



Yoga's Impact

On the Mat and Beyond

BY AIMEE WELCH



People doing yoga always look so peaceful. Eyes closed, breathing deeply, perfect posture...oblivious to the day's stresses that inundated them before stretching out on that mat. It's a picture so perfect, one wonders what they know that the rest of us don't.

Finding "balance" is a quest many people seem to share. For some, yoga classes provide the path. For others, inner peace is found on adventures through the Arizona's beautiful deserts, forests, and awe-inspiring red rocks. And then there are the adrenaline addicts, who get "centered" by pushing their bodies to run further, cycle faster, jump higher or push harder. And, today, sometimes it's all wrapped up in one big box of zen, in the form of a yoga retreat that mixes nature, adventure and yoga.

Whatever its "secret," yoga has survived and thrived for the last 5,000 years, and its growing list of health benefits – physical, emotional, and spiritual – continues to draw a crowd. And it's a more diverse crowd than you might think.

A study conducted by *Yoga Journal* magazine in 2005 reported that 77 percent of American yoga practitioners are female, which is ironic considering the world's greatest yogis from its Eastern origins in India were male – but times are changin' and yoga classes are now a melting pot of people of different sizes, genders, abilities and backgrounds.

In the Sanskrit language in which most historical yoga scriptures are written, the word "yoga" means "to join or yoke together," connecting mind, body, and spirit through exercise, breathing and meditation. Sometimes it may look a lot like that picture in your head of a room full of zen-ish women, effortlessly twisted across comfy mats, radiating serenity – but the benefits and realities of yoga's true impact run much deeper, and there are many truths that just might alter that image in your mind's eye...

A hulk-ish professional basketball player doing a headstand, for one.

Yoga isn't just for girls

The subject of yoga doesn't typically conjure up images of 250-pound basketball great LeBron James in the downward dog position, wearing a cute Lululemon outfit. But this remarkable NBA athlete religiously practices yoga to build his strength and endurance for basketball. When asked about his yoga workouts by the *Miami Herald*, he answered, "Does it work for everybody? I don't know. I'm not a guru about how to be in the best condition – don't let me sit here and tell you that. But it works for me." He's not alone – from hockey and football players to swimmers and cyclists, yoga is rapidly making its way into the cross-training routines of professional and amateur athletes around the country.

Johnjay Van Es of KISS (104.7) FM's "Johnjay and Rich" morning-show fame is a huge advocate of Bikram yoga, after having lost 100 pounds in a year and half by changing his diet and doing yoga. An avid sports fan, Van Es easily rattles off a long list of successful celebrities and athletes who do yoga, and says he firmly believes yoga can make you better at whatever you do, from basketball to running to performing. "It works every single part of your body," he says. "You can feel your body come alive."



There are many different kinds of yoga out there – Bikram, Hatha, Vinyasa, Iyengar, and Power Yoga, to name a few – and, although many of the poses and results are similar, each style has its own emphasis. To simplify a complex list, Joseph Lauricella, founder and owner of Arizona Power Yoga in Tucson, and director of the Arizona School of Yoga, says you can group the different types into three general categories – athletic (or "power" for an intense, super-sweaty workout), restorative (longer stretches, meditative and relaxing) and basic (somewhere in the middle). Every kind is about conditioning the entire body and "they all help develop a deeper and better relationship with the self," he continues. Along with LeBron, a growing number of athletes are discovering how yoga can help their performance, both physically and mentally.

Ted McDonald, owner of 5 Point Yoga in Malibu, California, lists endurance and resilience among the many benefits yoga offers athletes. McDonald spends 4 weeks every winter with the



Joseph Lauricella, owner of Arizona Power Yoga in Tucson, helps students condition their entire bodies, and develop a deeper and better relationship with the self.

professional cycling BMC Racing Team at their training camp, sandwiching their daily 4- to 5-hour daily bike rides with yoga sessions in the morning and evening. McDonald, himself a former Elite Adventure Racer and UCLA lacrosse player, says yoga helps build strength from the inside out, which enables cyclists to ride longer and further. “Yoga allows athletes to sustain more and, if you crash on the bike, your recovery time is so much faster,” he says, speaking from experience.

McDonald combines Vinyasa flow yoga, which is a more intense and vigorous form of yoga that builds core strength, with restorative yin sessions that help to increase flexibility by holding the same poses for up to five minutes. He says the evening yoga sessions also serve as meditations, so popular among team members that he was asked to provide a 3-minute recording of his voice to help them achieve the same sense of centeredness throughout the season. Veteran American cyclist George Hincapie is a walking testimonial, literally, to yoga’s benefits. “For the first time in 11 years, I can stand up straight,” he told McDonald.

Dana Santas, founder and director of Radius Yoga Conditioning (RYC) in Tampa Bay, Florida, specializes in helping athletes – from football to swimming to golf – get physically and mentally stronger through yoga programs customized to their sport and their bodies. Among the many benefits yoga offers athletes, she lists: avoiding injury and decreasing chronic pain; extending range of motion while stabilizing joints; and enhancing accuracy, balance and quickness.

Santas says yoga does uncover some differences between men and women. “Male athletes get frustrated easier because they are generally battling against a lack of flexibility and integrated strength, both of which are necessary to look like they think they should look in yoga poses.” Once athletes realize they aren’t expected to look like a woman doing a yoga pose, and they start to feel it “working” and helping them perform better in their sport, they feel a lot better. “I use yoga to make my athletes better at their sport, not better at yoga,” says Santas.

Why people go yoga crazy

The majority of folks sweating through yoga class aren’t training for the Tour de France or dunking basketballs in the NBA –

they’re moms, dads, students, business professionals, free spirits, soul searchers, and active individuals. They’re people committed to taking an hour or two out of their day to better themselves, inside and out.

For working mom Tina Marie Brouwer of Gilbert, yoga is a momentary escape from a week jam-packed with the demands (and blessings) of her job as a dental hygienist, kids, and home. “For me, yoga is like pressing a pause button. Stop. Find awareness in a simple moment and breathe into the next one. I find myself renewed in calmness, mentally reset, and spiritually refocused.”

There are a lot of ways in which yoga helps move people along the journey to “better” – stress relief, pain relief, flexibility, better breathing, increased strength, weight management, improved circulation, cardiovascular conditioning, presence, and inner peace are a few listed by the Yoga Alliance®, the national educational and support organization for yoga in the U.S. Many studies have also found that yoga can increase life span by increasing telomerase (telomeres are DNA-housing enzymes at the end of our chromosomes associated with many health risks and diseases and regulated in great part by psychological stress). Well-known yogis from around the world are very long-lived, many living well over 100 years. Today, yoga is even “prescribed” by physicians to patients at risk for heart disease, back pain, arthritis, depression, and other chronic conditions, according to The American Yoga Association (AYA). All good reasons to go yoga crazy.

Physically, mentally, and emotionally, yoga leads people in the direction of peace and goodness. “Yoga resets your mental pattern beyond the mind, to a more soulful or sensory place,” says McDonald. It allows you to let go of the constant mind chatter, resolve inner conflict, and guide yourself in the direction of positive change, he continues.

Lauricella says people generally start yoga classes for physical reasons – to lose weight, get in better shape or build strength – but they stay because they soon realize the spiritual connection that comes with being a part of the yoga community. They find a deeper connection within themselves, and find peace in belonging to something that’s greater than themselves, he continues. “I’m selling health and wellness and love.”

Today, roughly 16 million Americans are buying into yoga’s health and wellness and love, according to a 2008 market study in *Yoga Journal*. And people who regularly practice yoga are...well, a little fanatical (in a good way). They get addicted to the classes, the feeling, the results, the whole experience. “The physical way you feel after a great yoga class can be downright addictive,” Brouwer exclaims. “You have boosted your strength, tuned your balance, and found your most flexible state. Your body feels fantastic when it has done what it was made to do,” she continues.

Lauricella says the yoga addiction is spiritual, but also greatly physical. “Yoga increases prana – life force or life energy,” he states passionately. “It increases the pranic energy, oxygenates

your whole body system, and releases a lot of hormones and chemicals that make you feel good,” he continues. It’s better than a “runner’s high,” he says, because good yoga classes are designed to have a positive impact on the whole body and the whole person, not just the legs. “Yoga is global. There is not a better exercise you can do for your overall health. Period.”

The yoga community

Yes, yoga does amazing things for your body and your mind, and even your athletic ability – loud and clear. But McDonald’s “5 Point Yoga” studio name hinted there was more...

Mental wellness, physical fitness, nutrition, community, and the environment are the “five points” he emphasizes to his students, and practices in his day-to-day life. The yoga community is about so much more than the individuals sitting on those mats.

These “five points” are firmly rooted in yoga’s deep history and, today, play an integral role in the yoga community’s “green movement,” which strives to reveal a deeper connection between nature and humanity, leading people toward a healthier and greener lifestyle. The Green Yoga Association writes, “Yoga helps us recognize that we are made from the planet; we are sea-water and earth. To take care of our planet is to take care of ourselves. Yoga practice creates a body-mind relationship which can bring energy and effectiveness to the way we address the ecological issues threatening our global life-support systems.”

In Arizona, Inner Vision Yoga was a founding member of the Green Yoga Association and is leading by example to encourage other yoga studios to take steps like replacing paper products with reusable products, using non-toxic cleaning supplies, encouraging carpooling among students and more.

The yoga community also emphasizes the importance of giving back, and avoiding self-centeredness. Volunteerism and community service are encouraged, and are sometimes realized through “Karma yoga” classes, which focus more on the spiritual than the physical. “Karma yoga is practiced with an attitude of selfless service with no regard to personal praise or anticipated outcome,” says the AYA, and yoga studios throughout Arizona find unique ways to translate selflessness into action. Bikram Yoga Paradise Valley (BYPV) holds Karma classes once a month – the \$10 donations collected for August’s Karma class benefited Yoga for Hope, an organization that helps create awareness of yoga and raises money for the City of Hope Hospital. BYPV General Manager and teacher Heidi Jo Klingman wrote in the studio’s blog, “When you care for your mind and body, your mission will come to you. Through patience, practice, and persistence, you can begin to perform your Karma Yoga and fulfill your life’s mission one posture at a time.”

McDonald found a unique way to address these issues with his company Adventure Yoga Retreats, which combines adventure sports, yoga, and community service into one soul-satisfying travel experience. In between yoga sessions, sightseeing, skiing, surfing or hiking, travelers visit local orphanages and volunteer in the local community. “If we don’t take care of our own physical

Ted McDonald leads the BMC Racing Team through their practice.



“Yoga helps us get back to our natural state, and our natural state is not full of stress - it’s like kids...they are just happy. It’s innate.” ~Ted McDonald

being and mental state, how can we take of our communities, far and wide?” he suggests.

It’s a more selfless state of mind, and one that many in the yoga community are seemingly ready to adopt. By its nature, yoga seems to attract like-minded people on a quest for similar experiences, whether spiritual, emotional or physical – it’s a community of people who want to do and be better.

YOGA for you

Whether your goal is to get strong and fit, relieve stress, improve your athletic performance, or find a spiritual connection, yoga can help you improve your quality of life, which brings people back to yoga over and over. “It will be the one thing I do until the day I die,” says McDonald. “It will outlast cycling, running, triathlons, and everything else.” He’s not the only one...

December 11, 2012, will mark the sixth anniversary of Johnjay Van Es’s introduction to yoga – he remembers it like it was yesterday. On his first day, at 320 pounds, he made it through 15 minutes of class. The instructor caught him before he left and encouraged him to come back the next day – she complimented his form on some of his poses, and told him he was good. He did come back...again and again. Today, he credits yoga with bringing him many of the blessings in his life, from his career to his health to being able to keep up with his three sons. It transformed his life.

There are many classes available, so it’s best to talk to an instructor about your goals and current fitness level, and let them help you choose the right class. Lauricella says the “right class” is totally relative to the individual, and is based on general health, physical ability, and your attitude.

So what else should you know before pulling up a yoga mat? “It’s hard!” says McDonald, who has watched many beefy clients come to class, perplexed at how they can lift a giant weight over their heads, but can’t do some of the basic yoga moves (initially!). But he emphasizes that there’s no reason not to start – you don’t have to be flexible, because it can be molded to fit the individual. You can make it easier or harder. “Yoga is the perfect complement to anything you do...it’s only going to make everything better.” **B**

Namaste.