

Running, CrossFit, and Yoga



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For many of us, the start of a new year means having an earnest chat with ourselves about how we're doing at this thing called life, in every area from relationships, to work, to diet, and fitness. We take our habits one by one, like the assorted oddities that collect in a 9-year-old's pockets, and we examine them. When it comes to fitness, we promise to hit the gym, start running, or return to the cycling class we abandoned when last year's resolution steam fizzled out. If we've "stuck with the program" and made progress in our chosen sport, we resolve to do even more.

Whether self-examination invokes pride or shame, the result can be the same: we plow ahead with renewed resolve to be one-sport wonders. Now, we may be aware that the perfect trifecta of fitness combines cardio, strength, and flexibility, but people who devote themselves regularly to all three are about as rare as lumberjacks in the Justin Bieber fan club. And it seems the odd one out tends to be flexibility.

Can you lift cars in CrossFit but not touch your toes? Do you complete marathons in record time but feel like you're 80 getting out

of bed in the morning? The bottom line is this: If you're not building all three components into your workouts, you're not as fit as you could be, and you might even be setting yourself up for injury. One-sport wonder, meet yoga.

Ted McDonald is a fitness trainer and endurance athlete who started teaching yoga over 10 years ago. He still competes in marathons and triathlons, but as the owner of 5 Point Yoga in Malibu, California, he also teaches a Vinyasa Flow class five or six times a week, as well as Yin Yoga and restorative forms of practice, which focus on lengthening connective tissue, opening joints, and freeing up energy pathways to prevent injuries that can result from tightness. He notes that it's usually injuries, or the desire to prevent them, that brings runners to his classes. Tight hips, quads, and calves are the norm for this group, and so is back pain.

Students leave class with some relief from the pain and tightness, but also a new awareness of their breathing. "From a physical standpoint, yoga is like self-massage," McDonald explains. "You move your body in a specific way to increase blood flow, unblock congestion, and relieve stiffness, creating a healthier state of being. By connecting movement and breath during a yoga practice, you become much more relaxed. This

controlled breathing transcends yoga and allows runners to perform at a high level for a longer period of time." It's not necessarily easy at first, cautions McDonald. "There's a lot of work to do to unravel years of running. However, if runners keep an open mind and a good attitude, they'll do just fine and receive the incredible benefits that yoga has to offer."

His clients seem to agree. He remembers an Olympic competitor, Malachi Davis, in particular. She competed in 2004 on the UK's track and field team. After taking class with McDonald, Davis told him, "I've stretched for my entire career, but I've never felt so open and relaxed as I did after your class. It's definitely helped my running and is something I'd recommend for all athletes."

Toronto-based Christine Felstead, another runner-turned-yogi who now teaches yoga exclusively for runners, has had similar results with some of her clients. She recalls a marathoner and triathlete who had pain in her left hip. She investigated Felstead's Yoga for Runners™ and began doing some of the prescribed exercises. "She started to feel the benefits quickly, overcame the injury, and has successfully combined yoga and running for about 9 years now," Felstead reports. Ten marathons and one ultra marathon later, her



Good things come in threes
By Bonnie Lynch

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“Yoga loosens the tightness in your body and your mind.”

client remains injury-free.

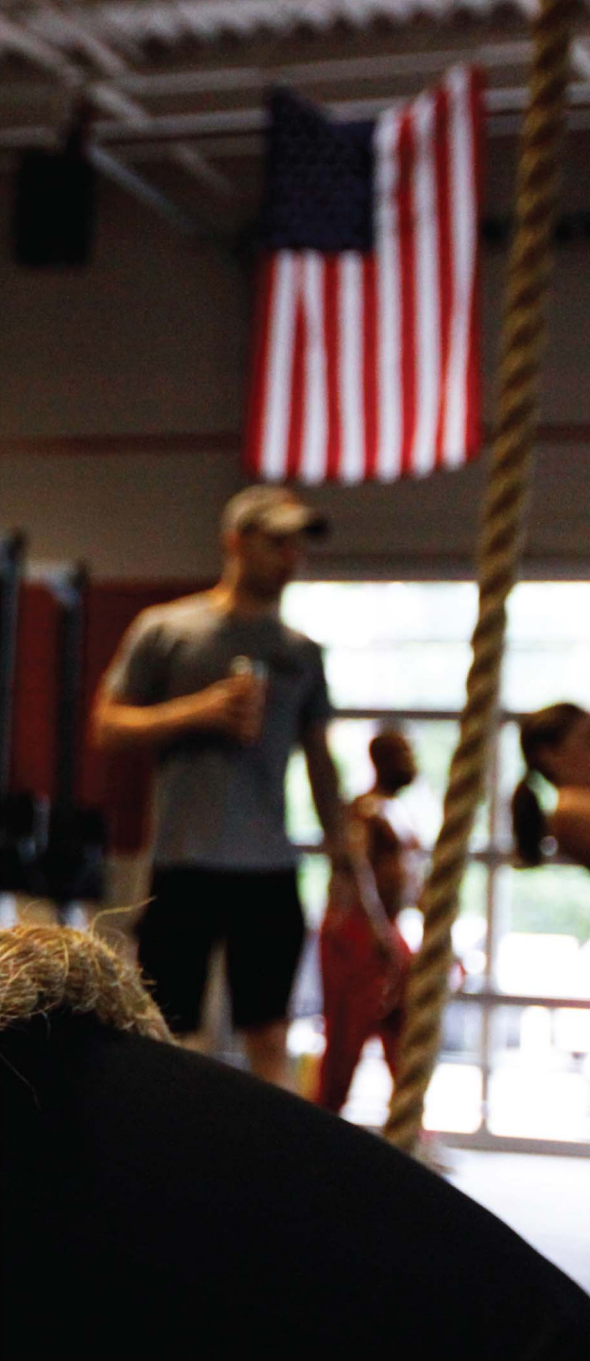
Felstead recounts that it's the runner's mindset that kept her own body tight and sore for years. "Like many runners, my thoughts of stretching ranged from non-existent to lame. Pretty pathetic! No wonder I had more than my share of injuries in those years, mainly in the hamstrings and hips. My running buddies and I would flock to whichever 'miracle worker' promised the proverbial silver bullet. If you've been running any length of time you already know them—the chiropractor, the massage therapist, the acupuncturist, shall I go on? Did I have tightness and pain? Yes, all the time; but don't tell me to stop running! In 1999 I went to a yoga retreat in Hawaii and was exposed to fairly vigorous yoga every day for two weeks. That

did it! I felt like I was in someone else's body." Yoga provides flexibility *and* strength, making it a natural complement to the cardio/endurance focus of running. But what about CrossFitters, whose Workouts of the Day (WODs) tend to place flexibility not just in the back seat of fitness considerations, but locked away in the trunk or left by the roadside altogether? Chad Smith has a word or two to say about that.

Thirty-eight-year-old Smith started lifting weights and running as a kid. He added yoga in his twenties and then combined yoga, CrossFit, and running in his thirties. "Yoga has made me a better runner and CrossFitter. I recover much faster and have full range of motion in all my movements." Smith sees yoga as the link that helps reconcile the seemingly conflicting goals

of running and CrossFit: "It's tough to run a 5-minute mile and deadlift 600 pounds; you compromise one for the other." With its attention to both strength and flexibility, he says, "yoga keeps the balance."

"All the push that we do in CrossFit makes us tight and restrained. Yoga helps open up those tight muscles. It's a great idea to incorporate yoga to give your body plenty of time to recover between intense CrossFit workouts and runs." Smith also notes that yoga can offer a break from the push of competing. "We let go of our ego," he explains. "CrossFit builds the ego and creates competition. This is where I believe the two balance each other out best. Yoga keeps you balanced and centred; CrossFit keeps you pushing your limits, and combined



[they teach] you to understand yourself." McDonald, Felstead, and Smith all point to a fourth component of fitness (one that yoga is especially well suited to provide): some space in which self-understanding can occur, physical and emotional balance can be restored, and goals and habits of mind can be examined. Maybe you'll notice the way you breathe and discover a perpetual tightness in your belly that translates to persistent low back pain when you run. Or maybe you'll sit in *Baddha Konasana*, the soles of your feet pressed together, knees turned out, and realize that everything in your current repertoire is tightening your hip joints to the extent that the pose is nearly impossible.

Yoga's function as a self-study laboratory, even if it's only for an hour a couple times a week, loosens the tightness in your body and your mind. Competition takes a holiday, as do miles logged, pounds lifted, and reps completed. As the muscles and joints ease up, so can the mental disturbances that hold you back or keep you stuck (be it in competition or a rigid idea of who you are.) Now that's a pocketful of treasures worth examining! **JE**

