

# Fitness Tips to Help Fine-Tune a Snowshoer's Body

By Jill Lawson, M.Ed.

It's no secret that winter sports whip us into shape. For some, an activity like snowshoeing is solely a means to improve fitness while enjoying the great outdoors. For others, it is a way to satisfy a craving for competition. At times, these cold weather endeavors can make us feel strong and powerful, and other times we are left feeling greatly defeated.

While summertime activities are a good way to cross train, performing specific exercises geared toward our sport of choice is an effective way to eliminate early-season soreness or get a leg-up on our racing prowess. If we take good care of ourselves and fine-tune our bodies, we will have a jump start on the season. We will enjoy those first few days on the snow rather than letting fatigue set in and hearing our legs scream in tenuous protest.

There is nothing worse than heading out on a beautiful bluebird day wishing you had packed the Ibuprofen. This can be avoided with a few simple tips. A little bit of time spent every other day, at least six weeks before the snow falls, will prepare you for your first snowshoeing adventure of the season – whether it's a recreational or a competitive endeavor.



## ***Tip No. 1 – Wall Sits***

To develop and maintain hip and leg strength, put your back up against the wall and imagine you are sitting in a chair with your knees bent over your ankles no deeper than 90 degrees. Stay in this position for one minute, building up to that time if necessary and repeat up to five times.

Wall sits will develop those powerhouse muscles of the gluteal region, quadriceps and hamstrings that are needed to punch through deep, powdery snow. The likelihood of knee injury drops when we keep our legs strong, so by developing a powerful lower body, fatigue enhanced knee problems are greatly reduced.

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### ***Tip No. 2 – Snowshoer's Lunge***

For a functional range of motion and increased speed in your snowshoeing stride, it is important to keep the psoas muscles (the muscles that assist in bringing your leg forward when you take a step) flexible. Come into a runner's lunge (or a snowshoer's lunge) by standing on your left foot and stepping your right foot back about a leg length in distance. Bend your left knee as you lunge down, with your knee directly over your ankle and your back leg straight or slightly bent.

Lay both hands on the top of your left thigh, align your shoulders over your hips and tuck your tailbone under to stretch your psoas muscles.

Hold for at least one minute before switching sides. **To modify this stretch, place your back knee gently on the floor (or snow).**

Tight psoas muscles are often culprits in lower back pain. They attach at the top of the thighbone and at the lumbar spine. When these muscles are tight and overworked they pull tenaciously at the low back, causing pain. They carry a heavy workload especially when we run on snowshoes, so it's important to maintain their flexibility.



### ***Tip No. 3 – Half Cobra Pose***

Yoga is a great way to maintain fitness throughout the year. Certain poses target areas that are crucial in developing and preserving strength and flexibility. One of these areas is the lower back region as well as the

muscles that are located on either side of the spine. While good posture is beneficial for everyone, it's especially important for the athlete. Snowshoeing requires a lot of endurance in the back muscles as we maneuver across the snow in an upright position.

Begin by lying in a prone position on the floor or a mat. Place both hands under each shoulder, palms flat and fingers facing forward. Draw your shoulders back and bring your arms into the sides of your ribs. Without using your hands or arms lift your chest up off the floor. Squeeze both shoulder blades together and broaden your collarbones. Hold this position for five to 10 deep breaths, rest and repeat five times.



***Tip No. 4 – Spinal Twist***

It's hard to believe a flexible spine would matter at all for the average snowshoer; in fact, without one we'd be in trouble. Just as walking or running requires a rhythmic swing of our arms, snowshoeing demands the same action. If we find ourselves stiff in our upper body, our shoulders absorb all the impact of the rhythmic arm swinging and that could send them into overload, potentially causing inflammation or impingement issues.

It's important to distribute this swinging effort along the entire upper body: Not by creating more effort of course, but by balancing the effort we are already exerting so that no part of our body wears out too soon. A healthy spine is a healthy body. It has been said by many yoga teachers and fitness professionals that we are only as fit as our spine is flexible. With that said, spinal flexibility is of paramount importance. With regard to snowshoeing, spinal twisting is a necessary function.

There are many effective ways to stretch and twist the spine. One example is from a standing position, somewhat emulating a snowshoe stride. Step forward with your right foot as if taking a step in snowshoes. With both feet planted firmly on the floor – right foot forward and left foot back – straighten both arms out to the side. Bring your left arm forward and your right arm behind you while twisting from the hips to the shoulders. Let your left hip move slightly forward and your right hip gently pull back. Keep your gaze straight ahead. Hold each side for at least one minute and repeat three times.



**Tip No. 5 – Hamstring Stretch/Forward Bend**

Anyone who sits in a car after an hour or more of snowshoeing knows the feeling of tight hamstrings. It's an inevitable side effect of our winter fun, unless we take the time to stretch. A very simple method that can be done just about anywhere (even in snowshoes) is the basic forward bend.

Stand with your feet hip width apart. Place your hands on your hips and begin to tip forward by lifting your tailbone. Bring your spine parallel to the floor or ground and slide both hands to your shins just below each knee. Keep both arms straight and the crown of your head stretching forward. Allow your hips to rock slightly forward as if your pelvis was a bowl full of water and you wanted to pour the water onto your toes. This will assure that you are not rounding your lower back.

For some, this is as far as it gets and that is okay. For others, more is needed. If it's appropriate, continue folding forward to stretch the crown of your head to your feet. Release your arms and allow them to relax toward the floor. Be sure to keep the sensation of the stretch in the belly of the hamstrings (mid back of thigh) and not behind the knee. If the backs of your knees are bothersome, bend both knees slightly.

**People with lower back issues should modify this exercise by bending both knees at all times.** Hold the stretch for at least 30 seconds per time, coming up slowly and carefully by using your legs. Repeat as often as you can.





***Tip No. 6 – Pilates/Criss Cross***

As we become more aware that a strong core is the essence of a powerful and steadfast body, we realize that much of our stability comes from the muscles between our hips and ribs. A strong core

helps to support our lower back and acts like a furnace, fueling our athletic endeavors. Without a solid core we may stumble, wobble or feel unsteady. To maintain balance, poise and finesse we must do the work. There are a myriad of core exercises ranging from the fundamental sit-up to more intricate methods such as Pilates.

One very effective Pilates exercise that works all of the abdominal muscles, and also incorporates some snowshoe sport specific spinal twisting, is the Criss Cross.

To begin, lay in a supine position with both knees bent. Lift both feet and bring your knees directly over your hips with shins parallel to the floor. Place your hands behind your head to offer support for your neck while you lift your head and upper body high enough to feel your shoulder blades clear the floor. Twist toward your right knee while extending your left leg forward at a 45 degree angle. While keeping your upper body lifted twist toward your bent left knee and extend your right leg. Continue alternating sides, breathing and moving rhythmically as if you are steadily climbing a mountain of snow. Perform this exercise for as long as you can. Feel the burn!

We all appreciate the idea that a little bit of hard work goes a long way. There is a lot of value in taking a few extra moments to fine tune our bodies. Whether we are new at the sport or are a seasoned competitor, when we head out to explore the snowy landscape it is encouraging to feel that we are able to take on the challenges in distance, deep snow or hill climbing. Being fit enables us to feel empowered and there is no better feeling to have as we experience the magic of the winter season on our snowshoes.

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