

From *Runner's World*
columnist and
yoga expert
sage rountree



the RUNNER'S GUIDE TO YOGA

A PRACTICAL APPROACH

TO BUILDING STRENGTH & FLEXIBILITY FOR BETTER RUNNING

PRAISE FOR SAGE ROUNTREE

“Sage’s clear approach to incorporating yoga into a training season perfectly addresses all the things athletes need to hear about flexibility and balanced conditioning—and Sage delivers it in a way that athletes can relate to.”

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“Yoga is not only *good* for athletes—it is essential, for both the physical and mental benefits. ... Sage shares the benefits that yoga has brought to her life as an athlete and offers easy-to-follow yoga postures and breathing techniques to help athletes of all sports get started with a safe and effective yoga routine and to help them avoid or rehabilitate an injury.”

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“Endurance athletes generally have poor flexibility, core strength, balance, and posture. Improving these can really change performance for the better. *The Athlete’s Guide to Yoga* is a great resource to get you on the path to better training and racing.”

—Joe Friel, founder of Ultrafit and author of *The Triathlete’s Training Bible*,
The Cyclist’s Training Bible, and *The Mountain Biker’s Training Bible*

“*The Athlete’s Guide to Yoga* is a practical in-your-body guidebook for anyone wanting to take their fitness routine into new realms. Clearly written, beautifully illustrated, it’s a real resource for starting and deepening a practice that stays true to yoga’s depth. Postures, breathing, relaxation, meditation, training routines, it’s all here.”

—Richard Faulds, Kripalu Center for Yoga & Health

“Somehow Sage Rountree has managed to maintain her yogic voice ... while also toning it down just enough to speak directly to an athlete. ... The book is straightforward without all the frou-frou and implied incense-burning and ohmmm of yoga that could turn off some athletes. ... Since she herself is a triathlete and runner, Rountree knows exactly where you get tight and why, what it feels like before and after certain workouts, the difficulties of combining a good yoga practice with hard training, and what’s realistic or not for an athlete.”

—SNEWS®

“Whether you’re a yogini or you’ve never heard of downward-facing dog, you’ll come away with something useful from *The Athlete’s Guide to Yoga*.”

—*Women’s Adventure* magazine

“This comprehensive book on yoga for athletes makes a compelling case for why and, more importantly, how athletes of every stripe can benefit from making yoga a regular part of their workout regimens.”

—American Council on Exercise Get Fit

PRAISE FOR *THE ATHLETE’S POCKET GUIDE TO YOGA*

“This sweet little book is a delightful and abundant source of yoga pose sequences. *The Athlete’s Pocket Guide to Yoga* is a great resource for yoga teachers and an easy source of inspiration and guidance for beginner to intermediate yogis.”

—YogaBasics.com

“For time-crunched yogis and jocks who don’t even identify with the term yogi but want a good stretch or cross-training workout, take a look at *The Athlete’s Pocket Guide to Yoga*. With no need to attend a class or even watch a DVD, there’s no excuse to not get a few poses in.”

—GearJunkie.com

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INTRODUCTION

In this book, we will investigate how yoga will help your running. You'll learn how yoga can prevent and correct running injuries, how yoga can make you feel (and yes, even look) better, and how yoga will give you new focus and tenacity with a direct positive effect on your running. We will explore which of the hundreds of yoga poses, exercises, and techniques to use, and I'll explain why, how, and when to use them. In this book, then, you'll find concrete advice on how to use yoga to be a better runner and a happier person.

Instead of being a comprehensive catalog of every pose—for a more thorough look at the poses, please read my book *The Athlete's Guide to Yoga*—this book covers poses of special use to runners, focusing on those that are safe for home practice. (Handstand, for example, can be a great teacher of proper alignment in both yoga and running, but it's best learned in the presence of an experienced yoga educator.) Here, I'll introduce yoga to those who are new to the practice and help those with some experience develop a home practice to complement their running.

In Part I, we'll look at how yoga helps runners by conferring strength, flexibility, balance, and focus in both physical and psychological ways. The second part of the book describes poses to use to improve running, targeting the main regions of the body we use in running: the hips and thighs; the core; the lower legs; and the upper body. In this section, we'll talk about why and how to do these poses and how you can modify them to make them more or less intense. In Part III, we explore ways to use yoga for balance. Being balanced in your body, in space, and in your approach to work and rest is critical for injury prevention. We'll move on to yoga philosophy in

Part IV, as we investigate the mental and spiritual aspects of the practice in ways that will hone your focus and sense of well-being. Finally, Part V details when to do these poses and exercises, outlining routines for practice before, after, and even during your runs and races.

Using the techniques outlined in this book, you'll learn more about yourself: where your perceived limits are and how to surpass them, when to push and when to back off, how to follow your breath and your intuition, and how to use competition to achieve peak performance.

PART I

OVERVIEW:
HOW YOGA
helps
RUNNERS

1

STRENGTH AND FLEXIBILITY

I HATED THE FIRST yoga class I attended. The problem wasn't my flexibility; while some of the stretches were intense, I was familiar enough with stretching and didn't have a problem twisting my body into the shapes the teacher described. The problem was that yoga was hard—much harder than I'd expected—in its demands on my strength. We were talked into a pose and then held it for what felt like minutes on end while the teacher worked the room, offering adjustments. *Oh, no*, I thought, *he's forgotten we're all in this pose! I've been abandoned! My muscles are burning; my legs are shaking—how is this generating inner peace?* I left with legs like jelly, feeling humbled and much, much weaker than I thought myself to be.

Perhaps your experience will be the opposite. You may find the strength poses doable while the flexibility poses flummox you. Each of us has individual strengths and weaknesses. Often we have a deficiency in either strength or flexibility; sometimes we are lacking in both. The rare individual—including yoga practitioners—will maintain a healthy, dynamic balance between the two, exhibiting strength and flexibility in equal measure.

What eventually brought me back to yoga was knowing that I needed balance in my body. I'd built strength in my marathon training, but I could feel my flexibility waning. By adding a 90-minute class once a week and revisiting a few poses at home after my runs, I brought my body back into enough balance to finish my first marathon in just under four hours. In addition to the hip strength and leg flexibility that kept

me on pace through the race, yoga helped me cultivate mental strength and a flexible attitude that enabled me to weather the highs and lows that come over the course of 26.2 miles. Yoga can help you find that same balance between strength and flexibility, whether your goal race is 100 meters or 100 miles.

Sthira and Sukha

The *Yoga Sutras*, a centuries-old series of aphorisms that define yoga, explain the method for quieting the fluctuations of the mind so that the practitioner can connect to his or her true nature (see Chapter 12 for an exploration of the sutras). Over the course of almost 200 verses, little reference is made to the physical practice—what most of us in the twenty-first-century West think of as yoga. The sutras' take on the postures is *Sthira sukham asanam*. The Sanskrit translates, loosely, to this: The posture (*asana*) should be both firm (*sthira*) and easy (*sukha*).

These twin concepts, effort and ease, stability and mobility, strength and flexibility, must be present simultaneously. This concept applies not just to sitting in meditation (what the sutras are most likely prescribing) but to all physical activity, where we must balance a rigidity of form (in the skeleton, for example) with a fluidity of motion (in the muscles, for example). And it applies to running, too, where we must balance stiffness of form with a fluid range of motion.

STIFFNESS

Think of elite runners. What words would you use to describe their form? *Springy*, *snappy*, *floating*. This comes from *sthira*, stiffness. Good runners are tight in the right places. Stiffness around the hips and core is critical for efficient transfer of energy to the ground and for recoil that takes the energetic rebound from the ground and rolls it into forward motion. A runner who is too lax around the hips or weak around the core will sink into the ground with each step. This is inefficient running, and it can lead to injury over time, as the joints are strained by excessive torque.

Through running, you will develop sport-specific strength. There's a reason that runners are obsessed with mileage: Generally speaking, running more miles confers efficiency, building strength in the hips and core muscles that supports a more economical stride. That means less effort at the same pace or greater ability to run faster paces.

RANGE OF MOTION

If you have had, at times, trouble reaching your shoelaces, then you know there is certainly such a thing as too much stiffness. While you need strength to run well, you

also need enough flexibility and ease (*sukha*) to move fluidly through the proper range of motion and to access your strength. Too much stiffness in your hips can shorten your stride, thus limiting your speed, which is a factor of your stride rate and your stride length. Tightness in a specific muscle can alter your stride, as you subconsciously develop a little hiccup to work around it, and such gait modification can cause a host of problems up and down the kinetic chain of your body: knee trouble, foot issues, back pain.

Developing appropriate flexibility in the muscles will allow you to find the most efficient patterns for your stride. Greater mobility in the joints of the feet, hips, and spine will ease strain in these areas and others, preventing injury and lending an overall sense of well-being.

WORK AND REST

We also see this balance between *sthira* and *sukha* in proper run training. Both hard workouts and easy recovery runs are necessary for the body to receive the proper dosage of stress and to take the time to adapt to the stress and grow stronger. The same holds true in your yoga practice. There will be times to work and times to rest.

I cover the balance between work and rest in more detail in Chapter 10, but for a much more detailed look at recovery and ways to support hard work with high-quality rest, please refer to my book *The Athlete's Guide to Recovery*.

How Yoga Builds Strength

As I discovered in my first yoga class, a physical yoga practice can quickly reveal the limitations of your strength. It can also work to build your strength, challenging your muscles in both isometric and isotonic exercises.

Isometric strength develops when you hold a pose for a long time, forcing your muscles to work against static resistance. This could mean pushing your feet into the floor in a warrior pose or holding your hands to the ground in plank. Maintaining the position in a static hold and working against the steady resistance of the floor is key here. Such long holds develop the strength that helps you hold your core steady while you run.

Isotonic strength, however, comes from dynamic motion in and out of poses, as the muscles contract concentrically (while shortening) and eccentrically (while lengthening) as you move rhythmically. Your arm and leg muscles work in the same way as you run. Building isotonic strength will support your running.

Yoga poses use your body strength for resistance, but they are not a direct replacement for a strength-training program using weights. For some runners, yoga

can suffice as a strength practice; for others, a gym-based routine is useful. If you are an efficient runner and powerful on hills, yoga may be a strength practice. If you are weak compared to others in your training and age group, combine yoga with a gym-strength routine.

Many yoga classes feature a practice that moves forward and backward on the mat. Rectangular mats are set up with the short side forward, and the yogis move from front to back in sun salutations, standing poses, and even floor routines. For runners, this serves to build strength in the sagittal plane of forward motion—where we spend most of our time.

Yoga can also help build strength side to side. More and more yoga styles are bringing students out of this linear plane—one runners are stuck in almost exclusively, as endurance sports emphasize forward motion—and into sideways motion and spiraling twists. Look for rooms where the mats are laid out horizontally, or classes with “mandala” or “free flow” in the title. This approach is of great benefit to runners because it cultivates balance.

How Yoga Increases Flexibility

The flexibility you can gain through a physical yoga practice is extremely useful for your running. Proper stretching helps you balance the relationship between muscles in your body, loosening tight muscles that hamper a fluid, full range of motion.

In yoga’s static stretches (poses held for a period of 30 seconds to two minutes or longer), you will stretch not only muscles but also, with longer holds, the fascia that surrounds and shoots through your muscles. This connective tissue can be elastic, but it can also stick to itself like a wad of plastic wrap. Proper stretching helps to smooth it back out.

Yoga also moves dynamically, in sequences in which practitioners go from pose to pose with the breath. Dynamic movement aids flexibility in the muscles and emphasizes smooth, healthy range of motion at the joints. Lack of mobility at the joints can strain ligaments, tendons, and muscles and reduces efficiency. Hypermobility at the joints can cause problems, too, but in most devoted runners, the trend is toward stiffness rather than the excessive range of motion exhibited by dancers and gymnasts. Your goal will be to build enough flexibility to run with a full range of motion.

Finding the Right Balance

Most runners carry an imbalance of some sort: top to bottom, side to side, work to rest. In Part III, we’ll look at self-tests you can use to determine where your own

imbalances lie. Many yoga poses naturally create balance by strengthening one part of the body and stretching another. A lunge, for example, strengthens the front leg while stretching the back leg. At the same time, a lunge requires balance between the inner and outer thighs, the front and back of the torso, and the upper and lower body. Some poses focus more on strength, others target flexibility, and still others balance strength and flexibility by focusing fully on rest.

Yoga will help you balance strength and flexibility by increasing both and teaching you which types of exercises will best balance your needs. By cultivating balance, you'll be able to run more mileage, faster, with less physical and mental effort. This balance is the focus of Chapter 2.

4

HIPS AND THIGHS

YOUR HIPS AND LEGS are the drivetrain of your running stride. The stability of your hips and the mobility of your legs combine to move you over the ground. To that end, you need strength and flexibility in both the hips and the thighs to run well and avoid injury. Yoga offers a host of exercises that build both.

Standing Poses: Strength and Flexibility

Nowhere in the catalog of yoga asanas do the twin qualities of *sthira* and *sukha*—stability and mobility, strength and flexibility—shine more than in the standing poses. Moving in and out of the poses requires and builds isotonic strength, and holding them provides isometric exercise. When you flow from pose to pose, use the breath—generally, inhale to lift, exhale to lower. When you hold, allow the breath to come and go freely. Along the way, you gain flexibility and resilience through your legs.

WARRIOR I

WHY: Warrior I (Fig. 4.1) builds balanced strength in the muscles that act on the knee of the front leg while creating flexibility in the back-leg hip flexors and in the lower leg.

HOW: Standing tall, step forward with your left leg and angle your right heel in slightly. Pointing your pelvis straight ahead, inhale and lift your arms. Exhaling, lunge your left knee toward 90 degrees.

VARIATIONS: The width and length between your feet can confer stability or challenge your balance. Change your stance until you find what's right for you.

If you feel stress in your back knee, lift the heel and roll to the ball of the back foot.

Your arm position can change here: Arms can be parallel or hands can touch; elbows can bend; hands can clasp behind your back.



4.1 *Warrior I*

WARRIOR II

WHY: Like warrior I, warrior II (Fig. 4.2) supports knee health; at the same time, it increases flexibility in the inner thighs.

HOW: Take a wide stance, left toes turned out, right toes facing right. Inhale and lift your arms parallel to the floor; exhaling, lunge your left knee over your toes. Keep shoulders and pelvis stacked and squared to the long side of the mat, and turn just your head to look over your left hand.

VARIATIONS: Tight hips can make a proper lunge difficult. If your left knee is moving to the right, shorten your stance.

Add a side stretch to the pose by coming to exalted warrior (Fig. 4.3): Lift your front arm to the sky as you relax your back arm toward the ground.



4.2 *Warrior II*



4.3 *Exalted warrior*

WARRIOR III

WHY: Warrior III (Fig. 4.4) builds strength in the glutes and other hip stabilizers while stretching the back of the standing leg. It requires stability through the core and a focused sense of balance.

HOW: Stand tall and shift your weight onto your right leg. Hold shoulders, core, hips, and left leg in a long line as you hinge the pelvis forward and lift the left leg behind you.

VARIATIONS: Coming into and out of the pose with the breath makes a good dynamic warmup and workout for the hip muscles. Alternatively, holding the pose for a number of breaths is a good core challenge.

To increase or decrease intensity, change the position of your arms. Hands can reach back in an inverted V off to the sides, or overhead for more work. Try holding hands in prayer position or interlacing your fingers behind your back to stretch your chest.



4.4 *Warrior III*

TRIANGLE

WHY: Triangle (Fig. 4.5) stretches the hamstrings and inner thigh on the front leg, the outer hip and calf on the back leg, and the torso and chest.

HOW: From a wide stance, turn your left toes out and angle your right foot roughly 90 degrees relative to the left. Keeping your spine long, extend it over your left leg as you rest your left hand on your thigh, shin, or ankle. Reach your right arm upward.

VARIATIONS: Use a block on either side of your left leg to rest your hand or go hands-free for a strength challenge.

Experiment to determine the best position for your hips. Rolling your right hip forward and pulling your left hip to the right slightly may allow your hip to stretch more.

Choose a position for your neck and head that works for you. You can look down, forward, or up.



4.5 *Triangle*

SIDE ANGLE

WHY: Like warrior II, side angle (Fig. 4.6) offers an inner-thigh stretch while building strength isometrically. It also stretches the entire side of the body and the chest.

HOW: From triangle pose, bend your left knee and rest your left elbow on your left thigh. Take your right arm by your head, creating a diagonal line from the right heel through the right hand.

VARIATIONS: For a deeper stretch, take your left hand to a block or to the floor, either inside or outside your left foot.

To stretch the chest more, lay your right forearm on your lower back, tucking the right fingers between the waist and left thigh.



4.6 Side angle

PYRAMID

WHY: Pyramid pose provides a deep hamstring and hip stretch for the front leg, a calf stretch for the back leg, and either a core challenge or a release for the back, depending on whether you hold your back actively (Fig. 4.7) or passively (Fig. 4.8).

HOW: From mountain pose, take a moderate step forward with your left leg. Angle your right heel in slightly. Keeping hips facing forward, fold your pelvis until you feel a hamstring stretch.

VARIATIONS: To work your core, hold your spine parallel to the floor. For more of a stretch, let your back arc over your front leg.

For challenge in the core work, take your arms to the sides or overhead. For release in the stretch, hands can rest on the front thigh, the shin, blocks, or the floor.



4.7 *Pyramid with active back*



4.8 *Pyramid with passive back*

PART V

PUTTING
it
TOGETHER

15

ROUTINES FOR DYNAMIC WARM-UP BEFORE A RUN

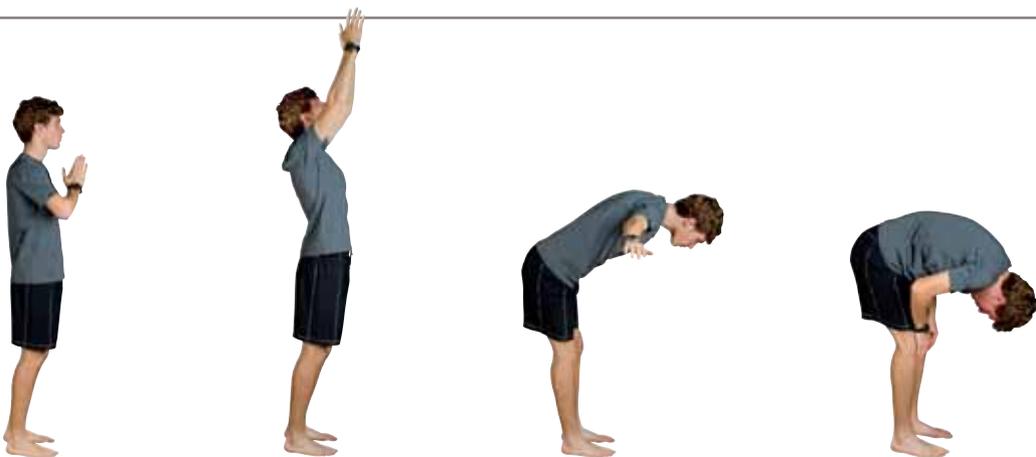
THE STATIC STRETCHING provided by holding a yoga pose is useful, but it should not be done just before a workout. Recent studies have shown that such static stretching can diminish short-term strength in the muscles. Instead of following the old-school model of running a few laps of the track, then flinging a leg up on the fence as you fold over to stretch your hamstrings, use a dynamic warm-up. Yoga is perfect for this.

In a dynamic warm-up routine, you'll move in and out of poses without lingering in them. The goal is to move through your range of motion, priming the muscles for the work you will soon do. The dynamic warm-up helps get the appropriate muscles firing. For example, paying special attention to warming up your hip muscles, especially the glutes, ensures you are beginning your run with appropriate muscular engagement, which can help prevent injury down the line by keeping the workload in the right muscles.

Before you begin any of these routines, stand in mountain pose for a few breaths. Set an intention for your training session, so that you enter it with a clear sense of purpose. You can use this time to commit to a mantra, set parameters for your interval pacing, or simply appreciate the blessing of being strong enough to run today. Move through the dynamic warm-up with a focus on your breath. This helps set the tone for a fantastic run.

SUN SALUTATIONS WITH LUNGES

WHY: Sun salutations engage your whole body, and they use your mind and breath to synchronize your motion to your inhalations and exhalations. As such, they make a fantastic pre-run warm-up.



Standing in mountain pose,

inhale and lift your arms overhead.

Exhaling, dive forward from the hips

and come into a forward fold. >>>



exhaling, lower your body halfway to the ground, elbows in tight.

Inhaling, swing hips forward and open your chest for upward-facing dog;

exhaling, come to downward-facing dog. >>>



Inhaling, lift your back until it is parallel with the ground;



exhaling, fold again.



Inhaling, step your right foot back to a lunge; exhaling, lower your hips in the lunge.



Inhaling, step left foot back to plank,



Inhaling, step right foot forward; exhaling, lower both hips to lunge.



Inhaling, step your left foot forward and lengthen your back;



exhaling, fold forward.



Inhaling, sweep your arms overhead as you rise to standing;



exhaling, lower your hands to prayer position. Repeat with the left foot leading; aim for four, six, or eight rounds.

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Runner's World columnist Sage Rountree holds coaching certifications from the Road Runner's Club of America and USA Triathlon and is an Experienced Registered Yoga Teacher. Her popular yoga classes for athletes draw students ranging from Ironman® triathletes and Olympians to everyday cyclists, runners, and walkers as well as team-sports athletes. She is a well-known writer who contributes frequently to *Yoga Journal*, *USA Triathlon*, and *Endurance Magazine* and is the author of *The Athlete's Guide to Yoga*, *The Athlete's Pocket Guide to Yoga*, and *The Athlete's Guide to Recovery*.

