

The Benefits of Yoga for Surfers

Written for Harness Consulting – San Diego Surf School Project

On the surface, surfing and yoga seem like completely different activities. Surfing requires waves and specific equipment, a board, a leash, maybe even a wetsuit. In contrast, yoga requires little more than yourself and can be done nearly anywhere. But dive a bit deeper into both disciplines and you'll find they have more in common than you'd think. Both activities require strength, flexibility, balance and focus. Read on to find out more about how the connection between these two sports can improve your surfing.

Strength

From your arms and shoulders, to your core and abs, down to your leg muscles and feet, surfing is a total body sport. It activates not only the large muscle groups needed for paddling and popping up on waves, it also activates smaller muscle groups that are used for balance and fine motor control. These smaller muscle groups can be more difficult to train, because they're not often used in daily life. Yoga, like surfing, also engages the total body, including large and small muscle groups, improving overall muscle tone and conditioning making it a great way to get in wave riding shape. After a good surf or a yoga session, you may find yourself sore in places you never thought possible, like the muscles in your feet, but a little soreness is a great reminder of how much stronger you're becoming from head to toe.

Flexibility

Yoga is often associated with bendy people who can pull themselves into odd shapes and pretzel like knots, but often people don't realize what a large role flexibility plays in surfing as well. Range of motion in the shoulders, chest and hip flexors is important to surfing and even more important in advancing your surfing skill. Better range of motion in your shoulders means you can create a more efficient paddling stroke, better flexibility in your chest and hip flexors means you'll have an easier time with your pop up and back flexibility will become critical as you progress to more advanced surfing maneuvers. The practice of yoga uses opposing muscle groups and body weight to stretch and lengthen many muscle groups throughout the body, shoulders, chest and hips included.

Balance

It's pretty obvious that balance is a skill needed for both surfing and yoga, but what you may not realize is that balance is a skill that can be honed, and also needs to be maintained. Balance is influenced by both strength and flexibility. When your body is able to use all its muscles properly it's better able to correct when things go off balance. And the more time you spend teetering between being off-center and in-balance, your brain learns to respond quicker and with finer control, keeping you on track whether you're riding a wave or doing tree pose on one foot. If you go long spans of time without testing your balance, your muscles get out of shape and your brain has to work a bit hard to remember how to get everything back under control. Practicing yoga when the surf is flat or when you can't get to the waves will help keep your mind and body tuned into balance.

Focus

There are many benefits to focus and clarity of mind outside of athletic activities. Whether you're trying to meet a deadline, finish a project or even drive a car, being present is a huge asset. Being in the ocean is no different. The ocean can be unpredictable and at times dangerous, add a flock of other surfers around you and there's much to be aware of. From paddling out, to looking for your next wave, to standing up and riding, if you're distracted, you're going to pay the price. Having a calm and focused

mind in any conditions will help keep you safe in the water and will also help you progress faster as you'll catch more waves and better understand your mistakes. Both yoga and surfing force you to focus because of the difficulty of what you're asking your body to do and this relationship is truly cyclical. The better you get at focus under pressure, the more you'll progress and the more you progress, the easier it'll be to slip into the super focused "flow state" that many athletes list as the peak of performance and happiness.

The combination of surfing and yoga is nothing new in professional surfing circles and we think it's easy to see why. Whether you take up both activities, use one to fuel the other or even just go on a short term yoga and surfing retreat, there's more to gain from the combination of surfing and yoga than just riding waves and fancy stretching. Give it a try, your body and your mind will thank you.