

YOGA

GIVING ATHLETES AN EDGE

What do Geelong Cats' vice-captain Harry Taylor, three-time world champion cyclist Kaarle McCulloch, and Brisbane Heat fast-bowler Nick Buchanan have in common? They've all embraced yoga to enhance their lives inside and outside the sporting arena. And they join a growing list of elite Australian athletes using yoga to gain a competitive edge and cope better with the pressures of high-level competition.

In their comparatively short careers elite athletes face the challenges of life writ large: success, failure, injury. Admittance to an elite team is often the culmination of a childhood ambition which, once attained, requires hard work to maintain.

Sporting teams like the Hockeyroos and the Australian cricket team are turning to yoga to improve strength, flexibility, concentration, proprioception, endurance, recovery, focus, balance and to switch on the relaxation response. Yoga also offers sportsmen and women the tools to deal mentally, emotionally and psychologically with the challenges of winning, losing, and life transitions.

Yoga Guru, BKS Iyengar, known for his fondness of cricket, taught yoga to the Indian cricket team. He also taught legendary Indian cricketer Sachin Tendulkar and Australia's Justin Langer. In his book: *Yoga for Sports, A Journey Towards Health and Healing*, Iyengar writes: "Let us bear in mind that a sportsperson is first a human being. Yoga teaches us how to maintain

our inner equilibrium irrespective of the external circumstances ... Yoga provides them with the methodology to give their best to the game and enlighten their own lives."

Yoga is similarly helping Harry Taylor who, in 2016, celebrated his 200th AFL game. For the past nine years Taylor has been doing Iyengar yoga weekly with Tim Oddie of Geelong City Yoga. For Cats' players, yoga is a recovery option. "Yoga is a mental break in the week, a re-set button between putting the last game on the shelf and moving forward to the next game," explains Taylor. And while he enjoys the stretching, he says it's the mental side of yoga he really gets the most out of.

Now 30, Taylor joined Geelong in the 2007 draft, the year yoga was first offered (the result of a team re-think following the 2007 loss to The Kangaroos). "It's a famous part of Geelong folklore," says Oddie. "After Round 6 in 2007 the Cats had a team meeting and various things were introduced, including yoga. They then went on this ridiculous



Harry Taylor with Tim Oddie of Geelong City Yoga

winning streak.” In his first year of play (2008), Taylor won Geelong’s Best First-Year Player award. In 2009 he took the mark that secured the Grand Final win for Geelong. In 2011, the Cats won again.

Taylor: “I’ve learnt a lot about winning and losing, and trying to stay as level with that as I can”. It’s something he struggled with early in his career, he tells *Australian Yoga Life*. “I was on a rollercoaster. Fortunately we won a lot of games - you get used to winning. You drive really hard when things aren’t going the way you want but unfortunately some circumstances you can’t control. Yoga and Tim have helped me stay balanced - not getting too excited when we have the big wins, and not being too down when we lose. Yoga has really helped me with that. Your career lasts a lot longer if you don’t get thrown around by the highs and lows of AFL footy.”

Taylor says he’s also learnt a lot about the breath, in particular, he’s realised the exhalation is as important as the inhalation. “There are times when

you’re really looking for that next breath, you’re searching for more energy and ways to get oxygen into your body. When I’m really labouring for breath, pranayama helps me slow down and [helps me] breathe out so I can get in the oxygen I need.”

He also uses yoga to deal with the bouquets and brickbats cast on social media. “People are nice when you’re playing well but when you’re not they’re very critical. Yoga helps you focus on yourself, stay centred, focus on your breath and block out the external noise.”

Oddie has immense respect for Taylor and the other players, and enjoys teaching them. “They’re expected to go out there and be fearless; to go into every contest almost without regard for safety.

In the yoga room the boys take instruction very well, he says. “They’re very intelligent in their bodies. They’re very disciplined and focused.”

AFL players these days are running machines, typically covering 10-12



Kaarle McCulloch. Photo by NSW Institute of Sport

kilometers in a game. They work to a hip flexion of 45 degrees. If they can increase that to 50 degrees the chance of injury lessens, explains Oddie. “It’s a fine balancing act though, as the joints need to retain their stability”.

The need for balance is something *Cycling Australia’s* Kaarle McCulloch knows too well. Winner of the 2009, 2010 and 2011 world titles, and Olympic cyclist at the London Olympics, McCulloch came to yoga due to a thoracic injury. Taking off from a set of lights, her foot slipped off the pedal and she fell on the road.

She started yoga in 2013 at Adelaide’s Yoga Spirit Studios. She’d been a runner previously, and had also tried Pilates. McCulloch practices yoga by herself up to four times a week (depending on her training load). She use yoga as part of her gym warm-up, and track cool-down. She doesn’t have a teacher and



Nick Buchanan. Photo by Michelle Smith/
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uses apps on her iPad. As someone who's highly competitive, she says she wouldn't always listen to her body if she was in a class. "As an individual sportsperson I think I will always prefer doing things on my own! With apps and websites I can go at my own pace and do it when I want to".

A fan of Yin Yoga, McCulloch says the longer stretches help her relax mentally. "I like holding the poses for a long time, particularly in my glutes and hips, where I feel extra tight from training. It's become one of those things I just HAVE to do now."

Her 2015 comeback from the thoracic injury, which saw her win bronze with Anna Meares at the World Championships in Paris, is particularly special. "I'd been suffering from injury from 2009-2014, undiagnosed for five years.

It started as lower back pain that became a very annoying left knee pain. Every training session for four years I was in pain. By 2013, my motivation for training had hit rock bottom. I wasn't training at full capacity, and that was reflected in my results. I was suffering from depression".

Fortunately a new physiotherapist discovered the fall had caused whiplash in her thoracic spine. Torn cartilage had caused a rotation that had transferred down her body. "It took three months completely off the bike, no gym, retraining my mind and my back, and a lot of yoga to fix it." McCulloch is now preparing for the 2017 World Championships in Hong Kong. When she's in a heavy strength phase her body gets tight and yoga helps her recover for the next session, especially as she gets older.

"I'm only 28, so I'm not that old! But because I've been pushing my body so hard for 10 years I don't bounce back as quickly as I used to." As a sprint cyclist she is constantly trying to go faster. The foundation to going fast is strength. Strength translates to power and power translates to speed. She spends a lot of time in the gym. Preparing for the Rio Olympics (she went as a reserve) she lifted 13 tonnes every weights session for five weeks. "You can imagine how much stress that puts on the body and how tired I was. It takes a lot of time in recovery to process that muscle damage."

McCulloch also spends a lot of time doing track practice. "Being a sprinter the aim is to get maximum power and go as fast as possible. To do that you need lots of rest and recovery. In a start session we might do 8 x 65-metre efforts. It's very taxing because you're going from a standing start to putting more torque through the pedals than a V8 car". Yoga has helped her with these starts because she is able to get more range and flexibility through her chest which has helped with her breathing. "I was holding my breath for 20 seconds and by the end of a session I was light headed and the quality was dropping off. I wasn't in touch and connected with my body. Now I have a breathing routine for the countdown before the start and then for the effort as well. Yoga has definitely helped me be more in touch with my body."

She also likes yoga because it keeps her humble. "I am so strong and powerful in my cycling position, but ask me to do a backbend and I will struggle immensely!" Similarly, when dealing with the disappointment of going to Rio as a reserve, it's yoga that she mentions. "It's very disappointing after sacrificing so

much of my life for four years. Yoga and my sports psychologist helped me remember the anger I was feeling was not me, just something that's happening in that moment."

As an elite athlete, McCulloch would like to see yoga used more in high-level sport. She's convinced it adds to performance. "Once athletes start hitting physical peak there is not much more they can get from

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At this stage yoga is not a formal part of Cycling Australia's training. "As a group we try to incorporate stretching but after I did yoga I found stretching wasn't adequate. Normally the girls are more interested than the boys. There's a bit of stigma around yoga being a girl's thing, which is obviously not true."

McCulloch is looking forward to doing more yoga in the future. "I know it's my competitiveness but I want to see how far I can take it. I see such potential and benefit in yoga, I know it's a big reason why I'm still able to go fast on my bike and it will help me stay fit and healthy when I finish riding."

Seeing the potential of yoga is what got twenty-five year old fast-bowler Nick Buchanan onto a mat. Five major operations in four years had left him looking for new ways to give his body the best competitive chance. A few chance yoga sessions

at the Cricket Academy with Anusara teacher Julie Smerdon (from Shri Yoga), dumbfounded him. "I really got huge benefits from it and contacted Julie and we started working one on one. I started practicing quite religiously. We mapped out the week based around training. Every morning now I do a routine and then three sessions with Julie in the week."

According to Smerdon, Buchanan took to yoga like a duck to water. "He was a very evolved young guy even before yoga. He has a drive and determination that you don't see very often, and a keen sense of who he is and where he wants to go".

Buchanan says yoga offers release from the rigors of training. It's helped him to switch off his mind, improve his hand/eye coordination, and strengthen the smaller muscles (giving more stability to his joints). It's helping him take care of himself. At 6'6" there's a lot of him to take care of, and finding the balance between flexibility and stability is a challenge. "My centre of gravity is high and yoga has improved my sense of where I am in space. Being upside down doing headstands, handstands and backbends was initially a big shock for me but really helped my proprioception."

Like McCulloch, Buchanan has learnt a lot about himself through dealing with injuries and operations on his ankle, shoulder, groin and hips. "It's been a testing period. But

you learn a lot about what works for you in the process and you come up with the masterful plan. The hardest thing is being able to keep the faith. Yoga helps by letting the mind settle".

He's also aware that the timeframe for a sport career is quite short. "You can't play forever. In a team you're a commodity. The team wants to win and if you're not performing well you're at risk of being left out - that's a lot of pressure".

As fate often has it, Buchanan found yoga when he was going through the toughest period of his life with injuries and drinking too much to escape his problems. He's now an ambassador for *Hello Sunday Morning*, an initiative to help people break their dependence on alcohol. "I wasn't an alcoholic but I drank a lot. In the moment of drinking you're happy but you wake up the next morning and the problems are still there. I was in a vicious cycle," Buchanan reflects. "Yoga took the space of alcohol for me, yoga became my release and I didn't need the alcohol."

The experiences of Taylor, McCulloch and Buchanan might not be a control study but they do suggest the value of incorporating yoga into sports; for the athletes' competitive edge, for their physical health, and for their overall mental wellbeing.

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