

Yoga For Swimmers

Yoga's emphasis on balance and alignment as well as the strength work it provides relative to gravity is great dryland training for swimmers. We are able to appreciate the similarities of swimming and yoga: gentle on the joints, forgiving of injuries and other physical limitations, and relaxing to the muscles and mind. When the two are practiced together, their strengths are united in a way that creates a more balanced athlete. In the past three years, the yoga program at STAR has become more fine-tuned as swimmers get used to the poses practiced, increase their body awareness and anticipate new, progressive poses to practice that come from consistency.

In looking at the four major strokes in competitive swimming: backstroke, breaststroke, and butterfly, the freestyle, the latter three contribute to the overdevelopment of the front of the body, particularly the pectoral muscles, leaving the fascia of the midback and the rhomboid muscles weaker in comparison. Just doing backstroke isn't enough. Thus, we have the need for dryland strength work and the balancing of strength and flexibility that can come from a yoga practice. When we look at the strength potential of a swimmer, we realize that a fitness routine based just in the water is not providing enough strength gain – there needs to be work against gravity. For the sake of countering injury, the importance of stretch must be emphasized, especially after the exercise bout.

In the practice of yoga the poses, known as postures or more formally as asanas, utilize the body weight as the powerful source of resistance. Poses fall into the following categories: standing, seated, inversions arm balancing, twists, breath work and restoratives. The idea is to provide as many angles as possible for muscles to work relative to gravity. This ensures strength throughout the range of movement and the stretch aspect of many poses paves the way for enhancing range of movement in the joints and supple muscles that are less prone to injury. One interesting compliment to swimming that comes from yoga is the fact that a consistent yoga practice also yields longer or extended muscles, as opposed to tighter, contracted muscles that comes from just land sports. This is physiologically necessary for swimmers since to be efficient in the water, a swimmer needs to be able to propel themselves by extending through a greater range of movement and fully contracting throughout the range of movement – in other words, using the potential strength of a well extended muscle, and with every muscle involved in each stroke, through the swim cycle, be it a race or a practice. If we look to the laws of physics, $\text{work} = \text{force} \times \text{distance}$. If an athlete is able to reach out further in his/her attempt of each stroke and pull with power not just in part of the contraction but throughout the entire contraction, more work (faster travel through the water) is achieved. In addition, there is an aspect of core strength involved with almost every pose, it may be secondary to the

primary focus of the pose, but it is always there. Working at poses from many angles relative to gravity means a very comprehensive way to trick your body into core strength work. Core strength is valuable to any sport!

In a nutshell we want to use yoga to reduce injury and improve performance. Many sports teams across the world are turning to yoga, from smaller leagues/age groups to the caliber of professional teams and Olympians. I am privileged to lead STAR swimmers in their yoga practice at three sites: Greensboro College, The Club at Oak Branch and The Sport Center. I am impressed that Jay has the foresight to offer this valuable advantage to his swimmers. I try to make the practice fun, as I want the swimmers to realize that this is the noncompetitive side of their swimming preparation so that the release physically and mentally can be optimized. But I want them to really begin to see/feel the connection to how certain poses relate to their swim strokes. We have discussion when we learn something new especially as to why certain stretches aspects of the particular pose could be helpful. This helps them to have the motivation to keep practicing and to build their body awareness. This past year I began to have many great questions like: “I am so tight in these (certain) muscles – what can we do in today’s practice to help?”

Here are some things as a yoga teacher for swimmers that I think about and plan:

1. Strength for (especially in-between) shoulder blades. Down dog to plank, lowering to the floor and coming into Up Dog – not haphazardly but with learned alignment principles so as not to “hang” incorrectly in certain muscles of the back and shoulder girdle. This helps to counter rotator cuff injuries and shoulder tendonitis (prevalent mostly with freestylers).
2. Hip flexibility – self explanatory for swimmers but, they get to hear that when hips are more open and flexible, surprisingly so will the shoulders be more open and flexible. When kids come to swim after school – sitting at a desk, riding in a car, their hips are tight. Thus, Warrior poses and strap work for leg stretches.
3. Ankles – since swimmers use ankle strength and mobility in propelling through the water attention to detail here can be in using balance work to strengthen ankles and muscles of the lower limbs and many poses like hero to provide stretch.

4. Range of movement and strength for shoulders in general. Yoga has an immense amount of poses for this as well as preparations for poses that are more like physical therapy – all useful in a preventative way!

5. Breath work factors in to good swimming. The stroke facilitates the cycle of the breath, unique to each individual depending on speed, mental alertness, and experience and lung capacity. Breath work in yoga is used in a restorative way, to quiet the mind, to sharpen focusing skills, to build a meditation practice, to build awareness, to build lung capacity and more. This year will give this aspect of a yoga practice more attention. Ultimately I would like the swimmers to think more of how they use their breath to enhance movement.

All STAR swimmers taking part in yoga need to come with a yoga mat. Last year we sold 1/3 or 1/2 mat pieces as they were easy to fold and put into swim bags. Mats are not available for borrowing at any of these locations and are considered personal items. We will sell 1/3 mat pieces for \$5, 1/2 mat pieces for 7.50 and full yoga mats for \$15. Please email Mona Flynn at Lifefityoga.com if you would like to purchase a mat, ahead of time. See you all at practice!

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