

Beneath the Surface

For sprint kayaker Karen Furneaux, yoga is about more than stretching. It's about developing the mental clarity that's key to realizing her Olympic dreams.

Interview by ANNA DUBROVSKY



INTENSE FOCUS *Karen Furneaux cultivates it through daily practice—in the water and on the mat.*

At this point in my athletic career I believe mental preparation is actually more important than the physical. Every kayaker I race against at the World Championships and at the Olympics is physically in peak shape. Everybody trains hard. Where you can make a difference is in your mental approach—every day in training and during racing.

If you don't practice it every day, you can't expect to pull out the amazing focus and clarity all of a sudden. You have to develop your ability to let things go, whether positive or negative, and focus in

ing to do things that were going to shape our futures. Yoga was something that we could enjoy together. We had a really good experience. Yoga really helped loosen me up and prepare me for my workout.

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the moment. You have to do that every day if you expect to do that at the start line of the Olympic final. You can't just summon it. That's what I do when I'm training every day. I bring that mental clarity. I think that gives me a definite competitive edge. Yoga helps with that mental clarity. It enables me to breathe through difficult moments.

I became interested in yoga pretty seriously a few years ago when my husband and I took a class together in Halifax. It was a period of growth for us. We had recently gotten married, and we were start-

I train three times a day: two paddling sessions on the water and one session in the middle of the day of either weight training or running. It comes to about five or six hours of training. I train six days a week and have Sundays off.

At first I was only doing yoga once or twice a week. Now it's part of my warm-up every day. I also do it at the end of every day to recenter, to breathe, to refocus on the power that is me. Olympic kayaking is a very explosive, powerful, dynamic sport, so yoga is a real complement to what I do in the gym and on the water. It

helps me balance my strength and power.

My yoga practice changes from day to day, depending on how I feel. I typically get up, have a light breakfast, do some stretching, and then move into some flow patterns of yoga and sun salutations and things like that just to warm up my body. And then I get into some rhythmic breathing, trying to focus on what I want to accomplish in my training. The yoga is part of my morning routine and probably lasts 15 to 20 minutes.

In the evenings I'll practice for 30 to 40 minutes. That one's a little bit slower—not so much trying to create heat but just opening up spaces in my body so that the blood can flow and all the good training from the day can move through my body and kind of go where it needs to be. Now that I'm in my 30s, I recognize the benefits of stretching and not letting the toxins in your body build up during the training week. I'm better week to week and training session to training session. I'm more supple and prepared to do the work on the water.

I travel a lot: the Olympic trials in Atlanta in May and shortly after that a qualifier in Montreal. Then two World Cups in Europe, and back home training for the Olympics in Beijing this summer. Yoga is very portable. I bring my mat everywhere I go. +

Karen Furneaux is a two-time World Champion and two-time Olympian. She has been a member of Canada's national team since 1994. At press time, Furneaux was preparing for the trials in Atlanta. She needed to place first there and at the qualifier in Montreal to compete in the Olympics. Learn more at karenfurneaux.com.