OGA IS AN ANCIENT Indian philosophy that focuses on achieving deeper awareness of the body–mind through disciplined, dedicated practice. Yogic practice usually involves asanas, which are postures or sequences of postures; pranayama, or breathing modification and exercises; and meditation (and sometimes chanting). Although I focus on the physical aspect of yoga in this column, it is important to keep in mind that yoga emphasizes the integration of body, mind, and spirit and focuses on the person as a whole being. I will also address reasons athletic trainers might want to consider yoga as a supplement to conventional treatment and rehabilitation methods.

**Yoga Defined**

There are different interpretations of the Sanskrit word *yoga*. The most common one is “to unite” or “to come together,” which gives us a physical interpretation of the word. Another meaning of yoga is “to tie the strands of the mind together,” which points to intentionality and the importance of directing our thoughts toward the yoga practice. The deeper meaning of yoga, therefore, is “acting in such a way that all of our attention is directed toward the activity in which we are currently engaged.”

**Hatha Yoga**

Hatha is one of six main types of yoga (the others are Raja, Karma, Bhakti, Jnana, and Tantra) and the most widely practiced form of yoga in the West. Hatha yoga aims at purifying the body and eventually the mind through physical transformation. Hatha’s focus, therefore, is mainly on the physical body and breathing to achieve self-awareness, concentration, endurance, flexibility, and balance. Within Hatha yoga, there are several styles that include but are not limited to Ashtanga, Iyengar, Bikram, Kundalini, Kripalu, and Tibetan. These styles represent different schools of thought and are likely to be present in either full form or in varying degrees or combinations in a yoga class, depending on the preference of the instructor.

**Yoga in Athletic Training**

Yoga is increasingly being incorporated into the training regimens of athletes. Any athlete can reap the benefits of practicing yoga; it is especially valuable for preventing injuries in explosive sports (e.g., sprinting, tennis, basketball, baseball). Some specific reasons athletic trainers might want to consider using yoga in their injury-prevention programs include increased core stability, increased flexibility and range of motion, and increased relaxation.

**Increased Core Stability**

Asana practice increases core stability, which is essential to both sport performance and injury prevention. Because yoga practice requires the movement of many major and minor muscle groups simultaneously and focuses on proper muscular and skeletal alignment, it tends to differ from other conditioning methods that emphasize active engagement of only certain areas of the body. A typical outcome of systematic asana practice is an increased overall sense of balance and strength for whole-body movements. Good beginner poses include the tree pose (Figure 1), warrior pose 2 (Figure 2), and boat pose (Figure 3).

**Increased Flexibility and Range of Motion**

Yoga routines incorporate gentle, static postures that are held for an extensive period of time in order to safely lengthen muscles and tendons, as well as the...
spine. In yoga, flexibility exercises involve loose and relaxed muscles, relieving muscle tension and soreness while increasing range of motion and agility.† Many athletes find such poses as downward-facing dog (Figure 4), modified cobra, and reclined leg stretch (with the help of a yoga belt) to be particularly helpful.

**Increased Relaxation**

It is virtually impossible to overemphasize the role of rest in an athlete’s recovery after heavy training loads. It is a rule of thumb in yoga to rest when making a transition from one kind of asana to another. Even if athletes don’t feel like they need one, the rest ensures that their muscles return to their balanced tone and gives them the opportunity to feel the effects of the pose.† The yoga session concludes with 5–10 min of relaxation in corpse pose (shavasana), during which the mind/consciousness is trained to be indrawn/internalized. My students particularly enjoy corpse pose with elements of the autogenic training.

Asana practice includes both physical and psychological processes that can facilitate injury prevention for athletes. The key component seems to be yoga’s potential to help athletes become more attuned to their bodily processes, needs, and signals and thus be able to