

Women's SPORTS FITNESS

A woman with curly hair, wearing a white short-sleeved shirt and white shorts, is captured in a dynamic pose as if swinging a tennis racket. The background is dark and out of focus.

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PREVIEW

**YOUR FIRST
TRIATHLON**
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AND HERE'S HOW

**THE SECRET
STRETCH THAT
BUILDS ENDURANCE**



YACHT WARS: A FURIOUS SAIL
FOR OLYMPIC GOLD



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THE BEST-KEPT FITNESS SECRET

*Hatha yoga increases strength, endurance
and flexibility—without the “ommmmm.”
And classes abound.*

By Cynthia Cummins

*“Oh, East is East, and West
is West, and never the twain
shall meet...”*

—Rudyard Kipling

If you're among the majority of Americans, the word “yoga” brings to mind a turban-clad, incense-burning swami who is twisted into a pretzel shape and chanting “ommmmm.” Or perhaps you envision an individual whose latest excuse for not exercising is an extremely passive stretching routine dubbed “yoga,” on par with those miracle fat-burners advertised on daytime TV.

Contrary to popular stereotypes, hatha yoga delivers fitness benefits that rival the results of the best modern exercise programs: increased strength, flexibility, endurance, balance, and coordination; release of stress and muscle tension; and the enhanced ability to concentrate. More-

over, it shaves away fat, builds beautifully proportioned muscles, poses almost no risk of injury, and requires a minimal investment of time and money.

Certainly, a few yoga schools today have "all the [East] Indian trappings," according to San Francisco fitness consultant and yoga teacher Richard Odom. "For some people," he explains, "that association makes it more mysterious and powerful. But to the average Westerner, it distracts and makes the practice suspect."

To allay suspicions, it's important to distinguish between hatha yoga—the branch of yoga devoted primarily to physical fitness—and other, more advanced forms of yoga, such as meditation.

Susannah Darrow, a longtime yoga student and teacher who divides her time between Sun Valley, Idaho, and the Hawaiian island of Kauai, explains that hatha

Odom were all the evidence I needed before enrolling in yoga class. I figured no amount of passive "ommmmming out" could produce such incredible results. I remained skeptical, however, because I couldn't understand how mimicking an oddly-posed statue could manufacture muscle.

"It's very difficult," says Odom, "to grasp the concept that something 'immobile' can be beneficial. We think of kinesthetic movement as crucial to improving fitness, and the faster and more intense that movement the better. But there's a lot going on in yoga that doesn't meet the eye."

That's exactly what I discovered upon sweating, trembling, and forgetting to breathe through my first class.

As with aerobics, dance, gymnastics, and body building, there are numerous styles of yoga. At the heart of every variation,

touch your forehead to your knee and pull your elbows down beside the knee. Both knees are locked; both legs are straight. Hold the position, perfectly still, for a slow count of 10. Repeat the posture on the opposite side.

The muscles of the standing leg are tensed powerfully to support your weight and maintain your balance. The muscles of the extended leg are stretched from heel to buttocks as you attempt to straighten your knee. The muscles of both arms are contracted powerfully as a counterbalance to the stretching leg, and this contraction deepens as you begin pulling your torso out over the leg. In order to touch your forehead to your knee, all the muscles of the back—from the base of the skull to the coccyx—are engaged. And the abdomen is sucked in to support the lower back.

Your mission, of course, is to remain perfectly still for the count of 10. Your body and mind are locked in a tug of war over whether to hold on or let go, because there's a feeling that you're going to lose your grasp and send your limbs flying in all directions. Then, just around the count of three, it occurs to you that freezing—something that should be child's play—is requiring nearly every smidgen of strength and willpower you possess.

MORE THAN FLEXIBILITY

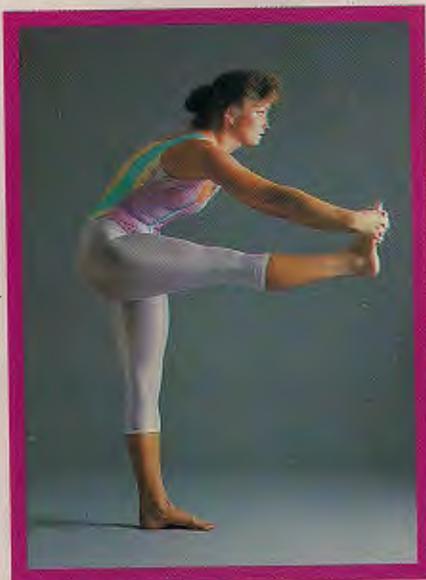
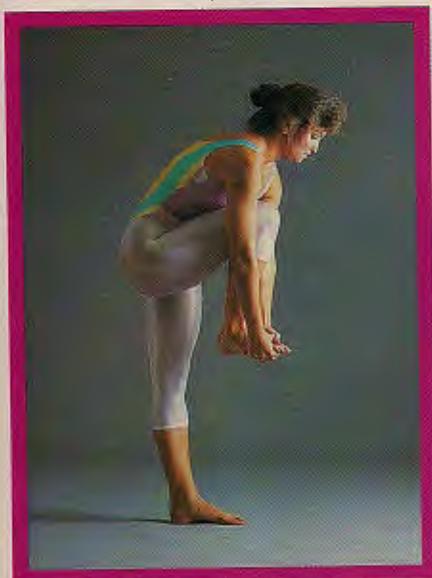
Your *immediate* reward, after completing a typical class of two sets of two dozen postures, is deep body relaxation accompanied by a sense of calm and euphoria. Most newcomers react as Raquel Welch did, who writes, "By the end of my first class, I was walking three feet off the ground. I felt buoyant and in a wildly expansive mood..."

Over time, the body is sculpted and tuned by the postures' demands for equal amounts of flexibility, strength, endurance, and balance. More subtle benefits include improved circulation, healthier skin, added stamina, and more flexibility in the joints, as well as increased concentration and body awareness.

According to Odom, "The problem with most exercise is that the mind works independently of the body. With aerobics you get lost in the beat. While swimming, you're mesmerized by the tiles on the bottom of the pool. With tennis, you follow the bouncing ball.

"In yoga there's nothing for the mind to attach itself to outside the body. Instead, powerful body/mind cooperation is needed," he explains. This heightened body awareness allows the yoga student to easily monitor her progress. She also knows when to push ahead and when to back off.

Susannah Darrow explains, "You learn to breathe properly with every movement. And every movement is done consciously, slowly, and deliberately, so it's almost



Far Left: The "standing head to knee" pose presents a challenge to body and mind.

yoga was developed some 5,000 years ago as a way to achieve "perfect health and full physical potential so the mind could eventually be freed to do meditative work."

In *The Raquel Welch Total Beauty and Fitness Program*, Welch, who does yoga daily, explains, "In Sanskrit, 'ha' means 'sun,' 'tha' means 'moon,' and yoga means 'to join together, in perfect harmony'... It was discovered that the body (the sun) and mind (the moon) could interact more freely if people weren't distracted by aches, pains, and stiffness. Nope, nothing super weird here."

Indeed, if we define optimum fitness as a physical and mental condition that allows us to maximize our human potential, then the ancient practice of hatha yoga makes perfect sense in our modern world.

THE PARADOX OF STILLNESS

The perfectly sculpted bodies of devoted yoga students like Darrow, Welch, and

however, is a group of postures or "asanas" that has evolved through the centuries. Contemporary yoga school formats vary according to the selection, order, and speed of execution of the postures, but the basic idea is to move gracefully into each posture and hold it for 10 seconds or more.

To the observer this is deceptively simple. For the practitioner, each posture presents a unique challenge to body and mind. Case in point: the infamous "standing head to knee pose," a.k.a. "Dandayamana-Janusanasana," a posture common to most styles of hatha yoga and among the most difficult for beginners.

Here's the idea: Balancing on one straight leg, you lift your other leg (knee bent) and slip that flexed foot into the interlaced fingers of your hands. Grasping the ball of the foot, you extend the leg forward and up until it is parallel to the floor and perpendicular to the torso. Next, you pull on the ball of the foot so your torso extends over the outstretched leg. You

impossible to injure yourself. That is, unless you ignore your body's signals."

The experienced student's heightened body awareness allows her quickly to recognize symptoms of stress in day-to-day life. She learns to work through stressful situations by using the breathing techniques learned in yoga. And when stress is manifested in knotted shoulders and an aching neck, the yoga postures quickly release the tension.

Marianne Gaddy, a professional political fund raiser residing in San Francisco, once required two weekly massages to alleviate the tension in her neck and back. She'd tried aerobics, running, and myriad other programs, but none seemed to work.

After two months of practicing yoga five times per week, she says, "The tension is simply gone. You can imagine all the money I'm saving by not having two massages each week."

While many people first try yoga to reduce stress and tension, an equal number come to class to alleviate back pain. Like no other exercise, yoga manipulates the spine and the accompanying musculature: creating a supple, strong back and a carriage that resists injury.

This characteristic makes yoga particularly well suited for lifelong practice. Not surprisingly, some of the youngest "old" people attend yoga classes regularly. As Odom says, "You're only as old as your spine."

San Francisco Yoga Studio director Antonio Sanchez concurs, pointing to the youthful appearance of a 73-year-old student who has been practicing yoga for four years. "Many people come here with back problems," he says. "Yoga gets rid of these problems, but the students stay to continue to enhance their health."

LIFELONG PURSUIT

At the age of 45, San Francisco resident Theo Gund has been practicing yoga for 15 years. Originally attracted by "the notion of having a flexible spine into old age," Gund began yoga classes soon after the birth of her second son, and plans to make yoga a lifelong practice.

Gund is now in top physical condition, but at first, she says, "I was incapable of crossing a room without knocking everything over. I definitely couldn't chew gum and walk at the same time."

Like Gund, Darrow was in poor shape when she first started yoga. Her appearance today belies her 42 years, and she's not only an accomplished yogi, but also an expert skier and avid hiker.

"I was an actress who'd completely ruined her health, and I didn't think I was strong enough to do anything," she recalls. "I learned that all yoga required was the discipline to show up for class. Then, I'd work at whatever level was comfortable on a given day. The pressure was off,

because a cardinal rule of the class is that you're not there to compete; you're there to do your best for that day.

"Ultimately," says Darrow, "it eliminates fear. And you develop the capability as well as the confidence to try any physical pursuit."

Yoga can turn wimps into athletes at any age, yet it is a superior fitness program for people who are already active.

Mary Ann Teixeira, with only 14 percent body fat and energy to burn, was in great shape when she first tried yoga. A former aerobics instructor and distance runner with a degree in dance therapy, Teixeira was "in between jobs" when she sampled a yoga class at the San Francisco Yoga Studio.



SUGGESTED YOGA RESOURCES

Birkram's Beginning Yoga Class by Birkram Choudhury. Step-by-step guidebook with photos. Available at bookstores, or write to J. P. Tarcher Inc., 9110 Sunset Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90069.

The Raquel Welch Total Beauty and Fitness Program by Raquel Welch. Step-by-step guidebook with photos. Available at bookstores. Also the video: *Raquel—Total Beauty And Fitness*.

Stretch & Relax by Maxine Tobias and Mary Stewart. Step-by-step guidebook with photos. Available at bookstores, or write Yoga Journal Book and Tape Source, 2054 University Ave., Berkeley, CA 94704; 415-841-9200.

Light on Yoga or *Light on Pranavama* by B. K. S. Iyengar. Available at bookstores or through Yoga Journal Book and Tape Source (see address/phone above).

Lilies! Alive with Yoga video by Lilies Folan. Write or call Rudra Press, PO Box 1973-L, Cambridge, MA 02238; 617-576-3394.

Yoga: The Home Study Course video by Manouso Manos. Write M. Manos, 236 West Portal Ave., Suite 196, San Francisco, CA 94127.

Yoga Journal, a bi-monthly magazine focusing on "body/mind approaches to personal and spiritual development," and containing many more resource suggestions. Available at newsstands or write *Yoga Journal*, PO Box 6076, Syracuse, NY 13217.

She liked it immediately and now practices yoga three to five times per week as her sole fitness maintenance program. As a result, her percentage of body fat has decreased to 10.

"It's really remarkable to me that I am gaining muscle and losing fat without lifting weights or making a radical change in diet," Teixeira says. "I wish someone—an exercise physiologist, for example—would do a study of yoga."

Like Teixeira, Amy Cooper was fit and active when she signed up for a yoga course at UC Santa Cruz. "That was it," she remembers; "I was hooked."

Eight years later, Cooper, now 27, is a movement therapist and esteemed yoga teacher. She says, "I started out very grossly, and ended up learning all kinds of new things about efficiency of movement, about using the breath to make movement easier, about alignment... [Yoga] was my foundation... for swimming, Tai Chi, running, hiking."

The simplicity of yoga makes it both an excellent fitness foundation and a base for other activities and sports. Collegiate and professional tennis players have practiced yoga to strengthen and stretch ankles, knees, and elbows. Basketball star Kareem Abdul Jabbar of the LA Lakers works out regularly at Bikram Choudhury's Yoga College of India in Beverly Hills. And the Minnesota North Stars hockey team practiced a yoga routine developed by Sanchez during the season they came closest to winning the Stanley Cup.

Of yoga's compatibility with Western sport and its place in our hectic lives, Richard Odom says, "Yoga gets down to the essentials. Most forms of exercise add on. Yoga strips down."

HOW TO START

Yoga can be practiced at home, but experts highly recommend that you begin by taking class. Not only will you learn to perform the postures correctly and safely, you'll also benefit from the support and energy of other students.

Finding a class that best matches your needs and level of ability may take some research. Luckily, there are many different options and most schools offer introductory free or discounted classes to neophytes. If the classes aren't available in your area, your next best option is to choose from the many videotapes, audiotapes, and books now available.

After your initial sessions, you'll probably feel relaxed, alert, happy, and muscled. If you continue with hatha yoga, it will only get better!

Cynthia Cummins, a frequent contributor to Women's Sports & Fitness, practices hatha yoga four times weekly as her primary fitness maintenance program.