this issue. “Mindfulness” is starting to enter the mainstream as a discipline and educational tool.⁴ There is a growing realization that as parents, coaches, and educators we have an additional calling and responsibility, one of helping our children, athletes, and students to manage anxiety and stress.⁵ Yoga can provide instruction on how to change and maximize the breath which has an immediate effect on the state of the nervous system.⁶ Breath brings a calm yet alert mind which can result in a calm body.⁷

Our Club just started offering Yoga for Athletes classes for players 7-12th grade. We are constantly looking to improve and have learned a great deal in our attempt to maximize both the audience and quality of the offering. Our instructor is 500 hour Himalayan Institute certified and teaches Hatha Yoga specialized for Athletes. When ready to incorporate yoga into your club or team routine, there are certainly standards to consider. Begin by evaluating the instructor’s credentials just as you would a paid soccer coach. Where were they trained? How many hours of on site (non-internet) instruction did they receive? What kind of yoga do they practice? How will the instructor differentiate between in-season and out of season classes? Will the instructor include relaxation, breath work, and concentration practices? Having the organization or coach “by-in” to yoga is equally important for several reasons:

- The players understand yoga is valued
- The team practices yoga together
- The endeavor is supported
- Quality control is in place
- Ensures consistent player participation

If you are in doubt or on the fence, do an internet search for a team, athlete or program employing yoga and seek a reference. Additionally, there is precedence for Yoga and Mindfulness programs in underserved communities⁸.

In conclusion, your competitor down the road may be gaining an advantage with yoga☺. More importantly, yoga can help your athletes take a large step in the direction of mind and body balance – perhaps for life. And for the last word, if you are able and willing, practice yoga with them. You will not regret it.

³ The Overachievers: The Secret Lives of Driven Kids – August 7, 2007, by Alexandra Robbins

⁴ <http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/topic/mindfulness/definition>

⁵ <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/news/high-school-stress/>

⁶ The Power of Yoga for Helping Children with Anxiety, by Rich Presta

⁷ Breathing for Life: The Mind-Body Healing Benefits of Pranayama, by: Sheila Patel, M.D.

⁸ The Holistic Foundation or Ivy Child International.