INTRODUCTION:
Yoga is an art and science that developed from the core of Sanathana Dharma. The Yogic life is the living of a unified holistic concept assuring health, happiness, longevity and spiritual evolution. How then, has this vast and thrilling concept with such wonderful and exciting practices offering well being and enlightenment been relegated to a ‘mere sport’ by so many? What sport has ever claimed to produce regenerative and recuperative powers for its practitioners? Can any sports person expect magnificent healing processes from their activity? Can any sport be termed wholistic, evolving body, emotions, mind, and even producing spiritual power, enlightenment and wisdom? The Yogi and the sports person stand at opposite ends of the universe in their attitudes toward the “world within” and the world “without”. Is there any value, then, in establishing a dialogue, a flow of information, ideas and techniques between these two mighty disciplines? Is it possible that the “inward looking” Yogi and the “outward looking sports person could co-operate in leading humankind towards the noble goal of a healthy mind in a healthy body” even in the peculiar, polluted and unnatural environment of the twenty-first century? What could the art and science of Yoga offer to the world of sports? What could the world of sports offer the art and science of Yoga? It is with these important questions in mind, that I try to integrate sport and yoga into the same framework.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN YOGA AND SPORTS:
In order to find an answer to these questions we need to first see how Yoga and sports are different from each other. Then perhaps we can find the mutually supportive areas of these two disciplines.

A Yogi’s view of his body and the sports person’s concept are poles apart. The Yogi understands that this body is the gross manifestation of more subtle and finer energies. He realizes that he has five bodies (pancha kosha) and is not limited to this physical body. He relies on age-old techniques to control and strengthen these forces and transcend mundane consciousness, which is tied up in the body and its five senses. He enjoys perceptions based on the higher mind impulses, which percolate through the quiet mind (yogash chitta vrutti nirodahah). The goals of the Yogi are not material but are the sustained struggle against past conditioning. The attempt is to control one’s inner environment and focus inward. Yoga is isometric, pitting one part of the body against the other without any external competition. The Yogi strives to be “more perfect today, than he was yesterday”. Yoga is non-violent, non-competitive, ego effacing, anti-materialistic and dedicated to union of the individual with the Supreme. It is impossible for classical Yogasanas, Pranayamas and other practices to harm the practitioner when performed properly.

The sports persons on the hand (with a few enlightened exceptions) have been conditioned to think of themselves only as the physical body (annamaya kosha). They are concerned with the muscles and bones rather than the intellect and soul. The food taken for building this body
is also of the nature based on the materialistic scientific view of what is needed to WIN. Their body is treated as an instrument, to be trained and polished in order to excel at their sport. Motivating factors are money, fame, pride and mainly EGO. The development is mainly concerned with speed, power, endurance, quick reflexes and specialized physical skill. The activities are generally isotonic, externally oriented and pit the body and will against external forces and challenges in order to WIN. Anything goes when it comes to the desire to WIN. Sports involve heavy impact activity, racing the nervous system, surging circulation and straining the organs to their utmost. No sports person lives without suffering accidents and injuries resulting in ongoing and permanent damage often to the debilitating and crippling level.

**YOGA COMPARED TO SPORTS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YOGA</th>
<th>SPORTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Parasympathetic dominance</td>
<td>1. Sympathetic dominance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Slow and static movements</td>
<td>2. Rapid and forceful movements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Muscle tone is normalized</td>
<td>3. Increased muscle tension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Low calorie consumption</td>
<td>4. Higher calorie consumption</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Low risk of injury</td>
<td>5. Higher risk of injury</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Energizing activity</td>
<td>7. Fatiguing activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Natural and controlled breathing</td>
<td>8. Breathing is taxed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Non competitive</td>
<td>10. Competitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Focus is on internal awareness</td>
<td>12. Focus is on external awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Infinite possibilities for growth in self-awareness</td>
<td>13. Boredom factor as there is no higher philosophy or goal than the body</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**BENEFITS OF YOGA FOR SPORTS PERSONS:**

Many world class sports persons have found that the practice of Yoga helps them to achieve greater skills in their sport. This is because Yoga not only works on the physical level but also has benefits for the mental, emotional and energy levels. It enables them to realize that ‘winning is not everything’ and that there is ‘more to life’ than sporting ‘highs’ and ‘lows’.

1. At the physical level asanas, kriyas, mudras and pranayama stabilize and balance the lop-sided physical drills necessary for sporting activity.
2. Yoga helps to develop all systems of the human body (cardiovascular, respiratory, digestive, eliminative, endocrine, nervous and musculo-skeletal) thus strengthening, cleansing and purifying the body so that it is brought under our conscious will. This is
vital for the sports person who otherwise develops the muscular system but puts too much stress and strain on the other systems leading to their failure sooner than later.

3. Most sporting activity is ‘on the feet’ and the exertion made standing up. In Yoga, all possible body positions are explored and the body is exercised standing, sitting, lying down (front, side and back) and even upside down! This creates an acute awareness of the entire body, strengthens the body systems and develops flexibility of the body that is not present in most sports persons.

4. Yoga is isometric and internal. It is a contest between our inherent inertia and the power of the will. Parts of the body are pitted against one another and a unique harmony of body, mind and breath is developed. This internal struggle when handled successfully deepens the consciousness of not only the working of the body but also of the mind and emotions.

5. Yoga seeks balance, which is lacking in the sporting activity. A tennis player may develop the muscles of the dominant arm but the rest of the body is neglected. Through Yoga all aspects of the body are cultivated equally. Flexibility, balance, control, strength and endurance are all developed by the concept of Loma Viloma which means to balance the opposites. For example, if we bend forward then we must bend backward also. If we perform a practice on the right side then we must balance it by performing it on the left side also.

6. In the science of Yoga, body movement and breath must be synchronized. The body is lifted on the incoming breath and lowered on the outgoing breath. Bhastrikas or the ‘bellows breath’ activate the solar plexus, which is an energy reservoir, as well as strengthen the diaphragm thus producing strength, vitality and endurance. Pranayamas such as Mukh Bhasrika stimulate the internal cleansing of toxins. Breath is directly related to the energy levels, life span, quality of emotions, state of mind and the clarity and subtlety of thoughts. This use of breath power with the body can bring about revolutionary effects on the performance of the sports person and improve their state of mind, emotions and all round health.

7. Sports persons are prone to glandular imbalance due to their lifestyles and activities both on and off the field. Yoga stimulates and strengthens the endocrine system and it counteracts the body stiffness, changes in skin tone and hair loss, which are common problems due to glandular imbalance.

8. The World of Sports in ancient Greece and Rome was associated with high levels of moral and ethical codes of behavior. Modern day sports has gone a long way astray from such ideals and the inculcation of Yogic values such as Yama and Niyama can go a long way in bringing back such ideals in to the world of sports. They will stimulate the sports people to have a second look at their decadent life styles and try to change for the better. The Yamas when practiced provide much mental solace and ethical strength to the participants of competitions while the Niyamas produce the stoic qualities necessary for high tension situations.

9. Yogic concepts such as ‘non attachment to the fruits of one’s labour’ and ‘equal mindedness in victory and defeat’ are important attitudes in sports. When sports persons go into the competition with such attitudes, they are free from anxiety and confident that they have done their best, they are willing to accept the verdict. Such persons have a much better chance of success than one who looks upon the competition as a life and death situation. Only a ‘quiet mind’ and ‘controlled body’ can produce real ‘skill in action’.
10. The whole philosophy of Yoga can constitute a ‘touch stone’ for those who find themselves lost when the spotlight dims or shifts its focus to another performer.

11. Yoga has a lot to offer to sports through the field of relaxation. In the sports world, all is PUSH, PUSH and PUSH. There is little room for relaxation in the arena. Yoga teaches us that there has to be balance. The concept is known as ‘spanda-nishpanda’ or ‘exertion-relaxation-exertion-relaxation’ in an alternating rhythm. The art of relaxation as taught in Yoga can provide a counterfoil to the extreme stress of competitive pressures, fostering mental, emotional and physical health.

12. The catabolic nature of sporting activities can be balanced by the anabolic activities of Yoga, retarding the aging process and giving the sports person a longer professional life.

13. A more conscious and aware outlook of the whole phenomenon of human life on earth will make the sports person a more valuable member of the human social unit.

14. All round health is developed which will stand the sports person in good stead even after retirement, saving them the ‘post retirement blues and breakdowns’.

15. Finally they may be unable to continue their sport throughout their life but can definitely continue the practice of Yoga till a very ripe age!

SPORTS AS A BUTRESS FOR YOGA PRACTICE:
Though it is quite clear how Yoga can benefit the sports person, is there also another side to the coin? Can sporting activity also be of use to the Yoga practitioner?

To answer this question we need to delve in to the distant past, that environment in which Yoga developed.

The world was a very different place, maybe even a different planet at that time.

Everyday life required intense muscular activity and journeys were long, arduous, and more often than not were foot pilgrimages to distant parts of the land. Even the tasks of daily living were tough. Tilling of the land, collection of food stuffs, grinding of grain, collection of water, washing of clothes etc were much tougher than they are in this modern day and age. Most forms of worship demanded strenuous body positions and activities. Self-defense was a vital necessity especially for those belonging to the warrior class and ancient man needed a certain level of physical alertness, awareness, agility and fine reflexes in order to survive. Thus intense physical activity and functioning of the body and mind was inherent in the very condition of life.

Within that framework Yoga developed techniques to control, purify, discipline and refine the human being. Yoga added subtle and refined physical practices to counterbalance the physical activities of their daily life. The Yogis chose to explore static body positions from standing, sitting, lying down and topsy-turvy directions. Thus Yoga took the body into realms which were not explored or used in day to day life. There wasn’t the need for ‘adrenaline stimulation’ in Yoga as it was present in abundance in the daily life-crisis situations.

Nowadays the body is used to a very negligible extent due to the modern comforts which are easily available. One only needs to push buttons, poke keyboards, turn dials click switches or push pedals. Once past their teens, few humans use their body in any exertional activity at all. Man lives in concrete jungles, isolated totally from nature with his senses dulled and deadened by over-stimulation. Insurance against ‘anything and everything’ and the
availability of easy replacement for everything from ‘houses to spouses’ has taken the real anxiety out of our life (though false anxieties and neuroses are rampant). There are few true ‘adrenaline situations’ in daily life as were there in ancient times such as confronting enemies in battle or a lion on the foot path.

Thus in this totally different world of the 21st century, are Yoga practices enough to produce a healthy mind in a healthy body? Can Yoga provide the complete ‘all round’ physical culture that it provided in co-ordination with the ancient lifestyle?

It is here that we can consider the positive role that sports can play in the life of a Yoga practitioner.

In these days, it is necessary for sports to fill up the lacuna of a sedentary life, provide muscular exertion, circulatory stimulation and the sharpening of reflexes that was earlier provided by the ancient lifestyle itself. Sporting activities that are compatible to Yoga include swimming, jogging, trekking and hiking as they give a balanced exertion to most of the body muscles, give the cardiovascular system a good tone and allow the close contact with nature which gives an exhilarating and fulfilling experience. This is very necessary for city bred people who have lost all touch with Mother Nature. The more contrived the sport, the less compatible it will be to Yoga.

Persons blessed with abundant energy need to have an outlet for that energy and it can be found in competitive sports. It can also give the ‘adrenaline rush’ that some person seem to need and even crave.

Yoga practice is very much an internal practice with stress on internal control and awareness. We must bear in mind that if a person who is already by nature negatively introverted takes to Yoga, the Yoga practice on its own may increase that introvertedness. This when used as an excuse may in the long run even lead to psychological and psychiatric disturbances. Team sports can play an important role in this situation as they create an interaction and develop a co-operative spirit amongst the team members. This forces the introvert to deal with others and live in society with proper attitudes towards others. Children, teens and young adults need this type of training in social skills of co-operation, adjustment and control which is developed by participation in the sporting activity.

A true Yogi is neither an introvert nor an extrovert. He is an ambivert, a person who is equally at home irrespective of whether he is introspecting within himself or whether he is interacting vibrantly with the external environment. Therefore to make sure that the natural introversion of Yoga is balanced with healthy extroversion, some form of extroverted activity such as sports, music or art and craft skill need to be deliberately cultivated.

YOGASANAS AS A SPORT:

Positive aspects of Yogasana competitions:

Yoga in its wholistic sense can never be competitive, and there exists no objective measurement by which one person can be declared more yogic than another. Therefore the term “competitive Yoga” is a paradox and has no real meaning. However the proficiency of the Sadhak can be compared with that of another in the performance of the Asanas, Kriyas, Mudras, Pranayamas and the Shat Karmas.

Yogasana competitions are a ‘fact’ in today’s Yoga world and are mushrooming up in all directions. When conducted efficiently and when the competitors approach them with the
right Yogic attitude of ‘Nishkama Karma’, i.e., selfless action, then the Yogasana competitions have a lot to offer.

They stimulate the young minds and give them an outlet for the competitive spirit, drive and energy. The youngsters learn to take the ‘win’ with the same equanimity (Samabhava) as the ‘loss’. They learn to accept that on any given day someone else may be better than them. They learn to accept the ‘highs’ with the ‘lows’ and realize that proper planning, dedicated and disciplined practice and enthusiastic participation is more important than the result. The youngsters are stimulated to intense practice and thus develop amazing body skills, which they may not develop otherwise.

The competitions provide a meeting point for the youngsters to meet and interact positively with others having similar interests. Formation of a group of similar minded Yoga Sadhaks can reinforce the individual’s practice whenever it slackens due to any reason. Positive ‘peer pressure’ creates a back up to counter any inertia that may hinder the practitioner in their Sadhana.

Due to competition, the Sadhak is shaken out of the complacency that tends to creep in when the practice of Yoga becomes a habit as monotonous as the brushing of teeth in the morning. They make sure that they don’t miss their practice and put in extra energy and time to keep in shape. The competitive edge sharpens and focuses the body awareness, thus fostering greater accuracy and perfection that in turn stimulates the real Yogic growth.

Spectators and the lay observers of these competitions get stimulated to take up the practice of Yoga and this in turn also draws these persons and the participants into a deeper Sadhana. The basic idea of Yoga receives wide general publicity and this can ‘open doors’ for many who are ignorant of this ancient art and science for the mind and body.

Thus we can see how Yogasana competitions, when put in the framework of competitive sport can restore the competitions to their original purpose, which was to produce a ‘healthy mind in a healthy body’.

**Negative aspects of Yogasana competitions:**

However when discussing the benefits of Yogasana competitions, we must not ignore the pitfalls that are present in ‘competitive Yoga’.

Yoga provides relief from the ‘rat race’ that pervades every area of modern life. Thus by putting stress and a competitive element into the practice of Yoga, we may be acting against its positive role and create more stress and tension than relief.

Unless the competitions are well structured, they can lead to confusion, partiality, and improper judgment thus finally creating a totally a-yogic situation as seen in many competitions. There is then friction amongst the participants, judges and organizers, which is as bad as that seen in other sporting competitions with everyone beating up each another.

As in other competitions, the ego of the victor is ‘patted and fed’ often becoming so bloated that it destroys all spiritual sensitivity and perceptions. This ego boosting leads to very unpleasant situations and finally the whole idea of Yoga gets lost. The person starts to think that the success is all due their work alone and that there is no need to be thankful to the parents, Guru or even the Divine. Asmita (ego) is one of the Kleshas (mental quirks) which are the root cause of human misery, and the aim of Yoga is to destroy the Kleshas and not to pamper them.
Competitors may make the effort for the sake of the rewards and not for the sake of the practice itself. This is the antithesis of the philosophy of wholistic Yoga. Too much emphasis on competition can lead to the practitioners getting ‘hung up’ in their bodies.

There is even the real danger of competitive Yoga breaking away from mainstream Yoga and becoming a subject onto itself, with its exponents living gross, crude and a-yogic lives thus falling in the same pitfalls as their sporting compatriots from other sports.

This is why those in-charge of such competitions must stand firm on moral and ethical issues. Competitors must sign a statement that they are vegetarian, non-smoking, non-drinking and non-drug users. They must have a basic knowledge of Yoga theory and marks should be allotted for Yoga deportment and character. They must be regular practitioners who are attached to either Yogashrams or accredited Yoga groups.

When all these considerations are taken into account, then ‘Yoga Sports’ can be a beacon light for other sports in terms of living the Yogic and sporting ideals. Thus Yoga Sports can add as well as benefit from the association with the sporting world and be a proper link between the two worlds of Yoga and sports.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF YOGA SPORT:

Yogasana competitions are part and parcel of the modern yoga world and various national and international organizations are involved in the development and propagation of the ideals of Yoga Sport.

In India we have the INDIAN YOGA FEDERATION and the YOGA FEDERATION OF INDIA that have been conducting Yogasana competitions in various age groups for three decades in all states of our country. We also have the Yoga Confederation of India and the South Indian Yoga Federation that are relatively more recent in their inception.

Pondicherry Yogasana Association® (PYA) founded by Yogamaharishi Dr Swami Gitananda Giri has been in the forefront of the Yoga Sport movement and Swamiji is hailed as one of the founding fathers of this concept. PYA is the official body for Yoga Sports in Pondicherry. It is recognized by the International Yoga Federation as well as the Asian Union of Yoga and affiliated to the Indian Yoga Federation. Founded by Yogamaharishi Dr. Swami Gitananda Giri Guru Maharaj in 1975, the PYA has been active in conducting Yoga Sport events such as 23 Pondicherry State Yoga Sport Championships and 9 Swami Gitananda Best Youth and Child Award Competitions. The 23rd Pondicherry State Yoga Sport Championship was conducted in a grand manner in December 2008 at Naveena Gardens Hall. More than 600 participants took part and their expertise in both Yoga Asanas and Yoga theory were tested. PYA has also introduced Yoga Theory aspects into all Yogasana Competitions and this has exposed competitors to the great science of Yoga in addition to developing their skill in Yogasanas. PYA has been the pioneer in introducing awards for Yogic personality as well as Yogic behavior in competitions conducted by the PYA.

In order to create interest in the art and science of Yoga, the PYA organised Swami Gitananda Best Yoga Youth Award competitions since 2000. In this competition the competitors are tested not only in their Asana skill but also in their Yogic thinking and exposition in addition to other aspects of the art and science of Yoga.

The Pondicherry Government has held an International Yogasana Competition every year since 1993 during the International Yoga Festival conducted by the Tourism Department and this draws hundreds of contestants from numerous states of India as well as many foreign countries. PYA has been in the forefront of supporting the Tourism Department in organizing...
the Yogasana Competitions and the General Secretary Dr Ananda Balayogi Bhavanani has COORDINATED these International Yoga competitions since 2001 onwards.

The INTERNATIONAL YOGA FEDERATION, which is the international governing body of Yoga Sport, is based in South America and Europe. The IYF has held International Yoga Championships nearly every year in various countries around the world. The First International Yoga Championship was held in 1989 at Pondicherry under the guidance of Yoga Maharishi Dr Swami Gitananda Giri. The most recent International Yoga Championships was held in Rome, Italy in 2009.

Indian Universities have also taken up this concept of Yoga competitions in their Inter University Championships and every year there is an inter university yoga competition. Pondy university team has participated in this competition on numerous occasions and won various prizes. Vivekananda Kendra Yogas (sVYASA) at Bangalore has conducted the National and International HIMALAYA YOGA OLYMPIAD since 2001 at s VYASA, Prashanti Kuteeram, Bangaore. Various organizations and state yoga associations are holding yoga competitions in their respective states and West Bengal, Haryana, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu are in the forefront of this movement.

CONCLUSION:

Thus we can see that though the world of sports and that of Yoga lie nearly on opposite poles, they have a lot to offer to each another. They can stimulate, strengthen and benefit the practitioners of either science to a great extent when approached properly and with an understanding of their respective merits and limitations. We can also see that though Yogasana competitions have both positive and negative aspects, they can be an effective link between Yoga and sports. It is now necessary for the practitioners of Yoga and sports to understand the benefits of their close association with one another and create the needed framework in which both can complement each another more effectively. This association between these two sciences can their provide humankind with a disciplined, strong, efficient and healthy body and mind for further evolution towards the Divine.

REFERENCES:

1. Yoga and Sports by Yogamaharishi Dr. Swami Gitananda Giri and Yogacharini Meenakshi Devi Bhavanani, Satya Press,Ananda Ashram,Pondicherry
2. Yoga: Step By Step by Yogamaharishi Dr. Swami Gitananda Giri, Satya Press, Ananda Ashram, Pondicherry
3. Frankly Speaking by Yogamaharishi Dr.Swami Gitananda Giri, Satya Press, Ananda Ashram, Pondicherry
4. Ashtanga Yoga of Patanjali by Yogamaharishi Dr.Swami Gitananda Giri, Satya Press, Ananda Ashram, Pondicherry
5. The Health Benefits of Yoga by Trisha Lamb Feuerstein YREC-A Gateway to Authentic Yoga-No.16(2001)