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PHOTOS TEOH SEET HENG & UNSPLASH

SLOW DOWN, FINISH STRONG

Teoh Seet Heng discovers that the secret to optimising physical performance doesn't come from pushing physical boundaries, but in being attuned to one's body

Sheer ability aside, the difference between a talented endurance athlete and a successful podium-finisher is in his or her ability to maximise efficiency and economise effort. Every wasted motion draws down from the precious reserve of energy that could make the difference between where it matters.

A triathlete, cyclist, or runner could chase efficiency and performance by investing in space-age footwear, apparel, accessories, and equipment. But for 36-year-old triathlete Sue Kay, that winning edge comes from the ancient practice of yoga.

Rooted in 5,000-year of Indian philosophy, Sue explained that yoga is a great low-impact workout that combines physical postures (*Asanas*) connected by flowing sequences (*Vinyasas*), breathing techniques (*Pranayama*), and meditation or relaxation. Specifically for athletic performance, the practice helps build strength and endurance, improves range of motion, balance, and supports recovery.

RUNNER-TURNED-YOGI

For Sue, a triathlete, yoga-instructor and digital agency owner, yoga is a source of joy as she trains for races, with the key benefit rooted in her ability to find internal balance amidst the intensity of race prep and punishing routines.

“People often asked why I smile when I run, even when it’s the last gruelling mile of a triathlon race,” shared Sue, who just sat down after collecting her bike for a six-day training camp in Chiang Mai.

“I used to tell them it is because I wanted to look good in the race photos. But the reality, as I discovered over time, is that being mindful of my race plan, breathing, posture, and approaching each obstacles with a balanced perspective is helping me to enjoy the race more,” explained Sue.

Sue picked up yoga by chance seven years ago. Already an avid runner, she soon noticed a difference between runners who practise yoga versus those who don’t. “Through yoga, I have gained a deeper awareness of how the body works. On a run, your quads, hamstring, glutes, calves, as well as core and abdominal each plays a role to benefit the action of running,” said Sue.

WORKING WITH THE BODY

“Through understanding the physiology of these muscle groups, I have been able to work with them to better manage muscle fatigue during long, drawn-out races or trainings,” shared Sue.

“Of course, there are also many different training options available to develop more strength or power for these muscle groups, from resistance band and body weight training, to kettlebell workouts and lifting. The key difference in yoga workout is that the Asanas and Vinyasas allow us to target the slow-twitch muscles, which are tremendously important for endurance,” explained Sue.

She elaborated that yoga routines incorporate slow and steady flexibility exercises that require a strong midsection. As such, frequent yoga training is known to increase core strength, flexibility, and improve range of motion while relieving muscle tension.

“One of the pain points for athletes is muscle tension. It is caused when a muscle contracts and does not release due to overuse or stress. If you have stiff and achy muscles in the upper half of the body, it is a sign of muscle tension, and can be debilitating if left untreated,” said Sue.

“Yoga uses techniques to lengthen, stretch and relax muscles while simultaneously working with your breath. It addresses both the physical side of muscle tension and the stress aspect as well,” she added.





IMPROVED BREATHING

Beyond improvements in muscle strength, flexibility, and injury prevention, those who race seriously or simply take part in occasional fun run would be aware of the impact breathing can have on performance. It is the foundation of reducing performance anxiety and improving concentration.

“I have employed yogic breath control techniques to help me get through intensive moments. For example, the Kapalabhati Pranayama that consists of short, powerful exhales and passive inhales is really effective in warming my body up at the start-line. While the Ujjayi Pranayama completely fills up my lungs helps with air intake in the middle of an event, a technique that I will most likely use repeatedly to tackle the mountainous terrain of Chiang Mai,” shared Sue.

A BALANCED MIND

There is also a less direct, though no less tangible, connection between yoga and the mental side of training. The yoga poses teach patience and allow an athlete to slow down and develop an awareness of their body. This awareness often translates into the ability to remain calm and collected in the face of diversity and intensity.

“Yoga helps me to see things as they are and focus on my game plan, so the mental chatter dies down,” said Sue.

As a business owner, Sue is a big advocate for time-strapped athletes and weekend warriors to incorporate 30 minutes to an hour of yoga exercises right after their workouts.

“The intensity of sport training often leads to burnout, both mental and physical. And this may be the greatest benefit of yoga – it reinvigorates an athlete and re-establishes a training balance. There are hundreds of yoga poses and sequences to choose from, and they can be done at any intensity to focus on the muscle groups that were utilised during the training session. You will find that they fit easily right after your regular workouts,” advised Sue.

According to Sue, one of the biggest misconceptions among the public is that flexibility is a prerequisite for the practice of yoga. “Frankly, the lack of flexibility is precisely why one needs to do yoga! It is not about performing fancy acrobatic poses, but rather finding the balance in the things we do,” she said. **D**



A FULL BODY YOGA EXERCISE FOR ENDURANCE ATHLETES

A simple to follow yoga exercise for runners and cyclists that stretches and lengthens major muscle groups from top to bottom. This exercise can be easily done after regular workouts.

STRETCH 1

- 1 Start with a seated hip opening pose. Make sure the back is straight, and hold it for a minute or two to cool down from the workout.
- 2 Stand straight up before placing your right foot forward for a deep lunge. Keep the back straight, face forward, and slowly raise both hands up. Hold the pose.
- 3 For deeper stretch, lower both hands, and twist the entire upper body to face right. Rest both your hands on your right leg, and hold the pose.
- 4 For more flexible athletes, you may lean further down to your right leg while still facing right, put both hands together to form a prayer pose. Hold the pose.
- 5 Advanced athletes could twist their body further, lean further down, and move the left arm under the right leg with the palm side facing down. Then, move the right arm across the back to lock hands with the left arm, all the while keeping a straight back, and facing backwards with a slightly tilted head. Hold the pose.
- 6 Release the pose, and repeat step 2 to 5 with the opposite side of the body.



STRETCH 2

- 1 Assume planking position with straightened arms. Hold the pose.
- 2 Lower the legs and waist until they are flat on the ground, while keeping the upper body raised with both arms. Hold the pose.
- 3 Lift the hip up supported by all four limbs. Keep a straight back by stretching out both arms while facing down. For beginners, bend the knees a little to prioritise keeping the back straight.
- 4 For more flexible athletes, keep the feet flat on the ground, and straighten both legs while keeping the back straight. Hold the pose.
- 5 Move both legs to the front, unfold the body to stand back up, and slowly lift the head up last.

