



Tennis Players Should Consider Yoga!

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How I ended up teaching “Yoga for Tennis” might surprise you, considering that I didn’t like yoga one bit when I first tried it! At the time, I was suffering from a lower back injury that I sustained a few months after graduating from Miami University (OH), where I played tennis on scholarship. Upon the suggestion of my therapist, I tried some evening classes that were being held at their office. I can still see it to this day: walking into a dimly lit room with my beach towel in hand (not yet owning my own mat) and feeling utterly lost at the back of the room. I was introduced to “postures” where I had no idea what I was doing, and I hated the feeling of being “bad” at yoga, naturally comparing myself to others in my peripherals. I was slipping on my towel, and surely, I wasn’t burning any calories because we were moving too slow to break a sweat! Because it was so different from what I had experienced in the past, yoga felt like a major waste of time.

It took me a while to try yoga again — this time in a gym setting where I began going once a week after workouts. I slowly enjoyed the challenge so much that I sought out classes with my gym pass all over the city, whenever and wherever I could — in-between teaching tennis for a living.

At first, it was still extremely hard. I was trying to find a balance between overdoing and underdoing it with regard to activity, teaching, and my previous injury. But also because with yoga, I was asked to do the complete opposite from what I had learned on the tennis court. I needed to slow down and pay attention — and gradually, it began to fill the void of all those hours I spent training for tennis in an aging body that suddenly needed more care after years of abuse.

In the beginning, all I cared about was healing my lower back through postures that offered opportunities for strength and a better range of motion. As yoga teachers, we often say that you come into “the

practice” for what you want to get out of it, but later find that you become interested in other facets of yoga, and that’s precisely what happened for me. But let’s start with the obvious reasons you should give yoga a shot as a tennis player — at any age and ability level!

Injury Prevention

Because of tennis’s repetitive nature for both recreational and competitive players alike, overuse injuries are common. According to a USTA Sport Science Committee injury tracking study, 861 Junior tennis players were studied to understand the most common injuries sustained. In this order, they are lower back, shoulder, ankle, knee, and wrist. Out of the 861 players, a total of 41 percent of all players reported injury, with one-third of players reporting a second injury. This data tells us that players don’t fully recover from their initial injury before suffering subsequent harm. We know how vital the kinetic chain is, and if one area is hurt, there’s a good chance of overloading another location in the body. Remember that you’re coming into the practice for what you’d like to gain. Where is your current tennis training regimen lacking? Is it strength, flexibility, balance, or agility you’re lacking? Yoga is here to help!

Recovery

With yoga styles labeled as “hot” and “vinyasa flow” maintaining popularity, tennis players new to yoga might be fooled into thinking that rigorous types of practice are “where it’s at.” Because, as players, we’re used to keeping a quicker



Photo Courtesy of Margit Bannon

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Margit Bannon (Left) and USPTA CEO John Embree (Right) at the 2021 USPTA World Conference in Las Vegas, Nevada.

tempo, training that is often punishing in nature is considered a plus. Instead, assuming you're already taxing yourself physically, allow yoga to bring a balance to what you are previously doing. In other words, just because you can stand on your hands doesn't mean you should. Take a different approach to yoga in alignment-based and restorative style yoga classes where moving slower and passive openings are offered. In the latter, you'll be encouraged to lie on the ground and use props such as blankets, bolsters, and blocks. These poses are held for extended periods, working towards long-term flexibility, allowing you to recover quicker from the next time you practice on court. At first, your greatest challenge may be that you're not being asked "to do" as much physically when lying still, but after a while, the body and mind adjust, and it feels like a glorious release (as if you've given yourself a massage) by the time your session is done!

Focus

Who doesn't need to find better focus throughout their day? Maybe you've noticed that you need this improvement throughout the course of a tennis match or practice. Where does your mind go when you're working on a stroke? Is it pulled in a million directions? Is it even

on court with you? How do you respond to a bad call or when you're not playing your best? Are you reactive, and does this trickle into your ability to perform? Are you using your time efficiently in between points and changeovers? Chances are, you've said yes to at least one of these questions.

The physical postures of yoga that you use to prevent injury and aid in recovery are a pathway to finding better focus as you become more aware of sensations within your body. This change happens as you connect with your breath and as you become more comfortable with slowing down. When we slow down, we have the opportunity to notice the patterns of our minds and the

stories we tell ourselves that are often unproductive to the game of tennis! So the first step is in noticing, and when we do, it's a literal game-changer — not just in tennis but in life! You may have heard the saying; you are what you think?! Ponder how powerful that is and how beneficial it could be if you were to catch yourself before responding in a certain way on court or before going down the rabbit hole of negativity. In other words, the first step is recognizing the problem.

Here's a simple Yoga for Tennis drill you can try on court: Practice a simple "mini tennis" drill with a partner with the only goal of watching the ball as closely as you can. Notice how many times your mind goes to something other than the task at hand. Your mind will naturally move elsewhere as it gets accustomed to what you are doing; the work is catching and redirecting yourself back to what you are doing. You have now practiced yoga in action!

Yoga for Tennis

In summary, there's a reason why tennis professionals such as Novak Djokovic have gravitated towards yoga as a way to improve their tennis lifestyle. So come into yoga for what you'd like to enhance within your game and surprise yourself with how much more your tennis world opens up! ✨

