

Yoga of Champions

From pre-race jitters to finish-line focus, yoga is a training tool of choice for athletes competing in the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics.

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To prep for the 2010 Winter Olympic Games, which began February 12, a number of elite athletes are practicing asana, pranayama, and meditation as a means to prepare body, breath, and mind for medal-worthy performances. From vigorous Ashtanga to gentle restorative and Yin Yoga practices, many athletes say that doing asanas gives them not only looser hamstrings but increased body awareness and mental focus. Some have found that pranayama practice has taught them to be better breathers during race time and has been an effective tool for calming pre-race jitters. Meditation is touted by many as an antidote to the fear and nervousness inherent in doing fast-paced and dangerous sports. To learn more, we talked to cross-country skier Chandra Crawford, alpine skier Emily Brydon, and freestyle skier Shannon Deanne Bahrke about yoga's role in their performance.

"I am absolutely so grateful to my yoga practice for bringing me that awareness of breath. When the nerves are running high, the things I've learned in yoga help to ground me and bring me clarity in the moment."-- Chandra Crawford, Canadian Cross-Country Ski Team

Chandra Crawford won a gold medal in the 2006 Olympics in the individual sprint freestyle event, and two World Cup gold medals in 2008. In the 2010 Winter Olympics, she'll compete in the individual sprint classic and the team sprint freestyle.

When did you fall in love with cross-country skiing? My parents put me on skis at one—as soon as I could walk.

Tell us about your yoga practice. I started doing Ashtanga when I was 16, but for the past five years I have gravitated more toward Yin and a flow practice. As an athlete I'm pushing, striving, and going beyond my limits on a daily basis, but in yoga I'm able to let go. Yoga has taught me balance and acceptance. It helps me recuperate. And every mindful moment of yoga class is enjoyable, including that feeling of total peace at the end.

How has yoga affected you in your races? The biggest thing I've been able to translate into racing is the focus. Cross-country skiing takes a lot of concentration, and when I was younger it was so tough. When I started yoga, it was initially so hard for me to keep my single point of focus throughout a whole class. So learning that has really been awesome.

Do you meditate or do any breathwork? My mom has been a transcendental meditator, so that's how I got the name Chandra—I was born on a full moon. She taught me pranayama at a very young age. Now I mostly do the breathwork in class, and I find any kind of focus on breathing amazingly beneficial.

How did it feel to win the gold? Crazy. When I saw that red line in the snow and I realized I was going to cross it first, I remember smiling and thinking, 'I'd better put my hands up.' I was overwhelmed. But that presence of mind to get to that point came from my yoga-like focus on every moment, every stride, making it my best. I was totally immersed in the process. It really speaks to taking your practice into every aspect of life.

"Yoga gives you the tools to calm your mind and body. I just see more of a conscious awareness of what my mind or breath is doing. And it helps me bring it back."--Emily Brydon, Canadian Alpine Ski Team

Emily Brydon is a two-time Olympic contender who has seven World Cup medals to her credit. In the 2010 Winter Olympics, she'll compete in downhill, Super-G, and combined skiing events.

How did you become an Olympic skier? I started racing when I was six years old and never looked back. The thing I love the most about what I do is when I'm on top of the mountain, alone, looking around at the beautiful scenery and getting ready to charge out of the gate.

Why did you start doing yoga? In 2001 I was in Alberta doing rehab for a knee injury, and I started practicing. It's a great addition to training. When you are coming back from an injury, you can really heal. I did basic Ashtanga. I've also done restorative yoga during big, heavy, physical blocks of training.

What's your practice like today? Sometimes I work out two or three times a day. I run out of steam. So that's when I do restorative. It's hard to do Ashtanga or Bikram when you are training so hard. I'll do those on the weekend, when I'm not spending hours in the gym. But the breathing is always there.

How does yoga prepare you for races? With skiing, there's a lot of fear and nerves involved. I do a lot of breathing practices before I go to the starting gate. It's a big part of my pre-race plan. It's my meditative ritual. I try to clear my mind before competing. And I use my breath to get to that point. I do a breathing meditation before, and then bring it back to my normal breath before I go. But in that process I try to clear my mind and calm my nerves, and the breath really helps—it helps me get over any fear. Day to day, I do mini meditations. I have a goal of three times a day: when I wake up, during the day, and when I go to bed.

Does your practice affect your daily life? I'm a really busy person. I like being busy. Yoga helps me slow down. It has taught me a lot of mind control. I was born in the wilderness, in a log house built by my parents. It wasn't the exercise of yoga, but rather the mentality of yoga. When I come to a busy city, yoga gives me a little getaway to calmness that should be more prevalent in my life. It gives me a chance to slow down.

"In a judged sport, you're always comparing yourself to others. Yoga has really taught me to be OK with what I have and to work within myself."--Shannon Deanne Bahrke, U.S. Freestyle Ski Team

Shannon Deanne Bahrke won a silver medal in the 2002 Olympics in the moguls event. Other trophies include a 2003 World Championship bronze medal and a 2007 World Championship silver medal. In the 2010 Winter Olympics, she'll compete in the freestyle moguls event.

How did you become an Olympic skier? I was just a kid that went skiing with my family and friends on the weekends. When I was 12 years old, the head coach of the Squaw Valley freestyle ski team, Ray deVre, saw how crazy I was and that I was in need of a little direction, so he asked me to join the team. Mogul skiing looked absolutely awful, but when I went out that first day with the team, I was instantly hooked. I loved the people, the atmosphere, the competitiveness. But most important, I was drawn to the fun.

Who got you into yoga? About five or six years ago, my friend, who is also an athlete and was into Bikram Yoga, said, "You've just got to do it. I hate stretching, and this is something that's kind of replaced that for me." And I was like, "Well, I hate stretching, too!" I really don't think of yoga as stretching when I'm doing it; it's more about moving in your own body and being centered, and also about feeling strong trying to hold the pose. That was something that really captured me, because I wasn't just sitting there holding a stretch—I was moving my body, trying to hold a pose.

What's your practice like? I've been doing a lot of at-home videos. It's what I have time to do. I warm up with a little bit of breathing, and then do a stretching Power Yoga video. It's perfect: it's short; it's sweet; it's everything that I need to stretch—and then it ends with a little bit of Savasana.

What has yoga taught you about being an athlete? To hold some of the poses that we do in yoga takes so much strength, but it's not just strength gained from lifting weights in the gym. Yoga has opened my eyes to this whole other world of being strong and calm and a different kind of athlete that I never really knew was out there.

What's surprised you most about yoga? I love it in class when there's a supergood vibe, and everybody's energy is working as one. Maybe you came in with a bad attitude or had a tough day, but now everyone's energy lifts you up. That doesn't happen very much on the mogul course, where you're fighting amongst yourselves, trying to give yourself your own energy. But when you're in class, all those people can lift you. That's just incredible.