



'YOGA HAS MADE ME A BETTER ATHLETE'

Professional athlete and Fiit yoga instructor, **Lina Nielsen**, tells us how yoga helped her return to fitness after injury

WORDS: Joanna Ebsworth

If there's one woman who knows all about the performance-enhancing power of yoga, it's Lina Nielsen. When *WF* talks to the British 400m hurdler and Fiit yoga instructor, she has just revealed that she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 2014 at the age of 17, following a flare-up of her condition which impacted her performance at this year's 2022 World Athletics Championships and the Commonwealth Games.

On top of this, Lina also feared her hurdling days were over for good back in 2017 when she sustained a stress fracture in

her left fibula and was pulled from competing. Five years later, however, she's in her best shape ever, both physically and mentally – and it's all thanks to yoga. 'If I hadn't got injured, or received my MS diagnosis, I wouldn't be a yoga teacher today,' laughs Nielsen, 'The fracture meant I couldn't put any pressure through that bone, so my physio recommended I try yoga. I went to a yin yoga class, but it wasn't a good experience because I was so stiff in my body and had so many imbalances. But because I was out of training for nine weeks, I had to find a way of moving. In the summer of 2017, I was also going through a relapse



– the last one I had before this recent one – so my coordination was a bit off. But when I started yoga, I noticed that my movement got better. It was a ‘blow my mind’ moment. I hated yoga at first, but I continued going back because I realised my movement and coordination was improving with each class. That’s when I started trying other types of yoga like dynamic vinyasa yoga.’

From that moment, Nielsen says she fell in love with yoga, and soon began piecing together a self-practice that would help improve her imbalances.

‘During the 400m hurdles, we athletes run fast while turning left, so we have a lot of imbalances on our left sides. Additionally, I also take off on my right leg to jump over the hurdle and land on my left leg afterwards, putting around seven times my body weight through my left leg. Unsurprisingly, that was the leg I injured, and I was especially tight around my hips. I couldn’t even get my bum to the floor in pigeon pose! I made sure I spent longer on my left side in that pose during those nine weeks, to balance things out.’

Finding a focus

Aside from the physical benefits, Nielsen quickly discovered the mental health benefits of yoga, too. ‘Taking up yoga puts you on a never-ending personal journey because there’s always something new to learn or do, and it gives you a chance to focus on something else,’ she says, before explaining how her failure to qualify for the 2019 World Championships and her MS diagnosis

became the driving force behind her yoga instructor qualification.

‘I decided I wanted to go on a yoga retreat but, when I looked at yoga retreats and teacher training courses, there didn’t seem to be that much difference. I figured if I was going away, I might as well get a qualification out of it. I wasn’t planning to

become a teacher, I was doing it for myself, but there was a point in the second or third week of the four-week course where I started picturing myself teaching – not just myself, but other athletes, too.’

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Yoga for runners

After getting her teaching qualification – an experience that took her to the northern Indian city of Rishikesh, where days were spent practising yoga, hiking into the Himalayan foothills in silence, and studying philosophy and anatomy – Nielsen started applying to teach yoga in her local area of North London. But then the pandemic hit which, as it turns out, might have been another blessing in disguise.

‘I started going on Instagram Live, and all the athletes that followed me tuned in for my classes. They loved it! I was only supposed to do one but everyone kept asking me for more, so I did one every Friday night for 12 weeks. That’s the journey, and now I teach at Fiit!’

Nielsen’s Yoga for Runners classes on leading fitness app Fiit (fiit.tv) have proven popular

with all levels of runners, from the elite to those just starting out.

‘For me, it’s all about teaching people about the muscles they use while running. My classes feature moves that engage and stretch muscles at the same time while mobilising the major joints, so it’s a nice cocktail of everything you need to get ready for running,’ she explains.

‘So many people forget that you need strong glutes for running because they are the powerhouse of your runs. They help you get off the ground and into your next stride. If your glutes are slightly weaker or they’re not activated enough, you’re going to end up using your hamstrings more, which can lead to a hamstring injury – maybe even runner’s knee or shin splints if your glutes aren’t activated enough to keep your knees stabilised. That’s why I do a lot of chair poses, alongside lots of core work, because core stabilisation is very important, too. In a lot of my Yoga for Runners classes, we stretch to release muscles such as the hamstrings, calves and the soles of your feet, then we reactivate everything so your body is ready to go straight out for a run.’

Full steam ahead

The good news is Nielsen has more (currently top secret) running-related projects coming up later this year with Fiit, and she’s also keen to explore the idea of becoming ‘the athlete’s yoga instructor’ down the line. But right now, her focus is solely on the athletics season ahead.

‘I’d almost call myself a full-time athlete for the first time ever, so yoga has taken a bit of a back seat. In a normal training week, I’m training Monday to Saturday. Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays are “double days”, during which I hit the track and then the gym straight after, which





Classes focus on stretching and mobilising joints

adds up to around four-to-five hours of training a day. But my athletics training and yoga still go hand-in-hand, especially when it comes to my recovery.'

'Yoga has 100 per cent made me a better athlete. While lots of hurdlers jump over the hurdle and then come back down, I feel I can just skim across the hurdle because my hamstrings are so flexible. That wouldn't have happened without yoga. And before yoga, I always needed to warm up key muscles thoroughly before competition, whereas now my body is just ready to go. Although, I still go through what I call my hip rotation series (easy twist, to lizard, to ninja lunge, then back to lizard and into half pyramid pose) before and after competition.'

Strength in numbers

Away from the track, Nielsen says yoga helps keep her grounded and humble, while also giving her another passion to focus on. 'When I started working with my sports psychologist, I was very much "track, track, track" in the first few sessions. But then he noticed how my "face lit up" when I mentioned yoga, so he actively supports me doing it... He says yoga keeps me bubbly and happy, and that a happy athlete is a fast athlete.'

Since then, Nielsen has managed to squeeze in one 30- to 45-minute self-practice a

week, and believes she wouldn't be where she is today if she hadn't discovered yoga. But having her twin sister Laviai, who competes professionally in the 400m event, around definitely helps. So, what does it feel like to be one half of the athletic power duo?

'It's great! I feel we are really privileged to have each other,' she says. 'Track and field is a very lonely sport when you're on the starting line alone. But having someone who's sharing the same experiences as you – the downfalls as well as the highs, and knows what you're going through when things aren't going your way – is amazing. The highs are especially great to share.'

Luckily, the twins compete in different events, because Nielsen admits there could be some 'friendly competition' between her and Laviai when they used to train together in their younger days. 'The elbows did come out on occasion,' she says. 'In racing, it doesn't matter if you're competing against your best friend – it's everyone for themselves, and you forget you are twins during the race. But it's nice that you can go to each other afterwards.' Which begs the question: does Laviai enjoy yoga, too? 'She loves it!', exclaims Nielsen. 'She says it's the only time I can tell her what to do!'

GET YOGA STRONG

Try this energising flow from Lina Nielsen to get you ready for running

♥ STANDING SIDE BEND (parsva urdhva hastasana)

A natural way to stretch and lengthen both sides of your body, whilst strengthening your arms and shoulders.

- Stand with your feet together ensuring your big toes are touching, with a slight gap between your heels. If it's more comfortable, stand with your feet hip-width apart.
- Tuck your tailbone under but don't round your lower back. Draw your belly in and prepare to inhale.
- Inhale and, in a sweeping position, bring your arms up overhead with your palms facing forward. Hook your thumbs together for a lever, keeping your fingers pointing to the ceiling.
- Exhale whilst driving the left side of your hips out and bending your upper torso to the right side, using the hook of your thumbs to pull your top arm down. Relax your shoulder blades and hold for as many breaths you feel is needed (typically, 5-8 breaths). Inhale and come back to centre, then switch sides.





4 HIGH LUNGE WITH CACTUS ARMS
(ashta chandrasana)

Stretches the chest, shoulders, arms, neck, torso and muscles of the back.

- From standing, take a huge step back with one foot to come into a high lunge position with your left foot in front and resting on the toes of your right leg.
- Inhale and bring your arms up overhead with your palms facing forward.
- As you exhale, begin to squeeze through your shoulder blades to bring your elbows down towards your ribcage for a good chest-opening sensation. Option to drop your back knee down towards the mat to feel more of the front of the body opening.
- Hold for 3-5 breaths before switching sides.

5 REVERSE WARRIOR
(viparita virabhadrasana)

Opens the chest and side body, releasing any tension you may be holding in your upper body. Plus, helps with mobility in the hips and stretches the inner thighs.

- Starting from a high-lunge position, begin to rotate your back foot so that the arch of your foot faces the front of your mat.
- As you exhale, rotate your torso to face the side of your mat. Bring your arms parallel to the floor with your palms facing down (warrior 2 position; B). Square your hips and roll your shoulders back, drawing your shoulder blades down.
- As you inhale, reach forward with the front hand and flip the palm to face upwards towards the ceiling.
- As you exhale, sweep your front hand up and overhead, bending your body towards the back of your mat. Your back hand finds a resting position on your back thigh.
- Lift your chest as you come into a gentle backbend and look towards your raised hand (A). Feel your side body open up as you take between 3-5 breaths.
- Come back to the warrior 2 position (B), switch legs and then repeat on the other side.



A



B



YOGI SQUAT (malasana)

Improves posture and ankle mobility whilst also strengthening the lower body.

- Stand at the top of your mat with your feet positioned slightly wider than hip-width apart and your feet turned slightly outwards.
- Begin to squat down as low as you can. Don't worry if your heels lift off the mat, but if you want the feet grounded, feel free to move your feet slightly wider apart.
- Bring your palms to touch in a prayer position, hooking your elbows inside your knees to push them apart for a deeper hip opener.

BOAT POSE (navasana)

Helps strengthen hip flexors, adductors and core.

- Come to sit on the centre of your mat with bent knees, feet flat on the mat. Hold the back of your thighs, just below the knee. Roll your shoulders back and drive your chest forwards.
- Keeping your hands behind your knees, inhale and begin to lift your feet off the mat to bring your shins parallel to the mat. If you're feeling confident, you have the option to point or flex the toes.
- Once you find your balance and core connection, loosen your hands from your thighs and keep them hovering just outside your knees with your palms facing upwards.
- If you want to advance this pose, try straightening your knees and extending your legs upwards. Challenge yourself to hold this pose for 30-45 seconds, breathing deeply and evenly.
- To come out of this pose, slowly exhale and bring your feet down to the mat with a neutral spine. 

