

Snowboarders, skiers: Searching for a truce?

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October 1994

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Focus the mind, increase flexibility and prevent knee injury, says Richard Odom, Sun Valley's

YOGI OF THE SLOPES

By Dick Dorworth

■ BEHIND CLOSED DOORS every weekday afternoon at 4, contorted bodies fill the aerobics room at Ketchum's Sun Valley Athletic Club. To the Western eye, these people—dressed in colorful tights, shorts, sweats and assorted baggy clothes—look both odd and uncomfortable. Music, mostly new age and classical, wafts through the air during the hourlong class. On neat rows of blue mats, the yoga students move and breathe to the gentle cadence of ex-West Point cadet Richard Odom.

Odom is certainly not the only yoga teacher at an American ski resort (see "Stretching Ski Vacations," page 42). But he may have the largest and most consistent following. It's not unusual to find 50 people at a time in his classes.

The distinguished congregation often includes Zach Crist, current U.S. Ski Team member, and Abbi Fisher, first seed in all alpine disciplines in the late 1970s. National masters champion Corneille Russell is a regular. So is Audi Erber, a ski instructor whose clients include Clint Eastwood, Arnold Schwarzenegger and Demi Moore.

They're practicing an ancient Indian discipline and philosophy. From the Sanskrit word meaning "union," yoga aims to join body, mind, emotion and spirit. Hatha (physical) yoga is not merely a system of stretching exercises. It's a spiritual regimen intended to lead its followers toward harmony of body and mind.

To a skier, a flexible body and a clear mind are harmonious; a \$20,000 knee operation, with its attendant pain, inconvenience and recovery time, is jarring in the extreme.

And knee injuries are a virtual epidemic among skiers (see "Knight of Knees," September 1994). Dr. Jasper Shealy of New York's Rochester Institute of Technology says skiers' knee injuries have risen by 20 percent over the past decade.

Odom believes many knee injuries result from inflexible hips. "When the hips are rigid and ankles are encased in a hard, plastic ski boot, the force of a turn is transferred directly to the fragile knee," he says. Yoga stretches the hip muscles, making them better shock absorbers.

Fisher, winner of a World Cup slalom in 1979, follows Odom's logic. "I've had knee surgery, and I think yoga is useful for injury prevention and rehabilitation," says Fisher, who was introduced to Odom's yoga class two years ago by current U.S. Ski Team member Megan Gerety. "Yoga can be beneficial to all racers and recreational skiers."

Treating yoga only as a knee-insurance policy, however, is twisted thinking. Crist believes yoga's physical benefits can be just as easily achieved with a consistent stretching program. The primary reason Crist studies with Odom is mental focus.

"When I'm stretching, it seems my mind is always somewhere else—in the past or the

One-time holder of the world speed-skiing record, Dick Dorworth attends Odom's class five times a week.

The "pigeon pose," demonstrated by Richard Odom (right) and the author, improves hip flexibility, lower-back strength and balance.

SCOTT MARKWITZ