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Yoga classes no laughing matter for Buckeyes

By **Jon Spencer**
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COLUMBUS -- Yoga master Bikram Choudhury should add "never too muscular" to his creed.

Fullback Branden Joe, whose weight-lifting feats have become legendary within the Ohio State football program, has discovered real strength while attending -- don't snicker -- yoga classes with several other Buckeyes.

"(Tailback) Maurice Hall was bugging me to go with him, and then once I went it was one of those things that's kind of hard, but you know it's good for you," Joe said.

"About 10 guys have gone on a regular basis. Everyone else can razz us all they want, but they haven't tried it. It's tough. The razzers will be in there whining like babies."

This is not your mother's yoga. Or Gandhi's, either.

No one assumes the lotus position or sits there chanting mantras. Bikram Yoga, novices might joke, is closer to self-mutilation than self-meditation.

In a room warmed to a withering 105 degrees, participants from soccer moms to college football players go through a series of 26 contortionist-like poses, holding each of them for long periods to improve strength, balance and agility.

The intense heat in the room at Bikram Yoga of Columbus is designed to loosen the muscles and induce sweating to rid the body of toxins.

Joe is happy if he gets through one of the 90-minute sessions without fainting.

"There's no meditation," he said, laughing. "The only mediation is the thought going through your head, 'Why am I doing this?' They should name it 'extreme yoga,' because that's what it feels like.

"You go through a gallon of water easily because you're drenched. I don't know the names of all the positions because when (instructor Amy VanTilburg) speaks about them, I'm too focused on trying not to pass out. So I don't hear her."

VanTilburg, director of the only Bikram Yoga center in Ohio, has gotten a kick out of having Joe and the other Buckeyes in her class. She has also been impressed by their progress.

"I knew once they figured out how it would help them, they'd want to stick with it," she said. "All of them have done a great job. They are naturally good at what they do, but they weren't as good at this, so it was humbling at first. But it's been fun watching their transition to becoming good."

Van Tilburg has seen the biggest change in Hall, who credits the program for getting through last season

on a pair of knees that eventually required surgery. Although he sat out spring drills, Hall expects to be in top form come fall.

"I definitely think (yoga) helps with my lateral movement," he said. "When I tried to get to a certain spot or make a certain move before, I couldn't because of hip tightness. Now I think I'll be able to get there."

OSU coaches will make yoga a regular part of the team's offseason conditioning. Beginning in May, Van Tilburg will conduct two sessions a week in the football facility's weight room.

She's not sure the heat in the room will reach 105, but the hotter the better. Bikram Yoga not only increases stamina and agility, the extreme temperatures are conditioning the Buckeyes for August two-a-days.

"The yoga helps in so many areas," VanTilburg said. "It prevents future injuries, cures old ones and develops new strength to go with the strength you already have. It adds a whole new dimension for the players. It opens a whole new world for them and should help with the longevity of their careers."

Middle linebacker Anthony Schlegel is glad to know that stretching backward from his knees and grabbing his heels hasn't been for nothing.

"It's like wrestling practice," said Schlegel, a former state champion grappler in Texas. "You're holding these positions, so you're using your strength and trying to get stretched out. It's very tough."

Joe, who tore a pectoral muscle last year bench-pressing 500 pounds, feels stronger and better than ever since discovering what is commonly referred to as "hot" yoga.

"You can definitely become too muscle-bound for any sport, unless you're a bodybuilder," he said. "I feel combining strength with flexibility is only going to help me compete on the field, and that was the main focus ... perhaps preventing injuries and creating good habits."

Who is Bikram Choudhury?

- Bikram Choudhury started yoga at the age of four. At 12 he was the youngest-ever national yoga champion of India. He went on to become a champion weight-lifter, setting world records and competing in the 1964 Olympics. At age 20, a lifting accident crushed his knee. He was told he would never walk again. With the help of a yoga guru, he was able to make a complete recovery. Combining Eastern doctrine to three years of work with Western doctors, Bikram perfected his comprehensive system of 26 postures. He has scientifically formulated and demonstrated yoga's ability to regenerate tissue and heal chronic ailments. He has been teaching his methods all over the world for 30 years.

-- <http://www.bikramyogacolumbus.com/>

What is Bikram Yoga?

- It is a 90-minute class, consisting of 26 postures, each performed twice in a heated room. The series of poses is designed to warm and stretch the muscles, tendons and ligaments in the order in which they should be stretched, preparing the body for the next posture. Bikram's 26 poses systematically move fresh, oxygenated blood to 100 percent of the body, restoring all systems to healthy, working order.

Professional athletes say it gives them mental clarity and increased energy. Physically, Bikram Yoga is the perfect blend of strength, flexibility, balance and cardiovascular training. It can be used for physical rehabilitation, injury prevention and performance enhancement.

