

# ZEN

# AND THE ART OF HAMSTRING MAINTENANCE

■ BY JULIA GREEN

TO STRETCH OR NOT to stretch: runners have been debating this question for many years, some claiming that stretching is a no-no, others swearing that maintaining flexibility is the secret to their success. Recently, scientists have joined the fray, and a major study sponsored by USA Track & Field is currently underway to try to settle the stretching score once and for all. But amid the cacophonous back and forth between doctors and athletes, another stretching revolution is taking shape: runners who do yoga.

Jennifer Daly, an avid long-distance runner, certified Iyengar yoga teacher, and director of the Anahata Yoga Center of Williamsburg, Va., began running in high school. She added yoga to her exercise routine in graduate school to relieve stress. Twenty years later, she does yoga daily, runs four to five times a week, and believes this combination keeps her physically healthy as well as relaxed and centered.

According to Daly, yoga can improve a runner's performance in many ways. Most injuries are the result of muscular imbalance or strain—an asymmetrical gait can stress some muscles more than others, diminishing running efficiency, while a tight area, such as the hips, can pull the rest of the body out of whack, destabilizing the pelvis and causing lower back pain or knee problems. Iyengar yoga emphasizes anatomical alignment to alleviate those afflictions before they become major injuries. Also, focused breathing increases breath capacity, energy level, and efficient circulation of oxygenated blood. It also leads to the type of running that Daly refers to as a “moving meditation.” She says that yoga “brings you into a mental zone.”

Rustan Adcock, M.D., a marathoner and family-practice physician in Asheville, N.C., agrees. He practices yoga twice a week and says that it has strengthened his running ability. “It puts you in touch with your breathing, and definitely helps me run more efficiently.”

As the gospel of yoga spreads among runners, many studios have begun offering classes designed specifically for runners. Trish Jones



Trish Jones shaved a minute off her 10K time after starting her yoga practice.

ROB MESITE

teaches two in the D.C. metro area. Now 32, Jones has been a runner since middle school and took up yoga six years ago to relieve lower back pain, although she admits she “had no clue why it would help. I just knew yoga was the trendy thing to do.” Not only has yoga alleviated her pain, but it's improved her performance dramatically: “Because my hips are more open and my strides longer, I've shaved a minute off my time. Also, being able to control my breath has improved my endurance and relieved my asthma.”

So why isn't everybody doing yoga? “A lot of runners are wary of adding something new to their routine,” Daly acknowledges, “because they're not sure how that will affect their performance and they don't want to take any chances.” Some runners fear overstretching, which Daly contends is a myth. “It's just not true that you can overstretch muscles. Ligaments and tendons will prevent you from overstretching and it's actually a non-issue for runners,” whose muscles are usually too short from running to be over-stretched.

Other runners testify that yoga has helped heal their injuries. Says Beth Ridout, a cyclist and runner who's training for the 24-hour, 182-mile Ragnar relay race in Washington D.C., “The most impressive display of the power of yoga for me was actually related to a rotator cuff strain I suffered during a golf lesson. The pain kept me from moving my right hand even to my left shoulder for almost six months. During that

time I had gotten away from yoga, but during a trip to Costa Rica I took my mat and started again. By the time I returned a week later, I had regained most of the mobility I had lost.”

Since most of the evidence that yoga can help runners perform better is anecdotal, Dan Pereles, M.D., an orthopedist and triathlete, is trying to get some hard data on stretching. He's the principal investigator on USATF's stretching study ([www.usatf.org/stretchstudy](http://www.usatf.org/stretchstudy)), which is evaluating the effects of pre-run stretching. “I don't do yoga myself, but it's been great for a lot of my patients,” says Pereles, whose orthopedic practice is in Kensington, Md. He doesn't specifically prescribe yoga to his patients, whom he classifies as too busy to even go to physical therapy, but he does assign special exercises for certain injuries.

Of his own routine, Pereles, who is 46 and has been running since he was 19, says he used to stretch for ten minutes before running, but now only stretches his IT band before he runs. “Since I started stretching less, I've started hurting more. But that might be because I'm getting older. Running's dirty little secret is when you look at races, you see a lot of people in their 20s, 30s, and 40s, but not as many in their 50s, and very few in their 60s or over. Something happens to us as we get older that breaks us down, so we're not running anymore. A lot of people come into my office and I have to break the bad news”—that they can't run

anymore. Pereles, whose last triathlon was in New York City in July, says his own running days are coming to an end. He now sticks mostly to biking and swimming.

But Daly says she has students in her yoga class who are in their 70s and 80s who are still running. “I hope I'll be running when I'm 80,” she says. “Yoga keeps my muscles supple, making running that long a possibility. What I do know for sure is that yoga certainly doesn't hurt.”

Pereles doesn't disagree with Daly, per se, but his philosophy hinges more on luck than anything. “I see runners who come in with horrible arthritis, but there are also runners who are biomechanically blessed—they just don't get hurt. Everyone can tolerate a different amount of slop in the joints. I think it's luck of the draw.”

So far the stretch study, which began over a year ago and has collected data from several thousand participants, has not produced any significant data that shows pre-run stretching has any effect on injury rate. Pereles expects this to be the ultimate finding of the study, though researchers will examine the data by subgroup to see if a certain demographic does benefit from stretching. He hopes to do a study on post-run stretching in the future.

As Daly observes, “Part of the practice of yoga is to accept what you're presented with in your body and appreciate it,” an idea that may behoove runners and yogis alike to embrace. •