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Taking a Big Breath, N.F.L. Tackles Yoga
By LENA WILLIAMS

The rookies arrived at the Giants' conditioning camp at the Meadowlands and went right to work.

Strengthening. Weights. Sprints. Speed drills. Yoga.

Yoga?

"I did a double-take," said Adam Wright, a free agent hoping to make the team as a fullback.

No, his eyes hadn't deceived him.

There it was, in plain Giant blue and white: yoga classes, Tuesdays and Thursdays, 9:30 to 11 a.m. Attendance: mandatory.

The veterans, those Super Bowl runner-ups, had completed two weeks of mandatory classes, eight sessions in all.

Yoga: the meditative breathing exercises that isolate and release tension and channel the flow of positive energy in the body. Yoga: the New Age mind-body connection that is normally associated with actresses, supermodels and Buddhist monks is now the exercise du jour with some of the hulks in the National Football League.

The Giants are one of a handful of N.F.L. teams — the Denver Broncos have worked with a yoga instructor — to incorporate yoga as part of the team's diversity training. The seed was planted by fullback Greg Comella and wide receiver Amani Toomer, both students of Sarah Margolis and Marilyn Barnett, who run the Yoga Connection TriBeCa. After six months in a heated room practicing Bikram, which entails 26 postures designed to move oxygen through the body, Comella and Toomer began to get more playing time.

Whether one had anything to do with the other is difficult to say, but Comella and Toomer became converts touting the praises of yoga to Coach Jim Fassel and John Dunn, the strength and conditioning coach.

"Coach Fassel wanted to continue the theme of providing new and different activities rather than just the traditional running and lifting," said Dunn, noting that last year the team offered martial arts as part of its training regimen. "Yoga gave us that. Obviously, the flexibility that comes with yoga is important."

Margolis and Barnett were hired to work with the players for the six weeks of conditioning camp, focusing solely on increasing the players' flexibility through stretching. They leave the weights and strengthening to Dunn. Their philosophy is simple: if players have all strength and no flexibility, they are more prone to injuries.

"If they can increase their flexibility to equalize their strength," Barnett said, "then they will have better balance and prevent themselves from getting injured and have faster rehabilitation of injuries they've already had."



Aaron Lee Fineman for The New York Times
NFL in BIKRAM Triangle

"We also teach them that by focusing on their breathing and concentrating, they can be right there in the moment on the field and be aware of what they're doing, then be able to let it go when they walk off the field and relax."

Recently, 21 players, mostly rookies, placed blue rubberized mats onto the Astroturf in the bubble outside Giants Stadium and assumed the position — legs together, feet flat on the floor, chest high, head raised — and began to breathe deeply. The instructors start slowly. Getting the players to open up the lungs and loosen the shoulders. The first exercise seemed easy enough.

The players were asked to do a half-moon pose tailored by Barnett and Margolis specifically for athletes. With hands together, they were told to stretch from side to side and maintain the position on either side for up to 60 seconds. That was followed with back bends held for 15 to 20 seconds and forward bends. Finally, they were told to counterstretch into the hands-to-feet pose. The pose is designed to increase the flexibility of the spine and muscles surrounding it, as well as to condition the abdominals and muscles in the back of the legs.

Well, after three minutes of half- moons, the fine-tuned, lean-and- mean athletes were struggling to maintain their balance, breathing through open mouths. Wait, was that a grimace?

"You would think that football players, having good balance and being athletic, that yoga would be easy," said Wright, one of several who couldn't maintain the pose for the full 60 seconds. "You're working with muscles that haven't been trained and developed to do certain things."

Will Allen, the Giants' first-round draft pick from Syracuse, was impressed. A cornerback, Allen had never seen yoga before arriving in East Rutherford, N.J. He expected a lot of stretches. He got a lot more from the two petite women in leotards who confessed after class that they enjoy playing the "Mother, May I" game.

"No, not yet," is how they usually respond.

"It seemed so simple," Allen said. "But you really have to focus on most of those positions. Otherwise, you find yourself not breathing right and not focusing on your body. Or focusing on your body when you should be focusing on your breathing."

Jason Garrett, the backup quarterback, became a devotee of yoga two years ago. He attended the sessions even though, as a veteran, his participation in the class was no longer required.

"I implemented this as part of my off-season program a couple of years ago and was pleasantly surprised," Garrett said. "I think it's really a good thing for the team. It's a good complement to the other stuff we do as football players."

Garrett said yoga has made him more aware of his body and his breathing. He couldn't say that it had made a difference on the field but was convinced of its intangible benefits. He says he feels better after a workout but admits he looks "ugly at it."

In the six weeks they spent at camp, Margolis and Barnett learned a few things. They enjoyed working with the rookies, in part because they invariably have fewer injuries and are more flexible.

"When it comes to the veteran players, you're dealing with more scar tissue and the inflexibility that comes with being a veteran for years and years," Margolis said.

"Having that strength and conditioning has taken them to a whole other place where they're not able to move as well and create a balance."

The instructors were pleasantly surprised at how receptive the Giants were to learning yoga. Working with athletes, they said, offers different challenges than working with corporate types, but it also has its rewards.

"Athletes are so connected to their bodies that they have a leg up — excuse the pun — on others," Margolis said. "So they know what you mean when you talk about lengthening up the thigh or opening up the hamstring or bend forward with a flat back."

While the yogis were converting a few nonbelievers, the football players acquired two fans.

"Last year, we didn't miss a game because of Greg and Amani," Barnett said. Should the Giants repeat as N.F.C. champions this season and return to the Super Bowl, it may be due to the team's finding that perfect balance not only between defense and offense, but also between body and mind.