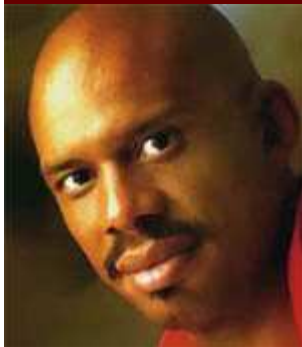


SPORTS YOGA

Think this form of exercise is only for crystal- hugging hippies? Tell it to Kareem.

By Joe Barks and E.J. Muller



There is no way I could have played as long as I did without yoga," says Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, not retired after an extraordinary 20 years in pro basketball. Many consider Abdul-Jabbar to be the greatest center, maybe the greatest player, in basketball history. "My friends and teammates think I made a deal with the devil. But it was yoga that made my training complete," he says.

Abdul-Jabbar first discovered yoga in 1971 when he was a nearly 7foot tall 14-year old high school student named Lew Alcindor. He came across a book on the subject and immediately saw how this Eastern discipline's emphasis on suppleness, concentration and breathing rather than sheer physical strength could benefit him. Particularly the breathing: "Basketball is an endurance sport, and you have to learn to control your breath," he says. "That's the essence of yoga, too. So I consciously began to use yoga techniques in my practice and playing."

When he got to UCLA, Abdul-Jabbar read more books as his interest in yoga grew. By 1978 he was routinely employing yoga exercises as part of his training program. Since 1984 he's studied with Bikram Choudhury--the "Yogi to the Stars" and a former amateur world weight-lifting champion--at the Yoga College of Beverly Hills.

Abdul-Jabbar is unequivocal about the contributions yoga made to his longevity. "As preventative medicine, it's unequaled," he says. "Once I started practicing it, I had no muscle injuries during my career. Yoga can help any athlete with hip joints, muscles, tendons, and knees. Plus it keeps you in touch with your body."

Yoga is a 6,000 year old Eastern discipline that's part philosophy (it holds that mind, body, and spirit are inseparable) and part physical fitness. The exercises take the form of *asanas* or poses that anyone can execute. The benefits include flexibility, relaxation, and increased strength.

With Kareem such a prominent advocate, you might expect it would be easy to find other top-notch athletes who have incorporated yoga into their fitness routines, and to get insights from them. But it's hard to pin some of them down.

Consider this conversation with Roger Craig, formerly a star running back with the San Francisco 49ers and now with the Los Angeles Raiders. Two independent sources had described him as having practiced yoga.

MEN's HEALTH: We want to talk with you about your interest in yoga and how it relates to your football career.

CRAIG: Well, I've never studied yoga. I do stretching exercises and that sort of thing, but no, I've never studied yoga. The only guy I know who does is Kareem.

In cases like this it may just be a matter of semantic confusion. "Trainers have long recognized the importance of stretching, and much of what they do is derived from yoga," says Pam Field, director of the Yoga Center of Santa Rosa, California, and formerly a stretching and yoga consultant to professional basketball's Portland Trailblazers.

"A lot of people think I'm nuts when I talk about the energy you can generate with yoga," says wrestler Chris Campbell, a competitor to watch at the coming summer Olympics in Barcelona. "But that's okay. I know I feel something."

Campbell, 37, was a two-time NCAA champion at Iowa in the 1970s and a member of the 1980 Olympic team that was not allowed to compete in Moscow. After retiring in 1984 because of knee surgery for torn cartilage, Campbell launched a comeback that saw him take a silver medal in the 1991 Pan Am Games.

Like Abdul-Jabbar, Campbell has no doubt that yoga has kept him healthier longer: "Training on a world-class level is tremendously stressful. Yoga allows me to heal myself on a daily basis, and continue to train on a high level."

Campbell also feels



yoga gives him a little something extra in competition. "Given equal technical skills, yoga allows me to perform at a higher level and be the superior wrestler."

It is understandable that some Western athletes are a little slow to grasp the principles of yoga. Most of us grew up learning that sports are competitive and that the whole point of exercise is to build strength. In that context, yoga principles can seem alien, especially when some practitioners talk like characters out of Star Trek. ("I am like a blacksmith," one instructor told us, ostensibly describing the importance of warming up before exercise. "My pupils are like steel. You cannot pound cold steel. You have to put it in the fire and then you can shape it into anything you want.")

Brent Rich, M.D., a Fellow of Sports Medicine at Michigan State University, suggests you look past the odd language and spiritual overtones of yoga's devotees and take what you need out of the discipline: "I'm not sure if spirituality is the important part of yoga for an athlete."

Indeed many yoga instructors freely admit that you can dispense with the philosophy if you like and still reap the benefits. It may help to think of yoga principles in Western terms: The controlled breathing is a proven stress-relieving technique; the stretching limbers up muscles and prepares them for sport; and the exercises tone and strengthen your whole body. Dr. Rich adds that the meditation used in some yoga is really nothing more than a means of eliminating all other forms of distraction so you can concentrate better. "You can think of something spiritual or you can just close your eyes," he says.

Yoga-style stretching can benefit any athlete, but it is most valuable for preventing injuries in sports that require explosive activity, according to Tony Mahon, Ph.D., an exercise physiologist at Ball State Human Performance Lab, in Muncie, Indiana. These include racket sports, power lifting, sprinting, basketball, volleyball, baseball, and any activity where a great deal of force is suddenly exerted by the muscles. Yoga and stretching is less essential prior to endurance activities like swimming, cycling or running, since athletes can begin these sports slowly, giving their muscles a chance to warm up before they really begin to push. "However," adds Mahon, "stretching *after* a long workout can speed recovery and help get the athlete ready for the next session."

Yoga also helps athletes get back on track after an injury. Physical therapists now routinely prescribe it for chronic back and muscular pain. "Yoga allows you to change old injurious posture habits," says Mary Schatz, M.D., of the Centennial Medical Center in Nashville. "And by learning breathing and meditative techniques, you can begin to feel each muscle, recognize the early sensations of pain, and take action to reduce the stress on your body."

"I guarantee that 10 years from now, yoga will be much more mainstream in the athletic world," adds Joel Fish, Ph.D., executive

director of the Center for Sports Psychology in Philadelphia.

Abdul-Jabbar isn't quite so sure. Athletes spend so much time building up layers of rigid muscle, he believes, it can be difficult for them to learn how to use yoga to break that muscle down and recondition it into a more sinewy, flexible form. "You have to be very humble to start from scratch," he says.

But once the initial resistance is overcome, an athlete often sees the real benefits that he can't get through other forms of training. Clyde Lee, a 6-foot-10, 240 pound former power forward with the Golden State Warriors and Philadelphia 76ers, turned to yoga about a year ago to alleviate severe back pain brought on by "years of pounding on the court."

Now free of pain, he asserts, "The back troubles I was experiencing certainly helped end my basketball career. I'm sure yoga would have given me greater longevity."

The point is this: Yoga works. It's also easy to do and simple to incorporate into any kind of workout. Don't be put off by the space-cadet image. Real men do yoga. Some of them even admit it.