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Yoga: your flexible friend

Exit your comfort zone, enter downward-facing dog and bend your ticker into shape. GQ's Maharishi of masculinity adopts an uncomfortable position on another macho taboo

For a man, it is hard to start learning yoga. Taking up boxing, martial arts, anything where you get smacked in the cakehole on a regular basis – all these things are easy to begin, if not actually easy to do, because they let us remain in our manly, testosterone-soaked comfort zone. And yoga takes you out of it.

Yoga's image is overwhelmingly feminine. Yoga conjures up visions of beautiful women bending their bodies into impossible shapes to the gentle tinkle of temple bells. But this just in – men can do yoga too. And it will change your life.

But to start learning yoga, a man needs to break through the blush barrier. Moving your body like that looks hard. The spiritual dimension of yoga appears intimidating. And because yoga has the image of quiet rooms full of lithe women bending over backwards, most men feel far too shy to take that first step. Yoga feels like it is not for them – not for us; it's too difficult, too girly, a fitness regime too far. But the few brave men who take up yoga find themselves falling in love, and wondering how they ever lived without it.

Even if you are a veteran of gyms and dojos, even if you have been playing for Manchester United for more than 20 years – Ryan Giggs is yoga's greatest male advocate in the UK – yoga is like nothing you have ever done.

As Giggs has pointed out, most fitness regimes – weights, running, cycling – concentrate on strengthening one part of your body. In yoga, you use everything. After Giggs had his first lesson, he went home and slept for three hours.

It's gentle but there is nothing soft about it; non-competitive, yet demanding. In America there is a 20-year tradition of yoga jocks – professional athletes in the NFL, NBA and NHL who prolonged their careers with yoga. What I am trying to tell you is – yoga isn't Zumba, and yoga isn't Pilates.

Real men do yoga.

Why? Because it is impossible to practise yoga without your mind becoming calmer, without your body becoming more flexible, without all the minor (and major) aches and pains that you thought you would have to live with forever just melting away. This all makes it sound like some kind of miracle cure.

And it is! So why doesn't every man do it? Because something has to happen to a man before he can start learning yoga. It is no coincidence that the popular image of male yoga practitioners is of reformed wild boys like Colin Farrell and Russell Brand carrying their yoga mats to class – men who survived the outer limits of excess.

Because before a man takes up yoga, something has to break.

You think you are unbreakable. Your direct contemporaries have already begun the long, slow slide to old age, quietly piling on 2lb a year, acquiring that middle-aged gut with the same grim inevitability with which they acquired the job and the wife and the mortgage, living less and less in the physical world as time goes by, and their waistlines expand exponentially. But not you.

Pride, vanity, an addiction to endorphins, good habits, the will to survive – all these things keep you going back to the gym, or the football pitch, or your bike, or your running shoes. Keeping your body hard while others let their bodies grow soft does something to you. Rack up enough hours running in the park or sparring in the gym or hefting those free weights and you start believing that you are unbreakable. And then one day, guess what? You break.

It might be on some muddy Sunday morning football pitch (happens a lot), or on a ski slope, or sprinting in the park. But something snaps that you never dreamed would snap. And you understand that you are strong but you are not immortal, that you are fit but you are not unbreakable.

And that is when yoga comes looking for you.

I broke one Saturday morning as I was running across the road. Not even running – just a slow jog to get out of the oncoming traffic, when suddenly my back went into these terrible muscle spasms, pulsing tremors of blinding pain, waves of agony running from the base of my spine to the back of neck.

My back had been so strong and true for so long. I had never had a moment's pain in my back. And suddenly it felt like it would never stop hurting. The worst of it were these muscle spasms – the sign, I later learned, that the body knows it is hurt and is trying to protect itself.

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Illustration Piotr Lesniak

Why did I break? The previous day I had been sparring in the gym and taken a couple of hard left hooks to the ribs. But nothing that I hadn't survived 100 times before, and nothing that troubled me even as I was getting changed. There was no apparent reason for my back breaking. It was as senseless and random as being struck by lightning.

This was a life-sapping injury. I found that I could not turn my head enough to reverse a car. I could not put on a pair of socks. I could not sit in a chair for more than a few minutes without necking painkillers.

So I tried everything. Doctors. Physiotherapy. Deep-tissue massage. Three different osteopaths. And as the excruciating weeks dragged by, I found the only thing that really helped my back were certain exercises I picked up along the highway of pain.

An osteopath showed me one where you turn your body into an inverted V-shape, your tailbone in the air and your hands and feet flat on the ground. A deep-tissue therapist showed me another where you get down on all fours and stretch your body like a cat. Another osteopath showed me how to release tension from my neck and my spine.

These exercises all had funny names. Downward-facing dog. Cat stretch. Cobra. The bridge. And I stuck with them because they helped. The terrible spasms stopped. I could reverse a car again. I could put on a pair of socks without assistance. And I realised that these simple little movements that had released me from a world of pain all had one thing in common.

They all came from yoga.

Ryan Giggs turns 40 in 2013. "Yoga has definitely helped me," Giggs told *La Gazzetta Dello Sport*. "It helps me train every day because it gives me the flexibility and the strength not only to play the game, but to train as well."

Many people take up yoga because they want to be free of pain and injury (with Giggs it was persistent problems with his hamstrings). They continue doing it because yoga has the power to stop the clocks. Pushing 40, Giggs is still running past defenders who are young enough to be his son. Thanks to yoga.

His fitness DVD, *Giggs Fitness: Strength & Conditioning, Inspired by Yoga* shares much with classic yoga texts like *Awakening The Spine* by Vanda Scaravelli. At their heart is the desire to recover the things that are lost with the passing of the years – the mobility of youth, the fluidity of new muscles, the ability of the young to recover quickly from hard knocks. Giggs eloquently refutes any suggestion that yoga is for sissy boys.

"The general concept of yoga is meditating; nice, easy stretches," he says. "That couldn't be further from the truth. Yoga is the hardest thing I've ever done. You are using muscles you're not used to stretching. Waking muscles up. And it's hard. You need to concentrate."

At the far end of his thirties, Giggs still looks like a young footballer. Until her death at the age of 91, Scaravelli could still stand on her head, and bend her body into the shape of an exploded pretzel.

What Scaravelli and Giggs share is that they both came late to yoga. Giggs started at 30 (and wishes that he had begun when he was 19). Scaravelli did not publish *Awakening The Spine* until she was 83. But then everyone comes too late to yoga.

I dream that Ryan Giggs will do for yoga what Wayne Rooney did for hair transplants

First find your teacher. I found Sharon Ioannou of Yogaheartcentre.com in the spring, and by summer my back pain was a distant memory. By autumn I was getting down on the mat every day by myself, if only for a few minutes, because I loved the way that yoga made me feel. By winter I was reading lots of books featuring pictures of men in their underpants.

In *Surya Namaskars* ("salute to the sun"), the late Apa Pant – the only yoga master who is actually named after underwear – writes: "Yoga is a system of knowledge which seeks to unite the body with the mind, matter with spirit, the physical with the spiritual. The discipline of yoga seeks to unite the individual with the will of God."

The spiritual dimension of yoga had intimidated me, even more than the thought that I might have to ask my body – never particularly flexible – to do impossibly bendy things. But under Ioannou's guidance, and directed by her calm wisdom, I realised there was nothing to fear. Giggs probably never read a book by Apa Pant. It doesn't matter.

Here is the true glory of yoga – it can be whatever you want it to be. It can heal your pain, it can help you sleep or it can get you closer to God.

You don't get that with Zumba.

There are three ages of physical exercise. First you do it for fun (kicking a ball about with your mates). Then you do it for fitness (wanting to make the most of what God gave you). And finally you do it to stay alive (wanting to watch your kids grow up).

Yoga incorporates all three ages. It is fun even when you are doing it, feeling all those stiff and tired muscles waking up. It gets you fitter than you have ever been – making you even better at all the hard, heavy-impact things men enjoy like running and hitting things very, very hard.

And it keeps you alive.

Tramping across fields with my dog, Stan, we happened upon a young woman in a meadow doing the sun salutation just as the sun was coming up.

The sun salutation is a choreographed series of yoga movements, the kind of thing that is familiar to anyone who ever learned karate kata, t'ai chi or how to dance. Some martial arts are full of this stuff. In yoga there is only the sun salutation. It's just 12 moves, but books have been written about it. Some experts will tell you that this is all the yoga you will need. And watching that girl I had a dream that my fellow men will discover the life-healing benefits of yoga.

I dreamed that men would look at the likes of Colin Farrell and Russell Brand using yoga's shining path to lead them to health and happiness and wonder what it is all about. I dreamed that Giggs will do for yoga exactly what Wayne Rooney did for hair transplants – remove the fear factor, take away the shame, and set all men free to follow his example.

But I know it is just a crazy dream.

Having hair taken from one part of your head and surgically transplanted to a more barren part of your scalp – where's the shame in that? But embracing a 5,000-year-old physical discipline that can heal pretty much whatever ails you have, from a bad back to a torn hamstring to a jaded soul – are you kidding? Doing something that stops the pain?

Now that's embarrassing. ☹