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# Yoga For Yogaphobes

Forget meditation sessions and twisted-pretzel yogis. Here are four down-to-earth yoga concepts that will improve your skiing. **BY KATHRYN PERROTTI LEAVITT**

**M**y husband is deathly afraid of three things: spiders, swimming and yoga. The third has most recently been added to his list, after I came home from my first yoga class feeling so relaxed that he feared I'd been drugged. My husband has many athletic interests, including skiing, but he likely won't ever commit to yoga.

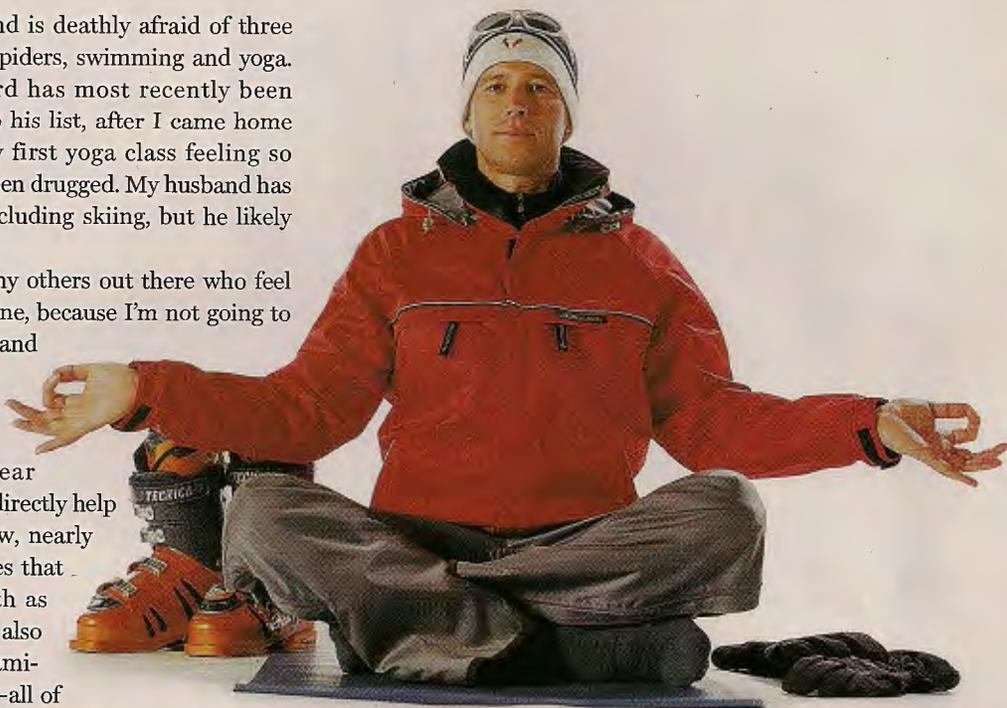
There are probably many others out there who feel the same way. And that's fine, because I'm not going to order anyone to find a guru and join a local yoga studio.

But I would like to ask skiers to open their minds just enough to hear some of the ways yoga can directly help their skiing. To name a few, nearly every yoga instructor agrees that yoga can increase strength as much as lifting weights and also can improve flexibility, stamina, balance and breathing—all of which are crucial to athletic performance. Plus, yoga, which originated in India about 5,000 years ago, must be doing something right. According to the Yoga Research and Education Center, some 12-15 million people in the U.S. currently practice it.

The best part is that some of these concepts are easy to apply without doing a full yoga routine. Here are a few ways you can work this ancient practice into your life from the comfort of your living room, during your normal workout routine, and, of course, out on the hill.

## HOW TO BREATHE

Yoga is based on breath control, or *pranayama*, a technique that increases concentration and helps the body relax and stretch. Proper breathing also helps on the hill. Says Richard Odom, a yoga instructor of 25 years who works at the Sun Valley Athletic Club in Sun Valley, Idaho: "Yoga opens up the rib cage and relaxes the



diaphragm muscles under the lungs, helping you draw deeper breaths." This delivers more oxygen to the vital organs, relaxes the nervous system and slows the heart rate—all vital for feeling calm and performing well. Taking things one step further, proponents of power yoga—a physically aggressive style of yoga used by many athletes—believe it actually increases the capacity of the respiratory muscles. "It improves the VO<sub>2</sub> max, the blood's ability to carry oxygen," says Beryl Bender Birch, founder and director of The Hard & Soft Astanga Yoga Institute in New York City and East Hampton, N.Y.

OK, you'd rather be caught skiing in a tutu than doing yoga. A few yoga poses before a hard day on the slopes may just change your mind.

To practice breathing yoga-style, lie on the floor or sit in a chair, and turn all your concentration to your breathing. Inhale and exhale deeply through the nose. Place your hands on your lower abdominals to see if they rise on the inhale. Many people take shallow breaths, bringing air only into the chest. The point of pranayama is to bring the breath down into the abdominals for increased body control and a more efficient use of breath.

## Health Hit

Nearly 70 percent of U.S. fitness centers offer yoga classes, compared with only 30 percent in 1996. —IDEA Health & Fitness Assn.

# healthskier

Mountain Pose to come back to middle ground. Being aware of your stance while skiing can help you ski strong.

Skiers also have bad daily habits that throw them out of alignment: carrying heavy bags on one shoulder and hunching over desks, for example. When you feel your posture collapsing, sit or stand up tall, and feel your spine lengthen all the way up to your head.

## HOW TO GET FLEXIBLE

The U.S. Ski Team has its own yoga instructor, and most members find that yoga helps them stay limber. "Yoga helps relax my body after a workout and also improves my flexibility and awareness of breath," says eight-year alpine team member Sacha Gros. Indeed, while skiers are definitely strong, they're also tight because skiing overuses certain muscles, forcing them to stay contracted and possibly leading to injury.

Hip flexibility is especially important for skiers. "As you begin to open up

through the hips, it decompresses the lower back, improving coordination and taking pressure off the knees," Odom says. And don't forget about the feet, he adds. "There are 7,200 nerve receptors in your feet. If they're too stiff [especially when locked in ski boots], your brain doesn't get the right messages."

To improve flexibility, yoga experts say skiers need to commit to stretching (yoga in particular) and take the time to do it—they recommend at least 10 to 15 minutes of stretching before and after hitting the slopes. Practicing yoga's Warrior Pose is a good way to start.

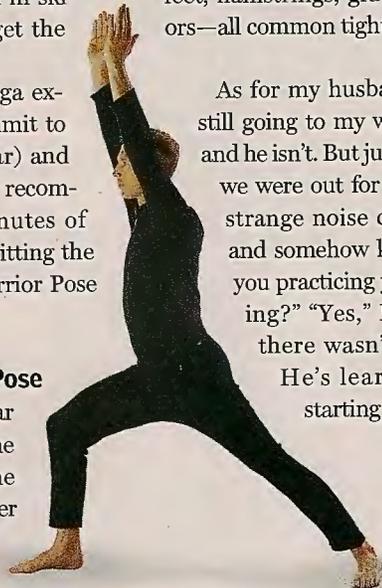
## How To Do The Warrior Pose

Lunge with the right leg as far forward as you can or until the thigh is about parallel to the ground, aligning the knee over the ankle. Keep the left leg straight, and pivot the left

foot outward. Bring your arms straight over your head with your palms facing each other. As you improve, press the palms together, while you look up at the ceiling. Hold for five long breaths, and switch sides. The Warrior stretches the feet, hamstrings, glutes and hip flexors—all common tight spots for skiers.

As for my husband and me, I'm still going to my weekly yoga class, and he isn't. But just last night when we were out for walk, he heard a strange noise coming from me and somehow knew to ask, "Are you practicing your yoga breathing?" "Yes," I answered, and there wasn't another word. He's learning—and he's starting to get curious. ♦

For more yoga exercises, visit [skimag.com](http://skimag.com), keyword "yoga."



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