

**Yoga can help realise
a child's athletic
potential, both on a
physical and mental
level. Jane Wiesner
explains how**

YOGA

Jane Wiesner

A SPORTING CHANCE

FROM a yogic perspective, a person's overall wellbeing gives us the capacity to fulfill our true potential in sport. It also claims that the key to optimal physical performance is found in the mind, not the body. So, for your child to become a great athlete, they need to train their mind as well as their body. Nature may endow us all with potential but it is what we 'think, feel and do' that ultimately

brings our inherent qualities to fruition. Being good at sport requires focused attention, determination, perseverance and ability – they are something we have to work for. So, why do some of us have to work harder than others? Often, what holds us back is a negative core belief, such as "I'm no good at sport". Sure, sport requires training, focus and passion but it also requires positive beliefs.

Dr Albert Ellis, a founding father of cognitive therapy, claims that negative core beliefs are the basis for emotional disturbance and destructive behaviour. He suggests that it is important for our success in life – and in sport – that we do what we can to improve our self-image and combat destructive core beliefs. Children are especially vulnerable to these destructive beliefs because they do not have the intellectual capacity to fight them.

Yoga can help a child replace these negative core beliefs with positive ones. It works to build their feelings of strength and personal power, giving them a sense of ease and comfort in their environment. Yoga teaches that there is a vital life force (energy or prana) at work in the body that moves through the breath. When this flow of energy is restricted our bodies break down and they can cause illness, depression and confusion. The physical side of yoga works with the movement of this energy throughout the body, giving us the health and vitality we need to excel at our most important challenge – living. Yogic theory also claims that the reason for this blockage in energy is 'tension' in the body and that practising methods of mindful stillness, relaxation techniques using various forms of yoga practice (such as dhyana (meditation), pranayama (breathing techniques) and asana (postures) release the body from this tension.

To understand this concept with relation to sporting performance, think about a golfer. If the golfer's mind is scattered and they are anxious, their body responds by initiating the sympathetic division of the autonomic nervous system (the flight or fight response). This creates a physical chain reaction that will make it impossible for them to make the shot successfully. Why? Because this biological response creates tension in the muscles of the body, increases adrenaline levels, makes the heart pump rapidly and increases the blood flow. It prepares the body to respond to a life-threatening situation. If the golfer's body is preparing for attack, how can they possibly expect to relax and focus, let alone hit the ball where they want it to go? Yoga teaches that without

sustained mental focus, the ability to release tension and an inner 'trust' in the body's processes, it is difficult to realise our full physical potential. It shows us how to redirect our anxiety in a positive way.

Thankfully, people are becoming increasingly aware of the benefits of the mind-body connection in sport. For instance, the child who runs out onto a football field needs to make this connection just as much as a golfer. The footballer needs the courage to face physical (and often aggressive) confrontations, the conviction that he can and will win and a high degree of control over his body's movements. Without this mental and physical strength, he is limited in what he can achieve. Yoga can give children in all sports the capacity to make this imperative mind-body connection. It teaches them ways to foster a constructive inner dialogue (through affirmations and positive self-talk) and to control the body's nervous responses through meditative movements (postures), breathing techniques and mindful meditation practice. Yoga practice massages the body's internal organs, re-oxygenates the blood, increases circulation (distributing healthy nutrients where needed), strengthens and tones the muscles, creates the capacity for balance and sureness of stance. On a more subtle level, it creates a sense of grounding, helping your child feel strong, capable and steady.

The following asanas are great for building physical and emotional strength and stamina: Mountain Pose, Lightning Pose, Triangle Pose, Warrior pose 1 and 2, and Tree Pose. Please note that to maintain balance, mindful relaxation should always follow athletic activity (try the Ragdoll and Maypole pose).



MOUNTAIN POSE (TADASANA)

Stand tall with the feet together, heels and toes touching. Spread the toes and evenly distribute your body weight over the feet. The arms are down by the sides, palms facing the body. Gently pull in your tummy, tuck the buttocks under and don't lock the knees. Lifting up through the waist, spine and neck, lift the head up towards the ceiling – imagine an invisible string gently expanding the gap between each vertebra. Hold this pose for a few minutes before releasing.

Benefits: A good balancing asana that improves concentration, strengthens the body and sharpens the mind. The even distribution of weight enhances the body's energy flow. It enhances spinal elasticity and combats fatigue.

LIGHTNING POSE

Begin this asana in the Mountain Pose, but with the feet hip-distance apart and knees slightly bent. Inhale, then breathe out and bend the body forward at a forty-five degree angle. Raise the arms to the front, forming a straight line along the spine from the tailbone to the finger tips. Breathe naturally, allowing the breath to strengthen the pose. Gaze at a single point to aid balance. Hold for a few seconds, breathe in and return to a standing position. Repeat 3 to 5 times.

Benefits: Tones the back and stomach, develops the chest muscles, strengthens the ankles and legs, and helps alleviate shoulder stiffness. This is a warming, energy-producing asana. To be avoided if you have ankle, knee or back problems



HELPFUL HINTS

- All yoga postures should be practised bare feet, on a firm, even foundation, preferably a non-slip yoga mat.
- Children should always perform yoga under adult supervision.
- When experiencing any discomfort, discontinue the practice immediately.
- For children, breath emphasis

(breathing in and out through the nostrils to minimise the bacteria entering the body) comes gradually and need not be applied except where outward breaths create the 'haa' sound (children find these great fun).

- Rest for a moment between each asana. Also rest for a full 30 seconds between each series of asanas.

- Encourage your child to develop positive affirmations associated with each pose. For instance, while practising the Warrior Pose, teach them to welcome feelings of strength by silently saying to themselves: "I am strong" and "I am steady". This will help increase their awareness of the positive energy flow in the body.



TRIANGLE POSE

Trikonasana

Stand tall with the feet parallel and just over hip-distance apart. Turn the right foot out to the side, away from the body. Turn the left foot in towards the body at a 45-degree angle. Facing ahead of you, lift the arms to the side to shoulder height, palms to the front. As you exhale, slowly bend to the right, sliding the hand down the right leg towards the foot. Only go as far as is comfortable. The body awareness is on opening and expanding the chest and hip areas. Reach up towards the ceiling with the left hand (palm

forward) looking up to the ceiling. If the neck is sensitive, turn the head towards the floor. Hold for 5 to 10 seconds then bring the head and neck to face the front. Breathe in while rising to a standing position. Repeat on the other side.

Benefits: This is an invigorating pose that stimulates and tones the spinal nerves, increases the circulation to the brain, improves drainage in the lymphatic system and enhances the flow of the lymphatic fluid, and stretches the back muscles and hamstrings. Avoid this pose if you have back or neck problem.

WARRIOR 1

Virabhadrasana

Stand with the feet parallel and just over hip-distance apart. Turn the right foot out to the side and the left foot in at a 45-degree angle. Bend the right knee no further than level with the ankle. Lift the arms up and outwards to the sides, level with the shoulders, with palms facing downwards. Turn the head to look along the right arm, keeping the neck straight and relaxed. Feel a lifting throughout the spine. Consciously lift the crown of the head towards the ceiling. Stay in this position breathing deeply for 30 seconds. Straighten the leg and rise up to a standing position. Lower the arms and come back to the start. Repeat to the other side. Repeat the posture 3 times.

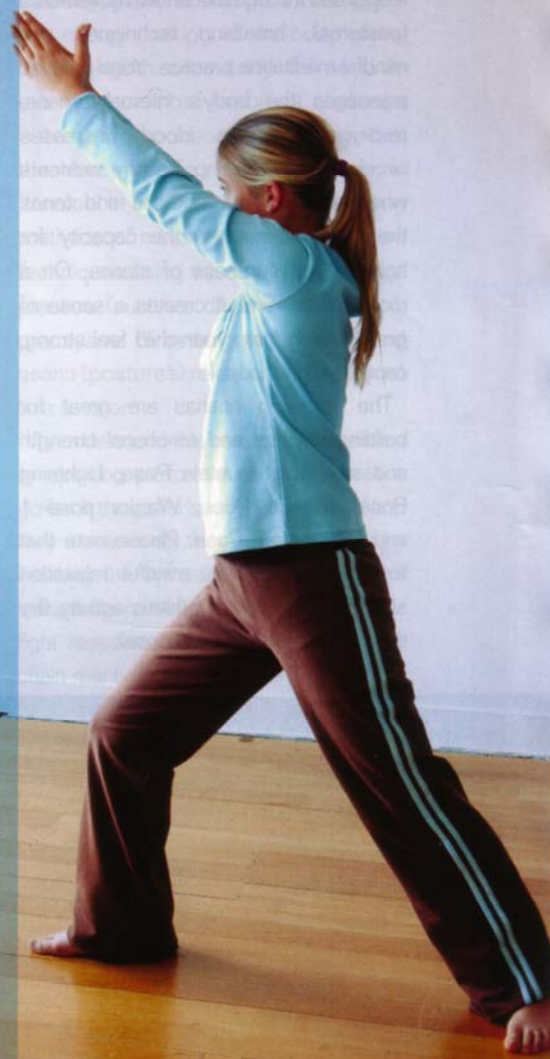


WARRIOR 2

Virabhadrasana

Stand with the feet parallel and just over hip-distance apart. Turn the right foot out to the side and the left foot in at 45 degrees. Square the hips and torso over the front leg. Bend the right knee, no further than level with the ankle. Lift the arms up over the head and place the hands palms together. Gaze at something at eye level to aid your focus. Feel a lifting throughout the spine while stretching the legs, spine, arms, hands and fingertips. Stay in this position breathing deeply for 30 seconds, and then gently lower the arms. Straighten the leg and rise up to a standing position. Repeat on the other side. Repeat 3 times.

Benefits: This pose strengthens the legs, builds the muscles in the back and arms and tones the nervous system. It also helps combat lethargy, and aids elimination and circulation. It promotes self-confidence, enthusiasm, courage and vigour.





TREE POSE

Eka Pada Pranamasana

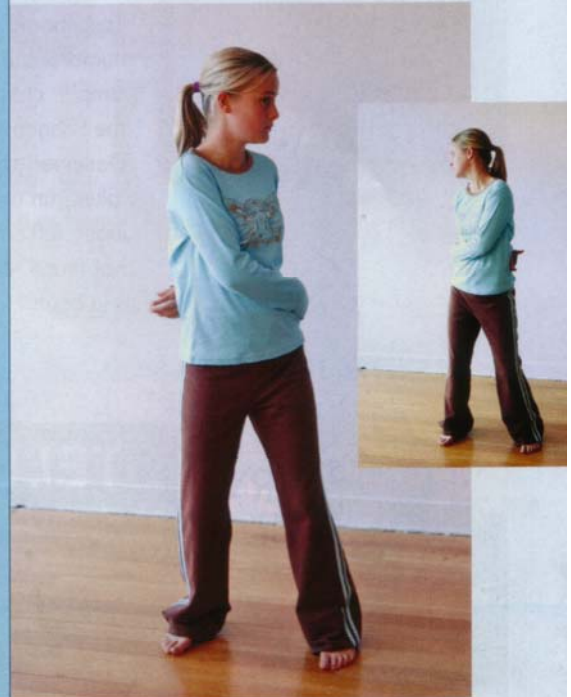
Stand with the feet parallel and slightly apart. Gaze at something at eye level that will not move. Grasp the right ankle and place the sole of the foot on the inside of the right thigh with that knee pointing outwards. Hold the ankle until balanced, and then place the hands in prayer position either at the chest or above the head. Straighten the body and breathe normally. This is a meditative pose, so let go of the world around you completely. Try and hold this pose for about 2 minutes, then bring the leg back down. Repeat 2 to 3 times on each side.

Benefits: This pose helps control stress and anxiety, balancing on a physical, emotional and mental level. It also strengthens the leg, ankle and foot muscles. Anyone suffering from vertigo or any other balance-related health problems should avoid this pose.

The Maypole or Waist Rotating Pose

Variation of Kati Chakrasana

Stand with the feet parallel and just over hip-distance apart, toes pointing outwards. Stretch up tall, lengthening the spine. Lift the crown of the head towards the ceiling.



THE RAG DOLL

Variation of Uttanasana

Stand up straight, feet parallel and hip-distance apart. Stretch up through the spine and lift the crown of the head towards the ceiling. Breathe in and lift the arms straight up to the front and over the head, pointing the fingers. Breathe out, bend the knees slightly and move the arms forward in a floppy rag doll movement. Finish the movement by letting the arms hang towards the floor. Let the breath out in three short "haa" sounds, bouncing gently and then breathe in through the nostrils and roll back up to standing, one vertebra at a time, with slightly bent knees. Repeat 3 times.

Benefits: Relaxes the upper body, strengthens the back muscles and tones and stretches the legs.



Improves circulation, elimination and digestion, and encourages relaxation. Inspires creativity and builds self-esteem. Avoid it if you are suffering from vertigo.

Relax the shoulders down. Bend the knees slightly and breathe in. On the exhale, gently twist the body to the left, letting the arms wrap loosely around the body. Then swing the arms to the right in a relaxed, easy movement. Continue to swing from side to side for least five counts per side, then come back up to standing.

Benefits: Tones the hips, waist and back, relaxes the shoulders and helps avoid stiffness in the middle and upper body. Relieves mental and physical tension. Avoid if suffering from problems with balance and serious shoulder conditions.

Jane Wiesner is the Principal of The Body and Mind School of Yoga in Melbourne and has been practising yoga for over 32 years. She has published two books on yoga – *Magic Me: Yoga a Magical Gift for All Ages* and *Who am I? Yoga for Children of All Ages*. Both books are available through Jane's website www.beingwell.net.au and from all good bookshops.

