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## Yoga's New Role In The Evolution of Fitness

By Mark Shelton

Cork floors, low volatile organic compound paint, tropical temperatures, aromatherapy, with colors and sound all balanced, "Yoga will change your life," states Sandy Gross, studio director of Evolution Yoga, Cleveland's newest yoga studio. Evolution Yoga features all of the above and is the latest testament to the current growth trend for yoga. Yoga is an over 5,000 year old system that helps people understand themselves better, get more centered, more grounded, walk taller, run straighter, and if that wasn't enough...reduce stress, prevent injuries and improve health. Sandy suggests that, "Yoga is the group exercise of the moment and people are coming to it for the group energy it generates. It's better for my knees and better for my body." Yoga energizes the athlete. It's not a fitness workout that drains the body; yoga invigorates the body and the mind.

It is little wonder that baby boomers, after passing through other fitness trends like running and step aerobics, have embraced yoga with its deep breathing and more conscientious approach to health. "After running for 20 years, my body started to ache. Yoga was a natural evolution for me to stay fit and reduce injuries," says Tami Schneider, co-director and teacher at Cleveland Yoga. Often, older athletes are attracted to yoga because they are injured. Yoga has great physical therapy benefits. And young people are using yoga as another form of exercise. Cleveland Yoga and Evolution Yoga are two of almost a dozen yoga studios in northeast Ohio now attracting athletes to a centuries old system that is new again. Sandy Gross adds, "Yoga is not about perfection, it is about practice. Yoga can help you develop a better relationship with yourself."

Yoga started in India and, especially here in America, is generally associated with "hatha yoga" or the yoga of postures. Many of the postures are named for animals. Over 3,000 postures are available and adaptable but still represent only one aspect of a school of thought that goes beyond exercise to include breathing and meditation. Diane Lees, from DailYoga explains, "The word yoga means "to join or yoke together"...it is "equal to the union of the mind, body, and spirit." Diane teaches hatha yoga to a wide variety of people who attend her lessons to achieve stress relief, relaxation, balance, and flexibility. In addition, with 30 years of cycling experience and building custom bicycles, she adapts yoga to meets the needs of cyclists. "They learn how to breathe and how to calm their minds. They improve their flexibility through a short sequence of postures that are used before they get on the bike and after they get off."

Yoga for cyclists? That's only the beginning. "Yoga was not the discipline that it is now," says Ginny Nadler from Body Wisdom. Ginny has taught yoga for 30 years

and learned from Iyengar, one of the foremost yoga teachers who helped bring yoga to the west. She explains, “Hatha yoga is the beginning of the practice of yoga and is one of the rungs on the ladder...all the way through the breath work, the study of sutras and ultimately reaching ‘nirvana.’ We practice hatha to prepare the body for the next level of the spiritual discipline. The body is a pathway to higher realms and hatha yoga a cleaning process to move through our misperceptions.” So, this oldest system for personal awareness and development has been adapted, as Tami Schneider states, “...through a creative blend of sequencing” to offer all levels and styles of yoga, most derived from hatha to include but not limited to Ashtanga Vinyasa, Vinyasa Flow, Jivamukti, Anusara, Power Yoga, Hot or Bikram Yoga and even fusion classes such as Kettlebell Yoga offered by Peak Performance Center.

John Collis, owner/director of Peak Performance Center, created the fusion of the eastern bloc kettlebell fitness training system with hatha yoga to achieve functional flexibility, strength, muscular endurance and conditioning. John explains, “I spent a lot of time in linear sports like running, but over time I realized the specificity of muscle training left me functionally out of shape and poorly balanced.” Kettlebell’s philosophy of exercise combined with the ancient wisdom of yoga creates a simple, practical, stabilizing and safe workout. Evolution Yoga also offers a series of very popular fusion classes called Sculpting Yoga, Cardio Sculpting Yoga and Sculpting Yoga with Pilates along the same lines.

The first questions may be which yoga studio, which teacher and what type of yoga. These are all very valid questions, but the highest priority is selecting the right teacher. “Shop around,” says Ginny Nadler. “This is the most importance decision.” Sandy Gross suggests, “You may want more than one teacher. For example, I like many streams of influence.” Looking for a teacher may be like finding the right doctor. It is a very personal issue and the teacher should be able to empower the student to find the teacher within. “You may want a teacher who teaches Iyengar yoga which helps with alignment of the body, or maybe you are looking for a more spiritual approach, you may like the mediation practice. Although all yoga uses aspects of these, you need to find the right teacher for your personal needs,” says Tami Schneider.

Most people who get involved with yoga realize it begins to transform their lives. It goes into the physical, emotional, spiritual, psychological core of who they are. It’s important to use teachers as a guide on this journey. The first step is to become an educated consumer about the specific needs and expectations for a teacher. Diane Lees says, “Drop in on a class, ask questions.” A common thought often associated with finding the right yoga teacher is “Yoga finds you when you’re ready for it.”

In the selection of a yoga teacher, the type of yoga and perhaps even the studio or facility becomes part of the decision. Yoga is about balance and often evolves into a life long learning discipline. Ginny Nadler says, “I am teaching me, I can only teach

where I've taken myself. As the student you have to develop your personal practice, it's an art."

After September 11 yoga classes increased dramatically throughout America. People understood life could be cut short and began to look earnestly for something that would offer consolation and help. Yoga, with its emphasis on mind, body, and spirit and its first principle of "Ahimsa" or non-violence in thought, word, and deed to other human beings and all living creatures, began to attract a new following.

Are yoga studios the health clubs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Are cork floors the new workout surface? John Collis suggests athletes are looking for better ways to build core strength, to build a stronger, more flexible "motor" for their bodies so they can be better runners, walkers, hikers, tennis players or cyclists. Ginny Nadler adds, "Windows and doors are open now, we can see the truth of who we are, the place we occupy and the personal awareness and satisfaction that comes with that knowledge. There is a group dynamic, a very positive group energy in yoga that takes you to a deeper place inside yourself. It is very transformative, and that can only be good."

Yoga's new role in the evolution of fitness arrives at a perfect time to help the athlete achieve a new level of balance and performance while helping prevent injuries and improving overall health, and that also can only be good.

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