

# The asanas of the long-distance runner

Chico Kidd explains how she uses yoga to complement her training for this year's London Marathon

**P**ounding the suburban streets in the bright winter sunshine, uphill and down, getting up a sweat, feeling those endorphins coursing round. This morning I ran 15 miles, and I feel really good.

I couldn't have written those words a year ago. The combination of an old hamstring injury and a number of other things (mainly work) had forced me to cut back my running to around ten miles a week— whereas prior to that I had been running that much most days. True, I was still going to the gym every weekday, but I wasn't even doing as much yoga as I used to or would have liked. All this was especially frustrating because I had completed my first London Marathon in 2002 without even a sore muscle.

So what went wrong? I wasn't unfit, but I was a lot less fit than I wanted to be, or had been. Coming up to the marathon I'd been running up to 60 miles a week, cross-training with weights and doing yoga every day. After the race I cut the running back to about 40 miles a week. (That's not as much as it sounds. Eight miles Monday to Friday. Less than an hour and a half, even running slowly.)

As always, it's the stupidest injuries that cause the most trouble. That's why paper-cuts hurt so much. I have to confess I damaged my hamstring jumping over a puddle. Kelly Holmes doesn't do daft things like that. And then I aggravated the problem by ignoring it and hoping it would go away. Of course, it didn't. By December 2003 the knock-on effect had kicked in. Compensating for weakness in one leg led to over-using the other, which led to bad posture... You get the picture.

Eventually I did what I should have done months before, and asked my GP to refer me to a physiotherapist (I'm no celebrity runner: I can't afford a personal trainer or private treatment) and the one I got was brilliant even if I did have to wait three months for an appointment. She not only hit me with the ultrasound and the massage and nagged me about my posture and running style, but also gave me acupuncture and some pretty darned effective stretches. Some of these were close enough to yoga asanas that I decided to go further down that route when the treatment finished.

When I used to travel regularly to central London I did a weekly *astanga* class which I thoroughly enjoyed, but since I've worked out of town I spread my mat on the living-room floor. Luckily there was certainly no shortage of places to pursue my investigation— books, magazines, internet— and I soon came up with some new postures to add to my routine. Adding to the benefits of downward dog, forward bend, triangle, head to knee, terrible and warrior, I now regularly practise goat and elephant. These are said to be very good for sciatica sufferers, and for me they helped eliminate any odd aches and pains within a couple of weeks.

My physio course finished in June, but I am still doing the stretches, and the yoga. I also have a place in this year's London Marathon.

Many professional athletes use yoga to complement their training, of course. But it seems that using it as therapy, as I did, is less common. Breathing, flexibility, and stretching are emphasised, of course. "Repetitive actions, such as running, can create unbalanced and excessively tight bodies," says Doug Kurtis ([www.howtobenefit.com/yogaforrunners.htm](http://www.howtobenefit.com/yogaforrunners.htm)) "Yoga can help runners overcome their imbalance and learn to relax their bodies. Yoga also

teaches relaxation techniques for breathing. Having an awareness of your breathing helps reduce the tension that running, especially racing, can cause." And Sara Shepherd (<http://flessortment.com/marathon>) suggests the mental disciplines of yoga will help when you hit the dreaded "Wall": "Marathon running is about mental preparation more than a lot of other factors... Yoga not only strengthens your powers to meditate and reduce stress, it also stretches your muscles and allows you to visualize your success."

There is also a bible for runners. Almost without exception, the book that is recommended is *The Runners Yoga Book* by Jean Couch, first published as long ago as 1979. I found a copy via *abebooks*. At first sight, it looks a little basic, with small black-and-white photos of models using chairs, walls, and so on for support, but that's because it starts from scratch. Beginners won't be intimidated. And if you can do *natarajasana* without holding onto a chair, you don't have to!

Anyway, I now agree with the majority that it is a brilliant book: comprehensive, clear, sensible and I should think very effective. I haven't yet tried the author's recommended before-and-after-your-run routine, mainly because I like to get out there and get running and let the first couple of hundred yards be my warmup, but it looks pretty effective. You start off in mountain, then do triangle, side angle stretch, downward dog, squats and hero and then off you go for your run. There's a longer routine for when you get back again that also includes stretches that any gym user would recognise.

And that is pretty much what I've been doing since I got back into training. When I get back from my daily run I do leg stretches, and then go into my yoga, starting with a sun salutation. In addition to the leg-targeting asanas I mentioned earlier, I also try to work through a routine that takes about half an hour to forty-five minutes. But if pushed for time I just stick to doing *surya namaskara* followed by elephant, goat, head to knee and one or other of the spinal twists.

Though my daily programme differs from the one in the book, it's somehow rather gratifying to know that I came up with something similar to what a professional yoga teacher writing specifically for runners recommended. And it's thanks to that in a big way that I'll be pounding some different streets on April 17 with 30,000 other masochists in the twenty-fifth London Marathon.

*The Runners Yoga Book* by Jean Couch is published by Rodmell Press (California) at \$19.95

*Chico is running to support the Royal National Lifeboat Institution*



Photo: Mike Thomas