

# Yoga and the Athlete



Susan Griffith

Susan Griffith is a Level IV coach in Middle and Long Distance. She has coached in the area since 1991. As the principal of Paceline Coaching and Training which provides running and coaching services, Susan has used many forms of training modalities. She is also a presenter at Level I Beginner coaching courses. In the article, Susan speaks about the many positive attributes of Yoga.

As a firm believer in cross training, I have long been aware of the benefits that yoga can provide. My challenge was 'selling' it to my runners. Often limited by time, adult runners want to spend their training time running and so my powers of persuasion would have to be convincing. My first task was to convince myself. After trying a number of studios I came across a yoga style that I believed would be well received by my runners. It is called Power Yoga.

I observed this form of yoga and attended the class. The class sequence moved and flowed. The practice develops increased flexibility, core strength, balance and breathing control. The class format allows people of all levels to participate together each working at their own pace. Yes there is some 'humming' but not too much – and even that grows on you!

Since organising a special 'runners only' class many of my group are now regular yoga practitioners. However, like most things in life, there are no quick fixes. To see the benefits takes time and commitment.... but the results are worth it.

The concept of Power Yoga is drawn from the ancient teaching of Hatha and includes the flowing style of Vinyasa. Power Yoga has a common sense approach to its postures for our modern day lifestyles.

I caught up with Duncan Peak, the founder of the Powerliving Studio in Neutral Bay, Sydney. Duncan was a former Captain in the elite Parachute Regiment of the Army and a competitive athlete. He has devoted the last five years to teaching Power Yoga around the world and he is one of Australia's most popular teachers, creating one of the busiest yoga and personal development schools in the country.

**Susan (S)**

**S How long have you been practising Yoga and why did you start?**

Duncan (D)

D I started out when I was 16 – it was more for meditative purposes to help me through my grief of the loss of two friends. I got more into it when I was 24 to help me get back some mobility and postural alignment after years of playing football.

**S. I understand that you are involved in teaching a number of different sporting groups, who are they and what benefits are they experiencing from practising yoga?**

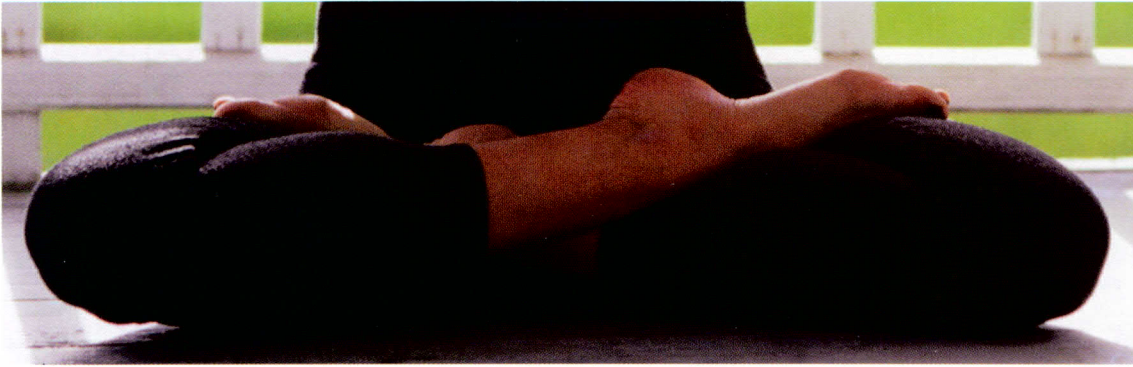
D. Yes, I have worked with numerous sports players including football teams (all codes), triathletes and tennis players. Sports players today are under immense pressure to perform and put their bodies on the line. Although they are supported by top trainers and medical staff the stress still takes its toll. Yoga can assist with maintenance of muscular and core strength and helps to provide the balance and symmetry in an athlete's body. As important is the peace and clarity that comes about from yoga practise.

**S. Women and Men have slightly different physical structures (biomechanics), is yoga more beneficial to one group than the other?**

D. Yoga can benefit everyone, male, female, young and old. Each person is unique. Generally speaking females are more flexible than males; however a male who has trained as a gymnast or dancer is likely to have far more flexibility than an adult female who hasn't included stretching in her exercise routine. It is important to understand your own body and work to your own level. You are your best teacher and you need to be accountable to yourself.

**S. As you know athletics covers, runners, throwers & jumpers. Do you think that yoga would benefit all these different event groups and if so why?**

D. For an athlete to perform at a high level intense training is required. This can sometimes lead to overuse injuries. Yoga brings a symmetry and balance to all types of athletes, jumpers, throwers and runners. Regular yoga practice helps to carry oxygenated blood to the muscles and nutrients back to the joints and assists in moving of lactic acid build up. It is important to understand that practising yoga can decrease an



athlete's muscle power for up to 5 hours after the practise and is not recommended 24hrs before a race/event/match.

**S. In addition to the physical benefits of practising yoga, how do you think it could benefit an athlete mentally?**

D. I could talk to you for a day on this topic. However, in short, regular yoga practise will help the athlete find who they are and to understand 'non attachment'. Non Attachment can be many things to many people but it can be simply the feeling of being able to go beyond where one feels comfortable and focus on something else. They will feel the calming effects which can improve their everyday life. They will learn to deal with challenges in a non reactive way. It will provide a good foundation, in particular for professional athletes, as they move towards the end of the athletic career.

**S. I have heard that being 'over flexible' can be hazardous for runners and could cause them to roll an ankles, over rotate other joints. What risks do you think there may be for athletes who want to start yoga?**

D. Like anything if you go too hard too soon it can have detrimental effects. It is important to build up slowly, working on postural improvements over 12 months. Consistent practice will help with neuro muscular training and the conditioning of the nervous system. This can't be achieved quickly.

Yoga is like any other exercise activity. If you do it to excess it may cause damage. For example the contortionist type of yoga (where yogis contort their bodies in to pretzel like shapes) can put excessive strain on joints, muscles and ligaments, just as a runner who is passionate about marathon running –

the consistent load can lead to knee, ankle and hip injuries. For a healthy life it's a matter of balance. To be the best in the world an athlete has to push to the limit. They just need to counterbalance to reduce the risk.

**S. From what age do you think yoga could benefit athletes?**

D. Children start to lose their flexibility between the ages of 5-10, in particular boys (girls will often take part in dance, ballet & gymnastics that helps maintain flexibility). So including some form of stretching/ yoga at a young age will help maintain flexibility and muscular strength.

**S. For many mature athletes, flexibility is often limited, and while many know that they need to improve some find thought of walking in to a yoga studio very intimidating. What would you say to people thinking of giving yoga a go?**

D. It is important to find a space you feel comfortable with. Look around try a few studios (Powerliving if you live in Sydney) and find a teacher that you can relate to.

**S. What led you to open your own studio?**

D. It was by accident. I started helping a few mates learn yoga which led to hiring a room in a surf club. Through word of mouth the classes grew in popularity and I was asked to take over the studio where I am now in Neutral Bay, Sydney. I was a bit reluctant at first but now the studio has been running successfully for 5 years and another Powerliving Studio has recently opened in Manly.

(After leaving the Army Duncan worked as a business consultant and has a MBA. He has spent time in India learning the art of teaching through some of the world's most revered teachers.)

**S. Currently you have a studio in Neutral Bay & Manly (Sydney). Many readers of this article are located all over Australia. What style of Yoga would you suggest they look for? How can they find out about yoga studios in their area?**

D. You can visit a website [www.findyoga.com](http://www.findyoga.com) this will help you locate a studio in your area. Power and Vinyasa style yoga are a flowing style yoga. However practice of any yoga is beneficial. Find one that suits you.

**S. Do you have a message you'd like to leave with our coaches?**

D. Encourage your athletes to train with mental awareness and keep present when they train. Body – Mind – Union (is Yoga).

*The photos below are just a few of the poses I've found beneficial. All incorporate moves that help to lengthen and strengthen the body in areas valuable for runners. I am sure that throwers & jumpers will equally benefit from yoga.*



*Hip/glute stretch, shoulders & back*



*Back & hamstrings*



*Shoulders, back & calves*



*Balance, single leg strength*



*Back, quad*



*Balance, spine twist, leg strength*



*Lunge – hip flexor stretch*