

**Surya Yantrasana**  
(Sundial Pose)

# Hamstring Harmony

Yoga is the hamstring helper—use these poses on this tricky trio of muscles and never fear a pull again

By Matthew Solan

**Y**ou no doubt have seen the image on television. Chiseled athletes brimming with strength, speed, and agility, who suddenly pull up in mid-stride, grab their leg, and either hobble about or collapse to the ground in agony.

You immediately know what happened. The infamous pulled hamstring, the athlete's Kryptonite, a muscle that's responsible for more running-related pain and injury than any other.

Christine Felstead, a yoga teacher who conducts Yoga for Runners workshops in Toronto ([www.yogaforrunners.ca](http://www.yogaforrunners.ca)), and a long-time competitive runner herself, has seen her share of hamstring issues on and off the mat. She says athletes are more likely to have hamstring problems because of neglect and overuse. "You don't pay attention to your hamstring until it begins to hurt, and even then you might not address it because the pain comes and goes," she says. "You may feel discomfort at the beginning of a run, but it vanishes after the muscles warm up, so you forget about it."

That was the story with her student Marisa DiBattista. Several months into training for her first marathon, the 31-year-old DiBattista ran 20 kilometers nonstop on a treadmill. Two-plus hours of the exact stride, pace, and speed pushed her overworked hamstrings past their threshold and afterwards, she felt a deep stabbing pain. Then over the next few days, she lost her range of motion. "I couldn't place my palms flat on the ground like I used to and could just barely touch my toes," says DiBattista,

Her blind spot was gauging the pain's seriousness. Her hamstrings were fine during her daily runs, but then the pain would flare up hours later. Soon, the pain became more intense and lingered longer than usual. Her solution was to try to stretch

## Yoga on the Run

For endeavors such as running and cycling, where your hamstrings get a hard workout, yoga teacher Christine Felstead recommends not to do asanas beforehand, but to wait until afterwards. "This is when the muscles are loose and warm for stretching and when you can beat back lactic-acid build-up that can lead to hamstring tightness and cramps," she says.

A favorite post-workout routine of marathon runner Marisa DiBattista is a series of Sun Salutations to stretch the entire body, followed by forward bends like Supta Padangusthasana (Supine Hand-to-Foot Pose) and Parsvottanasana (Intense Side Stretch Pose), using a wall or tree for support and to ensure a deeper hamstring stretch. Devote at least 10 to 15 minutes to yoga, and your hamstrings will always hold their own. — M.S.

## Poses for Hamstrings:

**Supta Padangusthasana** (Supine Hand-to-Foot Pose)

**Parsvottanasana** (Intense Side Stretch Pose)

**Adho Mukha Svanasana** (Downward Facing Dog)

**Parighasana** (Gate Pose)

**Janu Sirsasana** (Head-to-Knee Pose)

**Uttanasana** (Standing Forward Bend)

away the soreness. She did the standard runner's stretches: lunges or placing her leg on a bench and with a bent knee, leaning forward. But this actually made her hamstrings worse. "I was stretching the wrong way," she says. Her stretching was unfocused and unbalanced. She tilted her hips too much, and so did not target the hamstrings enough, and she often stretched too long or not long enough. DiBattista took Felstead's Yoga for Runners class and found yoga taught her how to focus her stretching methods so she could zero in on the spots that needed the most attention, in this case her aching hamstrings.

After several months of thrice-weekly classes, including private sessions with Felstead that included hamstring-specific sequences, DiBattista's hamstring strength and flexibility returned. She has now approached marathons with greater gusto. She's run two marathons, in Chicago and Las Vegas, since she embraced yoga—and in both events her finishing and recovery time was shorter than in previous races. "The second half of the marathon was just as fast as the first, and the next day it felt like I didn't do anything," she says.





**Parsvottanasana**  
(Intense Side Stretch Pose)



**Adho Mukha Svanasana**  
(Downward Facing Dog)



**Janu Sirsasana**  
(Head-to-Knee Pose)

## Hamstrings 101

The hamstring is not a single muscle, but rather a group of three muscles (biceps femoris, semitendinosus, and semimembranosus) that span the back of the thigh, from the lower pelvis to the back of the shinbone. The hamstring's main job is to extend the hip joint and flex the knee. You activate the hamstrings with every step—and they get a good workout in activities that involve sudden accelerations and quick stops, for instance, track, soccer, and basketball.

A pulled hamstring is simply a tear in the hamstring muscle fibers. This occurs when the hamstring tries to contract while the ground forces it in the opposite direction. It can happen during a sudden acceleration, such as when a baseball player bolts out of the batter's box from a standing position, or during an abrupt change in direction, as in those quick cuts on the basketball court. If the force is strong and your hamstrings are weak, the muscle fiber tears and causes the major-league hobble.

Pulled hamstrings are common among pro athletes because, contrary to their appearance, big muscles also can be weak. They can lack the flexibility to constantly move and stretch, which is why hamstring injuries often strike bulky track stars and football and baseball players.

Even if you are not an athlete, your hamstrings can still be troublesome. Lack of movement from sedentary jobs can cause the hamstrings to tighten until eventually even everyday walking can cause a strain.

For such a seemingly tricky body part, the hamstrings are easy to condition. If you suffer from a pulled hamstring, your first move is not to move at all. Rest for several days, apply ice to the sore area up to three times a day to soothe inflammation, and gently massage





**Parighasana**  
(Gate Pose)



to release any tightness. Of course, you still need to walk, but be smart about how you put one foot in front of the other. “Take shorter strides, and don’t charge upstairs,” advises Felstead.

### Choose Your Stretch

Once the pain has subsided, you can focus on getting the hamstring back in the action. The key, says Felstead, is to condition the belly of the hamstring muscle rather than the hip, where those injured often feel the pain. “As you condition the hamstring area, you’ll release pressure on the hip points,” she says.

Many yoga poses indirectly work the hamstrings, but your goal here is to lengthen and strengthen the area simultaneously. Emphasize asanas designed specifically to target the hamstrings and help you go as deep as you need; and hold for as long as possible. This approach is ideal whether you



**Supta Padangusthasana**  
(Supine Hand-to-Foot Pose)



**Uttanansana**  
(Standing Forward Bend)



are recovering from an injury or simply for regular preventive care.

Uttanansana (Standing Forward Bend), Adho Mukha Svanasana (Downward Facing Dog), and Janu Sirsasana (Head-to-Knee Pose) are favorite hamstring helpers because they also help you gauge your level of tightness. “Ideally, you should perform them with straight legs, but you should bend your knees to help go into the pose,” Felstead says. “As you progress, and your hamstrings become looser, you can strive to straighten your legs and go deeper into the pose.”

These poses, however, can sometimes put stress on your lumbar spine, since tight hamstrings can


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## The Athletic Yogi

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cause you to overexaggerate the curve your lower back. If you have particularly tight hamstrings, or suffer from low-back pain, Felstead suggests supine hamstring poses with props. Doing poses that require lying on your back—such as Supta Padangusthasana (Supine Hand-to-Foot Pose) with a strap placed around your foot—protects your back from injury, plus you can hold the pose longer and with less strain. “The longer you hold a stretch the better,” she says.

For all hamstring poses, Felstead advocates holding for a minimum of 20 seconds and up to two minutes to receive the full benefit of the stretch. You should go as deeply as you can where you can feel the stretch at work, but don’t push yourself beyond your threshold. Reduce the intensity or duration of the stretch if you feel any pain, twinges, or sharpness, even if it fades. Don’t try to tough it out. “You need to know your body better, and yoga can help you make that connection,” says Felstead. As you progress, you can take on more intense hamstring stretches, such as Parighasana (Gate Pose) and Prasarita Padottanasana (Wide-Legged Forward Bend).

Once your hamstrings are back in shape, don’t think you can ignore them. You should commit at least once a week to a one-hour yoga routine that weaves in a good dose of these hamstring-specific poses. “One day of yoga won’t do it,” says Felstead. “But a regular practice can keep your hamstrings going for a long time.” 

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