

# It's no stretch to say yoga has benefited skater Sasha Cohen

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By Bob Riha Jr., USA TODAY

Sasha Cohen does yoga, showing off her flexibility and balance, at YogaWorks in Newport Beach, Calif., Dec. 20.

By Janice Lloyd, USA TODAY

Figure skater Sasha Cohen has her mother to thank for letting her dream about competing in the Olympics again.

Cohen's mother turned to yoga 2½ years ago because she had pain in her shoulder and lower back. Galina Cohen wasted little time getting her two daughters to plunk down their mats next to hers at a yoga workshop in Newport Beach, Calif. After the practices eliminated Galina's pain and made her stronger overall than she had been, she wanted daughters Sasha and Natasha to share the perks.

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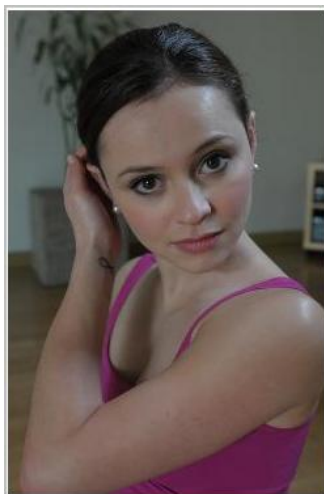
## BETTER LIFE: Yoga, like prayer, evokes 'relaxation response,' expert says

"People think it is for wimps, but it is demanding of your entire body," Galina Cohen says. "It's pretty cool to do it with my kids. We love taking up the front row at class."

Sasha, 24, says she practices yoga at least five days a week and does yoga as her warmup for skating.

"The best thing about yoga — as opposed to the gym or weights — is that you have to use your own body, and it makes you really aware of all the connections and how to balance yourself," Sasha says.

Balance is everything to a skater twirling on one leg on the razor-thin edge of a blade across a smooth ice rink. Sasha retired from competitive skating after winning silver at the 2006 Olympics but says yoga has helped her become stronger than ever. She'll decide this summer about trying out for the 2010 Vancouver Olympics. An end to her retirement would be good news for the USA, whose young cast of female skaters seemed destined to mediocrity behind the dominating Asian and Canadian skaters.



## Strength of mind and body

"I am training right now to see if I can get back to the place I want to be," she says. "I just don't want to rush my decision."

Yoga helps her not rush, she adds, because it helps her manage stress. She also is stronger physically. Though she has always been flexible, her overall strength had been lacking. Skating, which builds muscles in the legs, does not develop core or upper-body strength. Yoga works all the muscle groups by taking participants through a series of poses that are held for periods of time while breathing.

"I wish I had taken it up much earlier," Sasha says. "It will always be a part of my life now."

As with any new fitness routine, there are cautions to be taken. In *Fitness for Dummies* (Wiley Publishing), authors Suzanne Schlosberg and Liz Neporent advise that novices should take a beginners' class, should not let anyone push them into stretching too far and should not try to copy anyone else.

"Even if you can bench-press a heavy load in the gym, you may find yourself lacking the strength to hold a yoga pose for a minute," the authors write.

Sage Rountree, author of *The Athlete's Guide to Yoga*, says yoga builds strength differently from other exercises: "In yoga you are using your body weight and moving through a range of motion and using every muscle."

Sasha practices power yoga for strength, balance and stamina and uses vinyasa yoga for maintenance and flexibility. Power yoga adds push-ups between poses. In vinyasa yoga, the poses flow into each other like in dance.