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The benefits of yoga in high performance athletes and staff

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Introduction: There is increasing recognition of the benefits of yoga to psychological health but a lack of evidence regarding its use as part of a high performance training programme for athletes/athlete support personnel. Safeguarding athlete and staff wellbeing is recognized as an area of importance and priority in high performance sport.

Objectives: To establish how athletes rate different aspects of their physical/mental health and how they think including yoga into their training may benefit them. To establish how the introduction of yoga impacts on subjective health/performance factors.

Methods: A mixed cohort of performance and high performance athletes (n=131) and athlete support personnel (n=12) from 16 different sports were invited to attend yoga classes. Surveys were completed at induction, 3, 6 and 12 months.

Results: At induction, the following factors were rated as poor/below average: flexibility (65%), core strength (35%), balance (45%), sleep (37%), anxiety (36%), and mood (19%). 43% felt stress levels were high. Athletes felt yoga might help in a range of ways with the highest numbers stating improved flexibility, strength, reduced stress and improved recovery/injury prevention. At three months the vast majority stated yoga improved all measured physical and psychological factors: 100% of athletes/staff felt their mood and flexibility had improved. At six months 100% of athletes/staff completing the survey felt their mood, balance, core strength and breathing had improved. 95.5% felt that yoga was important to consider as part of an athletic training programme and 100% would recommend yoga to other athletes.

Conclusion: A significant proportion of high performance athletes and staff report below average or poor quality of physical/psychological health factors. Introducing regular yoga at a low dose resulted in a consistent improvement in these factors and was an acceptable and valued addition to athletes and staff. Introducing yoga into training programmes should be considered as an option to improve physical and psychological health factors.

Biography

Carrie McCrea-Routray is a Sports and Exercise Medicine Doctor with over 10 years of experience of working in high performance sport in Scotland. She has a special interest in athlete welfare, female athlete health and mental health, working extensively in both clinical and educational areas to improve awareness, knowledge and support for athletes and staff. She also has a strong interest in yoga as a physical and psychological intervention and; has been working alongside the British Institute of Modern Yoga Team to help evidence the potential uses/benefits of yoga within the unique environment of high performance sport.

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