

Asheville yoga class is geared toward runners

Fast athletes learn to slow down, breathe and stretch

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Runners take part in Gayle Jann's Yoga for Runners class Thursday evening at the Town and Mountain Training Center in Asheville. The class focuses on areas specific to running, such as hamstrings, quads, hips and core. / Jonathan Kirshner



Written by [Karen Chávez](#)



Yoga teacher Gayle Jann leads a Yoga for Runners session at the Town and Mountain Training Center in Asheville. The class is open to anyone, but has a core following of local runners. / JONATHAN KIRSHNER/Jonathan Kirshner



Yoga teacher Gayle Jann leads a Yoga for Runners session on a recent Thursday evening in Asheville. Here she performs a down dog split, which opens up the hamstrings, and strengthens the shoulders and core, all areas that are typically weak points for runners. / JONATHAN KIRSHNER/Jonathan Kirshner

ASHEVILLE — Standing in bare feet in a dimly lit yoga studio, Gayle Jann commands a presence that is warm, calm, quiet.

“Use the power of your tailbone to activate your core,” she tells her students.

It's quite the contrast to what these high-octane athletes are used to — jumping up and down to prepare for a race with a screaming crowd and a loudspeaker blasting adrenaline-pumping music.

But in her class, Yoga for Runners, which meets on Thursday nights in downtown Asheville, Jann tries to calm the outer runner to bring out their inner strength.

“This is not power yoga. Since people are always running, fast-paced, the goal here is to learn alignment and stretch more deeply,” said Jann, who has been practicing yoga for 13 years and running for 25 years.

“Runners typically have tight hamstrings, quads and hips, and are often slumped over, have rounded shoulders and don't necessarily have strong cores.”

Jann begins each class with a themed story; on this particular night, it was the story of the monkey god and the power of the tailbone. “The tailbone helps us to be more stable and more powerful in a pose,” she said.

A certified yoga instructor working toward her Anusara certification, Jann uses the principles of the Anusara style of yoga, which is based in therapeutic alignment.

“I love running, and I love yoga,” Jann said. “I had a feeling the basic principles of alignment applied to yoga can help with running and almost anything. I was right.”

She began offering Yoga for Runners last year to target Asheville's rapidly growing running community. The class now attracts a wide cross-section of men and women, ranging in age from early 20s to late 60s, new to advanced runners, as well as longtime yoga practitioners to yoga newbies.

Natural pairing

Sherry Roane, 51, has been a runner for three years, and began practicing yoga with Jann about six months ago on the recommendation of a fellow runner.

While Roane said she has not noticed increased speed, she has definitely noticed a decrease in pain.

Yoga is fast becoming bosom buddies with runners these days. Of the 43 million runners in the United States — those who ran at least once in the past year — 7.25 million, or 16.5 percent, also practice yoga, one of the highest rates of crossover activity, according to the Sporting Goods Manufacturers' Association's 2010 Sports and Fitness Participation Study.

“Running has been going up steadily every year since 2000,” said Mike May, SGMA communications director.

From 2008-09, the number of runners increased 6.7 percent. Yoga has also been increasing, he said, growing 13.2 percent from 2008-09, to 20 million participants.

Yoga works as a natural complement to the high-impact motion of running, May said, offering the benefits of flexibility, strength, improved posture, body alignment and injury prevention.

“Building a strong core helps runners to open up their chests more and helps to support your back, not only in running, but in everything in life,” Jann said. “Typically runners have strong legs but are out of balance in their upper bodies. Yoga will help align your body, help give you more balance. Runners will get less injuries and will become more aware of their posture.”

Jann said that while the class is geared toward runners, it is for anyone, and beginners are welcome.

“To me, the foundation is really important,” Jann said. “When you learn to align yourself properly, you can go deeper in a pose. That is better than doing more advanced poses out of alignment.”

Improving posture, reducing injuries

Lindsay Hensley, 29, owner of an Asheville advertising agency, is a marathon runner who began studying yoga with Jann about a year ago. Her husband, Beach Hensley, also attends the weekly classes.

“I like the style of yoga she teaches,” Hensley said. “It's a little more intentional. You're really aware of your body and how it's moving and how everything is integrated. I think that translates really well to running.”

Hensley said she kept experiencing injuries while running longer distances in preparation for marathons.

“I especially noticed a difference when I was marathon training,” she said. “Yoga kept me loose and injury-free. I've had an IT (iliotibial) band injury, but I was able to run through the injury. It made all the difference in running the marathon.”

Martha Marshall, 66, a retired professor in Asheville and a longtime runner, also experienced running-related injuries, including the piriformis, the muscle that rotates the hips, which caused her great pain.

“You don't always run into a yoga teacher who does aerobic-type activity,” Marshall said. “Gayle doesn't just tell us what we should do, she knows what we should do because she's a runner herself. She focuses so much on what runners need.”

Since taking Yoga for Runners, Marshall said she has noticed that the piriformis pain is now gone.

“People really need to cross-train when they're running. This is perfect for that,” she said. “When you're suffering less, you enjoy running more.”

That is the lesson Jann most wants to impart to her students — learning proper posture and balance when running will lead to more efficient use of muscles and breathing, and will result in more joyful running.

“It's all about finding balance between muscular energy — hugging in, or contracting — and organic energy — or breathing out, extending outward,” Jann said. “You have to learn how to find that balance and be more sensitive to your body. It's not push, push, push, or you're going to get injured. Listen to your body, work with it and respect your body.”

Jann takes the time during each hour-and-a-half class to walk the room, checking each student individually, making sure they are each listening to their bodies, aligning properly, finding their balance.

“Remember to run with an open heart,” Jann said. “Your posture often reflects your inner thoughts. When you stand taller, you just feel better.”

YOGA FOR RUNNERS

The weekly class helps runners learn to run smoothly with lightness and ease. Meets Thursdays 7-8:30 p.m. at Town and Mountain building on Asheland Avenue. Sessions run for six weeks for \$60 or drop in for \$12. Next session begins April 7.

For more information, call Gayle Jann at 236-2366 or visit www.YogaatYourPlace.net.

For a list of other yoga classes around Asheville, see the Fitness Calendar at **CITIZEN-TIMES.com**.