

Yoga Conditioning for Figure Skaters

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Abstract

The Lakewood Winter Club, located in Tacoma, WA, is among those few competitive figure skating clubs that have been nationally recognized as a progressive training facility and awarded the Excellence on Ice designation by the PSA. As part of its summer training program, the Lakewood Winter Club offers several off-ice conditioning classes, including off-ice jump, off-ice artistry, Pilates and yoga. Yoga Conditioning for Figure Skaters is an off-ice program designed to enhance flexibility, balance and total body muscular endurance. The poses take their inspiration from traditional vinyasa flow yoga practice and figure skating elements and are appropriate for skaters of all ages. The program begins with a warm-up consisting of breathing exercises, rhythmic limbering and dynamic stretching, with an emphasis on balancing the spinal joint actions of flexion, extension, lateral flexion and rotation. Large muscle groups are incorporated into warm-up movements through flowing traditional yoga poses and sequences, such as Chair Pose and Sun Salutations, resulting in elevated core body temperature and heart rate. Once the warm-up is complete, the program continues with standing balance poses that mimic the elements performed on the ice, including Standing Big Toe Hold (spiral variation), and Dancer Pose (catch-foot or Biellmann position). Next, skaters perform a series of standing strength poses from the dominant side of the body, utilizing the principles of dynamic tension and isometric contraction, thereby producing increases in the total body muscular endurance necessary for figure skating. Another series of balance poses is introduced prior to completing the standing strength poses on the opposing side of the body. These balance poses are more challenging and mimic advanced skating elements such as the layover and other creative spin and spiral positions. The program concludes with targeted core strengthening exercises and deep static stretches. In addition to the physical benefits, the breathing exercises included in this program enhance relaxation, psychological well-being and the development of an effective competitive mindset. The club has implemented the program for the past two competitive seasons. Skaters who participate in the program enjoy the experience as well as notice measurable increases in extension, balance and core strength. Both an introductory and an advanced level were included in the past summer training program for the 2007 competitive season. A DVD version of the program is in production and included in the mind-body off-ice conditioning program *Performance Enhancement for Figure Skating: A Psychological Skills Training Program for Competitive Figure Skaters*, available Spring 2008 from Coaches Choice/Healthy Learning (www.coacheschoice.com).

The Warm Up

The program begins standing in Mountain Pose, where we practice deep, rhythmic breathing. After several breaths, we begin to flow with the breath, drawing our arms overhead on the inhalation, and floating them downward on the exhalation. From here, we move through spinal flexion and extension, inhaling as we extend the spine, and flexing forward in a supported position on the exhalation.

After several breaths, we move through standing lateral flexion and standing spinal rotation (Figure 1), practicing breathing patterns for these movements.



Figure 1

The Warm Up

As we progress through the warm up, we build heat by incorporating large muscle group movements through flowing traditional yoga poses and sequences. Examples of the flowing movements used in this part of the warm up include Plié Squats, Chair Pose (Figure 2) and Sun Salutations, resulting in elevated core body temperature and heart rate.



Figure 2

The Body of the Practice

The body of the practice builds strength through length. We alternate between holding static poses—such as Warrior I and II (Figure 3), Reverse Warrior (Figure 4), and Triangle Pose (Figure 5)—with poses that we flow, such as Archer and the Half Series (Figure 6).



Figure 3



Figure 4

The Body of the Practice

These poses and sequences utilize the principles of dynamic tension and isometric contraction, thereby producing increases in the total body muscular endurance necessary for figure skating.



Figure 5



Figure 6

The Body of the Practice

After performing the series of standing strength from the dominant side of the body, we provide focused attention and balance practice through standing balance poses that mimic the elements performed on the ice. These poses include Standing Big Toe Hold, which simulates a spiral variation, and Dancer Pose (Figure 7), which simulates a catch-foot or Biellmann position, depending on the skill level of the skater.

After performing the balance poses on the dominant side, we complete the standing strength and balance poses on the less dominant side to enhance symmetry and balance in conditioning the body.



Figure 7

Core Strengthening

While the standing poses require core strength, we spend additional time during practice focusing specifically on developing isometric strength in the core musculature. This is accomplished through a series of static and flowing poses that target the rectus and transverse abdominals, the obliques, and the erector spinae, as well as the muscles surrounding the pelvis. These poses include Gate Pose (Figure 8), plank (Figure 9), side plank, and modified balancing half moon (Figure 10).



Figure 8



Figure 10



Figure 9

Upper Body Strengthening

A lot of upper body strength is built during the body of the practice, given the arm positions in the standing strength series of poses. Inverted poses also can be used to strengthen the muscles of the upper body by utilizing the weight of the skater's own body. These poses include Shoulder Stand (Figure 11), Tripod Head Stand (Figure 12), Dolphin pose, Modified Hand Stand or Forearm Balance (Figure 13) and Hand Stand (Figure 14).



Figure 11



Figure 12

Upper Body Strengthening



Figure 13



Figure 14

Biellmann Prep Stretch Sequence

We practice a series of poses that prepare our bodies for the extreme level of flexibility required for the Biellmann position.

After a thorough warm up, we begin by performing Standing Backbend (Figure 15) towards the wall. After three to five repetitions, we perform Kneeling Backbend (Figure 16) towards the wall (or without the wall) three to five times.



Figure 15



Figure 16

Biellmann Prep Stretch Sequence

With our spines sufficiently warmed through these backbends, we next perform Pigeon Pose to open the hip flexors while the spine is extended. We finish by deepening these joint actions by performing Pigeon Pose against the Wall (Figure 17).



Figure 17

Deep Stretches and Relaxation

We end our practice with a series of deep stretches and final relaxation. These deeper stretches are held for five to ten breaths, and skaters are encouraged to deepen the stretch on each exhalation. Deep stretches include frontal and sagittal splits (Figures 18 and 19), Seated Wide Angle Side Bend (Figure 20), and Lying Spine Twist (Figure 21).



Figure 18



Figure 19

Deep Stretches and Relaxation



Figure 20



Figure 21