



Kareem Abdul-Jabbar is hot for yoga

By John Morgan, *Spotlight Health* with medical adviser Stephen A. Shoop, M.D.
USA Today September 26, 2003

Basketball legend Kareem Abdul-Jabbar may be best known for his indefensible sky hook. But the Hall of Fame center believes his secret weapon was really yoga.

"I believe that yoga is one of the reasons that I was able to play as long and as healthy as I did," Abdul-Jabbar says. "Yoga is somewhat hard to quantify in terms of benefits because you see them in all the injuries you don't get."

But Abdul-Jabbar wasn't always injury-free.

"For me I noticed improvement in my posture – that was key for me because I had been having lower back problems," Abdul-Jabbar states. "After I started doing yoga positions – asanas — all that changed. My health greatly improved overall."

Abdul-Jabbar became interested in yoga breathing during his first year of high school. Not until 1976 did he actively begin doing asanas. Today, the NBA's all-time leading scorer does some kind of yoga or stretching five or six days a week. His son even teaches yoga.

"I do Bikram yoga and a number of other styles too," Abdul-Jabbar says. "People who tend to get into yoga often do what I call a 'yoga tour' — trying different styles and techniques. Eventually you find the one that is your niche."

Derived from the Sanskrit word that means 'yoke,' yoga encompasses many styles, from the sex-enhancing tantra yoga to the most popular Western form called hatha yoga. Bikram yoga is named after its originator, Bikram Choudhury. This form of yoga is practiced in a room heated to more than 100 degrees.

Now Choudhury has created something potentially even hotter — the first-ever Yoga Expo. The event will be held at the Los Angeles Convention Center Sept. 25 to 28 and will offer more than 400 exhibits, yoga demonstrations, children's yoga, all-day musical entertainment and what is expected to be the world's largest yoga class.

That is good news for the estimated 18 million to 20 million Americans who currently practice yoga regularly.

"I started yoga when I was 3 years old," Choudhury says. "In Calcutta, I met my guru and have been doing yoga all

my life until today. Now my guru would be celebrating his 100th birthday, so I decided to honor this occasion so the whole world will know about his enormous contribution to humanity. The perfect way is the Yoga Expo."

Hot topic

At the heart of yoga is a spiritual experience.

"Spiritualism is self realization – understanding your own self, your spirit," Choudhury explains. "This is the ultimate destination of human life. Three things make us who we are – our body, our mind and our spirit. Yoga brings together these three things."

Choudhury is forthcoming that the creation of Bikram yoga was almost accidental.

"If you take a piece of steel to a blacksmith and want him to make a knife out of it what does he do? He heats it," Choudhury says. "This is why we do Bikram yoga in a hot room. When I was teaching in Japan, it was very cold, and my American students could not do it. So I kept the room a little warm. Then one of my students asked if she could bring her own heater, and slowly we kept making the room hotter. We get the room hot so you can warm up faster and stretch your body easier."

Abdul-Jabbar notes that breathing, not heat, is the most important component in yoga.

"The yoga breath is what it's all about," Abdul-Jabbar says. "The whole concept of doing postures is to make it more difficult for you to breathe. Taking a full and complete breath in each of the postures is what we are trying to achieve."

What people seem to achieve through yoga is better physical health.

"Many of us in the West surrender our flexibility," says Bob Arnot, NBC's former chief medical editor who recently was made a special foreign correspondent. "We lose our range of motion. This becomes a 'disease' in the sense that we lose maybe 40% of our joint function. That's a lot to lose. Yoga can help you regain this joint function."

Choudhury agrees.

"We need something other than just operations and drugs and pills," says Choudhury, who founded the Yoga College of India. "Quincy Jones had a malignant tumor. They said if he survived he would never walk again. Well, he is still alive and walking because of yoga. Yoga can do this."

Inner strength

Yoga can also provide many proven health benefits, including:

- Reducing neck and back pain
- Increasing flexibility and range of movement
- Reducing stress
- Improvement in carpal tunnel syndrome
- Increased circulation in patients with fibromyalgia
- Improved respiratory function in asthma patients

"I was one of those people who did all the aerobic sports, and over time I just destroyed my right hip," Arnot says. "I had severe osteoarthritis. When you looked on the X-ray, you could see where the cartilage had been stripped away. As a result, I had a pronounced limp, and the specialist told me I would need surgery."

Arnot admits he was taking "12 to 16 Advil a day" but still could not run, hike or play tennis. He said it ruined his quality of life so completely that he wrote a book about his experience called *Wear and Tear*.

Fortunately Arnot says he found yoga.

"Almost by accident I went to a place in Vermont and tried Bikram yoga," Arnot recalls. "I could barely do it, but I went back three days in a row. My mobility started to change, so I looked into the research and found that in a problem like mine about 85% of the overall disability is in all the tissues surrounding the joint not the joint itself."

Over the course of two or three weeks Arnot's pain disappeared more and more until he had no pain at all.

"I got my mobility back," Arnot states, "so much so that I was able to run again and even ski which I love. I have been virtually pain-free for two years. I have not had a cold or flu since I started yoga. I haven't had any intestinal bugs or respiratory illnesses despite my suffering from asthma."

Arnot reports that he no longer takes asthma medication.

"I used to take four to six inhalations of the most powerful steroids," Arnot says. "I had to even take oral prednisone. I can't be sure the relief I've had is because of the yoga, but I believe it could be."

"Yoga is a great mechanism for relieving stress because it puts you in tune with your inner self both physically and

mentally," Abdul-Jabbar says. "It gives time and space away from outside stress and focuses you."

And the Laker great hopes people will focus on attending the Yoga Expo.

"The Expo is a great opportunity to see what yoga is all about and to see a lot of different takes on it," Abdul-Jabbar urges. "Peace and well-being are worth checking into."

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