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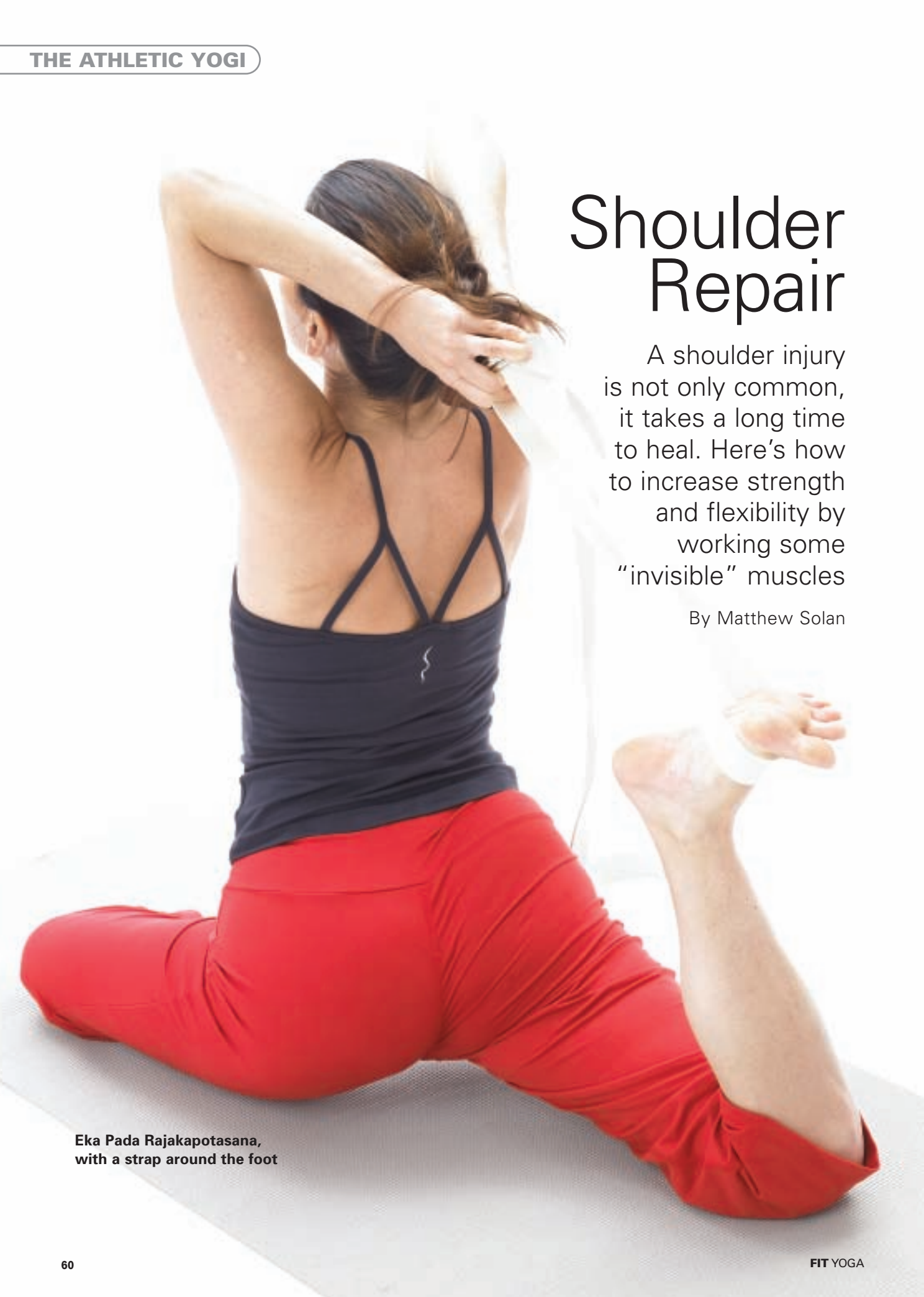


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Shoulder Repair

A shoulder injury is not only common, it takes a long time to heal. Here's how to increase strength and flexibility by working some "invisible" muscles

By Matthew Solan



**Eka Pada Rajakapotasana,
with a strap around the foot**

**Vajrasana with
Gomukhasana
arms using
a strap**



Beth Paxson thought she hit the jump clean. After all, this was nothing, a recreational outing on the slopes of the Blackcomb Glacier in British Columbia. It was a far cry from her intense training as a member of the U.S. Cross Country Ski Team from 1976 to 1982 and competing at the 1980 Winter Olympics. But she landed wrong and snowballed downhill. When she finally stopped, caked in snow and disoriented, she found she had fractured her right humerus.

For four weeks, she wore a sling that strapped her elbow to her body and made any movement impossible. Even though her shoulder wasn't injured, she had to keep it immobile during the healing process. An avid athlete (she also runs and cycles between snow seasons), Paxson understood what decreased range of motion for such a duration could do, and she wanted to avoid "frozen shoulder." This is an umbrella term for unexplained shoulder problems, a result of immobility due to pain. "If you don't keep your shoulder strong, flexible, and supple, the fluids there can become sticky and thick, and your shoulder joint can basically freeze up, so you can't lift or rotate without pain or discomfort," says Paxson, who's 46.

When it came time for rehab, Paxson knew what to do. Years earlier, she had taken up yoga to help

recover from a foot injury—and eventually became a teacher at the Julie Gudmestad Yoga Studio in Portland, Oregon. To help her shoulder, she needed to first increase her range of motion and then rebuild strength. Her challenge was to find poses that could exercise her shoulder without aggravating the injury. "The biggest issue with a shoulder-related injury is lack of range of motion—in particular, external rotation, flexion, and abduction," says Paxson.

Poses for Rehab

She focused on asanas with specific modifications that addressed these three areas. She began with Downward Facing Dog (Adho Mukha Svanasana) using the ropes against the wall at the yoga studio. Placing ropes around her hip creases allowed her to work on both external rotation and flexion ranges of motion with minimal weight on her shoulders.

As her injury healed, she eventually moved to Down Dog at the wall. Here, she placed her hands on the wall straight out from her shoulders and walked her feet back until her arms were straight. Using the wall as support, she gradually tested how much weight her shoulders could bear. A more challenging variation of this Down Dog is "Shower Pose," where you bend your arms slightly and lean forward to "collapse" your chest between your arms, being careful not to overarch your lower back.

Another rehab pose that Paxson used is a chest opener, which you begin by standing in Tadasana (Mountain Pose) with your big toes touching the wall. Then, you bring your right arm up to horizontal, perpendicular to your torso. Press your palm into the wall with your elbow creases facing upward and your arm straight. Draw your shoulder blades down. Rotate your body away from the wall—your feet, hips, and shoulders move as a single unit as if your body were a door and your shoulder, the hinge. Switch arms and repeat on the left side. "This increases external rotation and horizontal abduction," says Paxson.

Keep in mind that these are all restorative poses. "The emphasis is on recovery, not intensity, so take your time," she says. "You should devote at least five minutes or longer to each of these poses to ensure you don't rush yourself and end up damaging what you're trying to heal."

DOWN DOG VARIATIONS

Turbo Dog



Dolphin Pose



Shower Pose



**Shower Pose,
Dolphin variation**



SHOULDER STRENGTHENER

Want to avoid a shoulder injury in yoga? Make sure your shoulders are up to the task. A good gauge of your shoulder strength is how long you can hold Plank Pose. “Women are notoriously weak in the upper body, so they should begin doing Plank on their knees and then move up to the traditional pose,” says yoga teacher B.J. Sadtler. “When you can hold Plank for 10 to 20 breaths without shaking, you are ready for more challenging poses like arm balances and Handstand. You’ll find this approach better prepares you for these poses so you can perform them with greater integrity and less risk of injury.”

On the Cuff

We tend to ignore the muscles that surround our shoulder—even when it’s not injured—simply because we can’t see them. “Our big muscles, like the upper trapezoid, biceps, and deltoids are over-utilized because we don’t know how to engage the invisible, supportive ones,” says yoga teacher B.J. Sadtler of Breathe, Inc., in Glen Ellyn, Illinois. “The mind easily connects to muscles we can see and touch, but to connect to deeper muscles, we must feel them viscerally.”

The shoulder joint is supported by the four rotator-cuff muscles, commonly known as SITS (supraspinatus, infraspinatus, teres minor, and subscapularis), which are typically not brought into mental awareness until they’re injured. They are, by comparison, underutilized, underworked, and weak. “The rotator-cuff workout gets lost in the gym since most machines don’t specifically address them,” says Sadtler. “Unless you are trained in how to work them, they tend to go unnoticed.”

Not working your rotator cuff gradually makes it weaker. It’s no wonder, then, that the shoulders get easily strained from overhead-arm activities, such as tennis or other racket sports, golf, rowing, swim-

ming, and softball. It's also why shoulder injuries are common in yoga, says Sadtler. These injuries often occur in poses that require upper-body strength, such as Chaturanga Dandasana, and are exacerbated by arm balances like Bakasana (Crane Pose). "You need a strong rotator cuff in all these poses, but so often we don't realize this," says Sadtler. "By first working to strengthen the rotator cuff, you can then advance to more intense upper-body poses and arm balances, this time with greater success and less fear of succumbing to an injury."

Shoulder Wrap Strengthenener

The first step to building shoulder strength is to connect the body with the mind—in other words, train the brain to realize it's working the rotator cuff. "Muscle memory is what's needed," says Sadtler. "The body won't respond to something it doesn't believe exists." Again, since the rotator cuff is "invisible," you have to be able to feel the muscles being activated. You can do this by "wrapping the shoulders."

Here's how it works: Sit in a comfortable position with your arms straight out in front of you and your elbows slightly bent. Place a yoga block between your elbows and, with your eyes closed, squeeze the block.

Your armpits hollow out, your upper back broadens, and your vertebrae slightly puff up. Feel how your chest and shoulder muscles engage. This sensation is your four rotator-cuff muscles being activated.

You can duplicate this feeling and further strengthen the rotator cuff in poses such as Dolphin (Downward Facing Dog with your forearms flat on the floor).

Another pose that helps build the rotator-cuff strength is "Turbo Dog," which also resembles Down Dog, only you slightly bend your elbows towards the floor instead of keeping them straight, thus "wrapping the shoulders."

"The angle needs to be slight so that the chest can go towards the legs and the sit bones go up," says Sadtler. Adding both Dolphin and Turbo Dog to your normal routine prepares the body for more challenging upper-body poses. "Both poses pump blood and

energy into the shoulders and prepare them for greater weight-bearing work," she says.

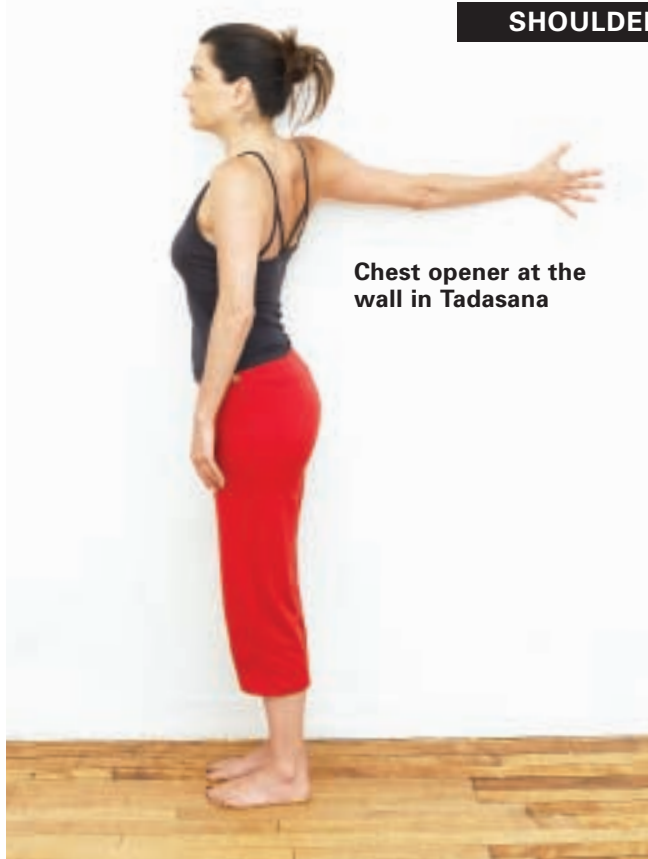
Flexible Plan

Yoga is about both strength and flexibility, so you also need to improve rotator-cuff flexibility to create a balanced system, says Sadtler. You can achieve this

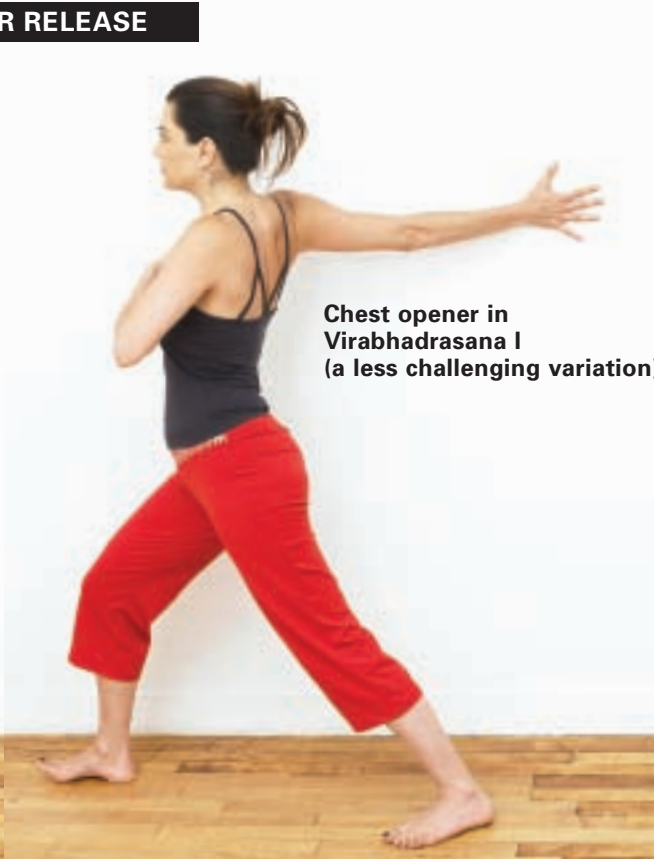
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SPORTS FOR SHOULDERS
Strong and supple shoulders can help avoid injury in overhead arm activities such as:
 Golf
 Baseball/Softball
 Tennis
 Rowing
 Swimming

SHOULDER RELEASE



Chest opener at the wall in Tadasana



Chest opener in Virabhadrasana I (a less challenging variation)

How You Doin' ?

Continued from page 11

Dear Rita,

I received my July copy of *Fit Yoga* yesterday and read your "Great Expectations" column. I wanted to make several comments about your magazine, having been a subscriber for a while.

I was in a near fatal accident six years ago, leaving me with multiple injuries, including head trauma and a back so bad that I could not sit up straight for two years. My doctor suggested yoga as a last chance. I started going to classes and soon met a teacher who I really connected with. She is half my age, but took me on as her first one-on-one student. Her skill and compassion have changed my life and body in a totally positive direction, and she has become a friend to my wife and my whole family.

It is encouraging to see a yoga magazine that actually has men included throughout the whole issue. Most yoga magazines seem to be written and photographed by, for, and only to women. As a 60-year-old student, who entered a one-year teacher-training program three months ago, I thought the best July article was the "14 inspiring yogis."

But it seems that almost every reference is focused on the New York and southern California areas. Aren't there other places that have stories/people/ideas besides those two places? Enough comments: I really enjoy your magazine and please go to once-a-month issues instead of every other month.

Aloha and namaste, Bob

[editor's note: Check out our new *Hometown Yoga* column. RT]

PS: I'd love to hear from you guys. Feel free to contact me at rtrieger@gmgpub.com... and don't forget to check out our beautiful new website at FitYoga.com


The Athletic Yogi

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with poses that stretch the shoulders, such as Gomukhasana (Cow Face Pose) using a strap to help you go deeper in the pose and open any tightness. Hold each stretch for several long breaths on both sides. Other great shoulder-stretching poses are Natarajasana (Lord of the Dance Pose) and Eka Pada Rajakapotasana (One-Legged King Pigeon Pose), also using a strap.

"Most yogis place the strap around the foot to create greater lift in the chest and deepen the backbend in these poses," Sadtler says. "But to really bring the shoulders and arms into the pose, the key is to hold onto the strap, one hand on each end, and begin wrapping the shoulders as you lift the leg and open the chest. You engage the rotator cuff and triceps by hugging the elbows in and lifting them up. Gradually, you choke up on the strap to create more space in the leg and chest while strengthening and stretching your rotator cuff."

When it comes to conditioning your shoulders, it's better to act now than later. If you get injured, the road to recovery can seem long. But Paxson believes that with constant work, you can fully regain complete range of motion. "Five years after my accident, I still don't have pain-free range of motion, but it's pretty close," she says.

"Shoulder injuries are an on-going process. Sometimes, you never get everything back from an injury to this area, but with my yoga, I've gotten as much back as possible." 

Our model, **Paula Tursi**, has been working with alternative healing practices for over 15 years, specializing in the combination of yoga, breath therapy and meditation. www.reflectionsyoga.com

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