



# HIT THE MAT

Time on the yoga mat should vary depending on where you are in your training cycle.

BY CHRISTINE YU

## HEADING TO YOGA ON YOUR

recovery day? Don't roll out your mat yet. While a sweaty vinyasa or power yoga class sounds like the ideal way to work out the kinks, you may be adding stress to your already taxed body. "If you're serious about training, you need to make sure your yoga practice isn't undermining it," says Sage Rountree, USAT-certified coach, yoga teacher and author of *The Athlete's Guide to Recovery*.

"Recognize that yoga is not your sport," says Tiffany

Cruikshank, founder of Yoga Medicine and former yoga teacher at the Nike World Headquarters. "You're going to yoga to feed your sport. Your goal isn't to touch your toes."

In fact, time on the mat should vary depending on where you are in your training cycle. "The intensity of your yoga practice needs to be in inverse proportion to the intensity of your training," says Rountree. Here's a look at how yoga fits into your race-day preparation.

### BASE BUILDING

As you build aerobic capacity and improve muscular endurance, it's a good time to correct imbalances in the body. In triathlon, you primarily move linearly. "Yoga can be a great balance to that by adding lateral and twisting movement," Rountree says. Since your race is far off, your routine can be more strenuous. But be careful of classes that involve a lot of forward folds and sun salutations. "You can wind up hurting yourself either by creating fatigue ... or overstressing the hamstrings," warns Rountree.

### BUILD PHASE

Swim, bike and run workouts, not yoga, should be the main source of physical intensity during this phase. Gentle and yin yoga classes, where poses are held longer, are appropri-

ate choices. "When athletes get tight, muscles become resistant to absorbing shock or even generating power," says Cruikshank. "To reestablish [muscle] elasticity, holding poses longer allows the tissues to adapt and re-lengthen to their capacity," she says.

For her coaching clients, Rountree recommends one class a week coupled with short, at-home sequences two to three days a week—a few core, hip and restorative poses.

### PEAK TRAINING

"Closer to your event, your yoga practice should be mellow," says Rountree. Restorative yoga offers huge benefits for triathletes, even if it looks like you're just lying around on pillows. You're actually engaging the parasympathetic nervous system and tapping into the body's natural relaxation response. Cruikshank notes this helps you reap the benefits of your higher-intensity workouts and rebuild energy stores.

### TAPER

In the final weeks before a race, you have extra time (and energy!) on your hands. Perfect time for yoga, right? Not so fast. "You have to trust the taper process ... and hold on to that energy," says Rountree. "You don't want to leave it in the yoga studio. That would be self-sabotage." Rountree and Cruikshank suggest five to 10 minutes of meditation most days. This mind-body practice bolsters the mental strength you'll need when you're deep in the pain cave on race day. Find a meditation class or simply make your inhalations and exhalations the same length. ■