

# yoga at Sydney FC

Greg Wythes talks to players and officials at Sydney FC about how the club is using yoga as a part of their preparation and training in the national A-League competition.

The 2009/10 season has been Sydney FC's best year in the national A-League since its inception. By winning the minor premiership, Sydney FC qualified for the Asian Champions League. In the finals series, after three matches which they had to win to avoid elimination, they beat Melbourne Victory at Melbourne's home ground to win the Grand Final. The factors that bring this kind of success are many and varied, but one innovation that the club introduced this season was weekly yoga classes. Yoga has played a role in helping to take Sydney FC to where it is today.

It was Tony Popovic's idea that yoga could be good for football players. Tony had had a distinguished career as a Socceroo and a European player. When, in his mid-thirties, he returned to Australia to play for Sydney FC, he was looking for something different to help with the chronic injuries that accrue from a life as a professional athlete.

"I couldn't run properly," says Tony. "My knees and lower back were sore. And I was looking for something to give me an edge. I'd done a bit of yoga in England, not too seriously, but I really got into it after meeting Fiona Leard, a Sydney yoga teacher."

At this time, yoga was not on the agenda of the management or coaching staff at Sydney FC. Tony didn't want to have to explain to them what he was

doing or why. He thought they might prefer him to stick with more accepted training programs. So initially his yoga sessions were private and secret – and very successful.

"I felt better straight away," Tony says, "but the full benefits began to come after about three months. I'd started yoga in the off-season, but once the season began, I found my running had really improved and my knees and lower back were stronger. I was 35, and after three months of yoga with Fiona, I'd never felt better."

Fiona Leard is a yoga teacher trained in the style of Baron Baptiste. She has a Masters in Sports Science and has competed as a sportsperson at national and international level. She brings a unique range of experience, education, and training to her work that allows her to clearly understand what the players need.

"Tony first came to see me in February 2008 as a player," says Fiona. "Slowly, it has built from there. Tony is very disciplined, so it's easy to work with him and he quickly adapted to a yoga discipline. Later, when he retired as a player and became assistant coach, he was able to convince the club to introduce yoga to all the players as part of their normal training schedule."

"From my own personal experience, I strongly believe in yoga,"



Sydney FC's Sebastian Ryall. Image supplied by Sydney FC.



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Footballers work on their lower backs.

## Mentally, I feel much fresher after a yoga session...

says Tony, “so it was easy to sell it to the club. I got some of the older players to try it first and the results were good. In the first year, we had only one soft tissue injury in 15 weeks of competition.”

Once yoga was established as a regular part of training at Sydney FC, Fiona began to work with Tony and the club’s medical team to fine-tune her methods, both physically and mentally.

“I like to research the sport to find the specific demands it makes on the players,” says Fiona. “With Sydney FC, there are different phases of competition, which require different approaches. In the off-season and in the pre-season, the emphasis is on building strength, especially core strength, and flexibility. In this period, about six members of the team come for private classes in addition to the club class, and I can give them more demanding poses to extend their strength and flexibility. But once the season begins, the emphasis has to shift to maintenance – a more yin and restorative practice. The players’ bodies need this recovery period to deal with the demands of the game. I get to know their individual needs and their

individual injuries. I modify the poses, or use props and straps to make the poses more accessible.”

Establishing trust with elite athletes does not happen quickly. Fiona had to build this over time. She began going to the team’s home games, watching how each player moved, and using this to diagnose potential injuries or weak spots in the biomechanics of a player’s movement. With this information, she could then give specific postures or stretches to help with these individual conditions.

“Fiona tailors yoga to suit the specific injuries or physical needs of the players,” says Tony. “It’s not always possible for us to do what normal yogis might do, so she adapts the postures to meet our needs. Football players need a lot of work for the hips, glutes, legs, and lower back. Fiona finds a way to structure the yoga to suit the abilities of the players.”

Stuart Musialik is a mid-field player who has taken to yoga quickly and takes private lessons with Fiona whenever he can. “Fiona is very approachable,” says Stuart. “She focuses specifically on our needs and I find yoga perfect for footie

players, especially because it builds flexibility and strength, without bulking the body up. Physically, I find the main benefit is keeping the muscles loose. I struggled with a hip injury towards the end of the season, but managed it with yoga. Mentally, I feel much fresher after a session and it definitely helps with my recovery after a game.”

Terry McFlynn was Sydney FC’s captain in this year’s grand final. He is one of the group of players who goes to Fiona for extra yoga classes and has noticed similar changes since he began. “I’ve increased my flexibility and the range of movement in my joints,” he says. “On the field this has helped with my speed over the ground. I find that yoga complements the other training we do. It has played a big part in reducing soft tissue injury at the club. This year has been my first year without any injuries at all!”

“I’m very happy with the way yoga is taught to our players, but it’s very important to get the right teacher,” says Dr. Craig Duncan, Director of Human Performance at Sydney FC. “I’m a great advocate of yoga as a tool to enhance player performance,” he adds. However, he does recognise that a football club has to be careful how it uses yoga. “We had tried yoga before but it didn’t work. I think there’s a growing problem with yoga and sport. Everybody wants to do yoga now, but you can’t just take a yoga teacher and put him or her in front of a sport team. It won’t work.”

One of Fiona’s skills that the players and staff appreciate is her ability to translate yoga into terms they can understand. With her sports science training, she is able to explain how specific postures will affect their bodies, using the language of anatomy and physiology, as well as the language of yoga. Players dealing with injuries or soreness will be getting treatment from the medical team, who will use medical terms, so it’s important the two relate. That Fiona can use the same language brings a sense of consistency across the club.

“With Fiona, nothing’s too much effort,” continues Craig. “She’s willing to adapt yoga for the players, and her sports science background is a really big positive.”

Craig is sympathetic to yoga's cultural and spiritual traditions, and acutely aware that you can't just cut and paste from the yoga canon and still maintain an authentic yoga practice. It's refreshing to find this approach in the sporting world, and to find the understanding that yoga itself is greater than the sum of its parts.

"A sporting team have to understand yoga first and then work out how it can be applied, all the while maintaining a sensitivity to yoga's culture and traditions," he says. "Yoga's application to sport, particularly the mental side, has to be packaged in the right way, but still remain respectful of yoga's heritage."

The mental side is an area that players are finding especially helpful. And it's Fiona's attention to detail and the real needs of the players, both as individuals and as part of a team, that influences her approach. "I talk to the players first and then design the relaxation period," she says. "For these players, it's mainly about developing clarity of mind. I talk about letting go of

fears, of anxiety. I ask them to visualise their skills, like a good pass, and to get that feeling in their body, and then talk about coming from that place of winning and consolidating it in their mind. Tony talks to the players too and gets their feedback. He's an intermediary with the players. I then use his feedback to fine-tune what I'm giving to the players."

Socceroo Clint Bolton was Sydney FC's goalkeeper for the last five years, although he will be moving to Melbourne Heart for the next season. He finds the physical and mental combination that yoga provides to be invaluable. "I've always been fairly flexible," says Clint, "but yoga has taken it to a new level. My core area has become a lot stronger since I've been working with Fiona, and this has given me more confidence. I just don't feel like I'm going to get injured. For me as a goalkeeper, the mental aspect is really important, and now I can hold my concentration for much longer. I used to dwell on my mistakes, on the things I couldn't control; but this year I've had a new sense of confidence, both physically

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Goalkeeper Clint Bolton enjoys the mind and body connection.

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Fiona assists Hayden Foxe with a hip release.

and mentally. It's been a really consistent year for me."

Terry McFlynn agrees with Clint. "The relaxation session clears my mind and allows me to focus on the game. It sets up a positive state of mind and gets rid of all my self doubt."

Clint regularly attends extra sessions with Fiona to continue to work on these areas. "I trust Fiona

completely," he says. "Yoga's only new to me for the last year and a half, and though I like to test my limits, Fiona's usually a step ahead. She'll give me postures that I don't think I can do - like headstands and splits - but she knows the preparation has been done, and she gets me there, and I'm able to do things I thought were beyond me. It's just great for my confidence."

Sydney FC's head coach is Vitezslav Lavicka, and although yoga is entirely new to him, he is sufficiently impressed to want to continue with it for the coming season. He acknowledges that it is a small but important part of the team's success. "It's new to the club and new to our head coach," says Tony Popovic, "but he likes what he sees. And if it works, he wants it. But I think we can develop it a lot further."

The first step in this development is taking the yoga program to the youth team. Fiona and Craig Duncan also have plans that involve extending the mental side of yoga with the players. "I'd like to build on the mind stuff," says Fiona. "To foster the mental focus that helps to give a team the edge."

Unlike some of the medical and management staff at Sydney FC, Craig is someone who is familiar with yoga and who recognises its broader potential for the club. "I'd like to take it from the physical to a new level," says Craig. "Now yoga is established, we can take the next step. There is a connection between breathing and the game, and I'd like to explore how this can help the players deal with anxiety when they're on the field. Also, yoga is a tool that helps us look at the player as a total being, not just as a sporting resource. This can involve things as different as sleep patterns and life after sport. Yoga will always remain a big part of any team I work with."

Greg Wythes holds classes in Austinmer and teaches massage at Karuna College. He maintains a bodywork practice in the northern suburbs of Wollongong. He can be reached on 02 4268 2048 or gwythes@yahoo.com.au.

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