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Riding the flow

Whether you are performing radical cutbacks or relaxing through the "spin cycle", yoga offers lessons for all levels of surfers.

Words: Anne Sasso Pictures: Damian Smyth Model: Adam Ford



I often lie in sphinx pose on my surfboard watching the early morning sun reflecting off the smooth surface of the water. When I first took up surfing, I was surprised at how many of the body positions felt oddly familiar, reminiscent of my yoga classes. My surprise was even greater on the morning of my first lesson when Maki Block, former Peruvian National Longboard Champion and veteran of the Pro circuit, led me in a warm up routine that incorporated many yoga poses. I now marvel at the growing synergy between the two activities; yoga is helping me to become a better surfer, while surfing is improving my yoga practice.

While a revelation to me, this link between yoga and surfing is being explored by Erika Hattingh, a yoga teacher in Redondo Beach, California. She leads a weekly fusion of yoga class and surf fest. "Yogis and surfers share a love of moving the body," she says.

"And they both love that feeling you get when you are

so immersed in the moment that nothing else exists except you, the sea, and your trusty board, or you, the earth, and your yoga mat."

Paul Frediani agrees. The New York City fitness instructor and author of *SurfFlex: Flexibility, Yoga and Conditioning Exercises for Surfers*, says that the benefits of yoga extend from increased flexibility and range of motion to enhanced mental focus and breath control. "A regular yoga practice is fantastic because you are going to consistently increase your range of motion," explains Frediani. "Being loose will help you combat fatigue as you are paddling out and avoid injuries when you're bent like a pretzel during a wipeout." Sounds like surfing to me.

A Surfboard is Just a Sticky Mat in Motion

While an accomplished surfer carving a graceful arc down the glassy face of a wave may look as peaceful as a Zen master tracing calligraphy on a blank page, surfing

requires a dynamic balance of full-body strength, flexibility, focus and, well, balance. Many surfers live by the adage that the only way to get in shape for surfing is to surf, but Frediani, who trained the U.S. Surf Team for their Olympic debut in Sydney in 2000, disagrees. He claims that this is a sure ride to overuse injuries, back and shoulder problems and unbalanced posture leading to joint stress. That's certainly not what I want from my surfing and that's where yoga comes in.

Yoga can play a key role in stretching and conditioning for wave riding. Women surfers, in particular, tend to suffer from poor upper body strength. It's hard to catch a wave if you can't even paddle out to where they are breaking. Hattingh leads her class through six to 10 rounds of variations of sun salutations (*surya namaskar*) with a focus on four limbed staff pose (*chaturanga dandasana*) to develop upper body strength before they hit the water.

Frediani agrees that sun salutations are an ideal warm-up for surfing. "They involve flex and extension of the body in a dynamic flowing routine," he says. This is exactly the preparation that surfers need to go from zero to warp speed in a matter of seconds. One minute you're quietly sitting on your board the next you are a frenzy of movement: paddling hard, popping up quickly and carving a hard bottom turn.

And they both love that feeling you get when you are so immersed in the moment that nothing else exists except you, the sea, and your trusty board

As my surfing skills have improved, I now spend more time riding on my board than falling off. This requires a whole new set of trained muscle groups. Lower body strength comes into play when you want to carve more radical turns or ride longer waves. Most standing asanas are good preparation, strengthening the legs, hips and ankles. Holding the poses for increasingly longer periods of time will build the muscular endurance needed for marathon sessions or long rides.

Flexibility is often a challenge for male surfers, particularly those who are no longer sixteen years old and are forced to hold down desk jobs most of the week. The neck and back extensor muscles are the ones that come under the greatest strain, both while surfing waves or the Internet. You use them when

you're holding your head up to see where you are going when paddling, keeping your feet out of the water to reduce drag, and looking behind you to perfectly time your take off on the wave. Neck rolls, cobra pose (*bhujangasana*), locust (*shalabhasana*) and bow (*dhanurasana*) will all help increase strength and flexibility in these areas.

Sitting on a board waiting for waves, especially on a wider longboard, the preferred vehicle of beginners and ageing seasonal or weekend wave riders, requires hip flexibility. Poses like single leg pigeon (*lekapada rajakapotasana*), cobbler (*baddha konasana*) and spread leg forward fold (*upavista konasana*) all help open the hip and groin area. They will insure against the onset of muscle spasms when the lineup is choppy, and you are bobbing and weaving just trying to stay upright.

Once you've caught the wave, all the fun lies in standing up and staying up. Balance is one of the first things that must be developed in beginning surfers, but veterans can also use a refresher course. "Our balance on a board or in a yoga pose is a reflection of our balance in life," says Hattingh. Balancing and standing poses are the most fruitful practice for surfers. That's why after sun salutations, Hattingh leads her class through a series of standing poses which include the warrior series (*virabhadrasana I-III*), triangle (*trikonasana*) and pyramid (*parsvottanasana*) followed by balancing poses such as tree (*vrkshasana*), eagle (*garudasana*) and extended big toe balance (*utthita hasta padanguthasana*).

Soul Surfing

The parallels between surfing and yoga reach far beyond the physical realm. Both Frediani and Hattingh point to the breath as the path to improved wave riding. "Being focused on your breath brings you to a place of calm," says Frediani. It is this peace of mind that allows you to surrender to the spin cycle after a wipeout, keeping the fear demons at bay and following your air bubbles (your breath manifest) back to the surface. This spirals back into one's practice as the calm surrendering to the moment allows one to breath more deeply into a posture, and, then, into life.

"Our breath and the ocean are so similar. There is a whole yoga to surfing. It is a feeling of complete freedom in the moment. Enjoying the waves, waiting patiently for the next set to come in, I am in meditation," says Hattingh. "When I surf, I enter into a state of total presence. Mind, body and spirit merge as one. The waves flow and I ride their wake sculpting myself to their shape, like I adjust my body to a posture. Sure sounds like yoga to me."