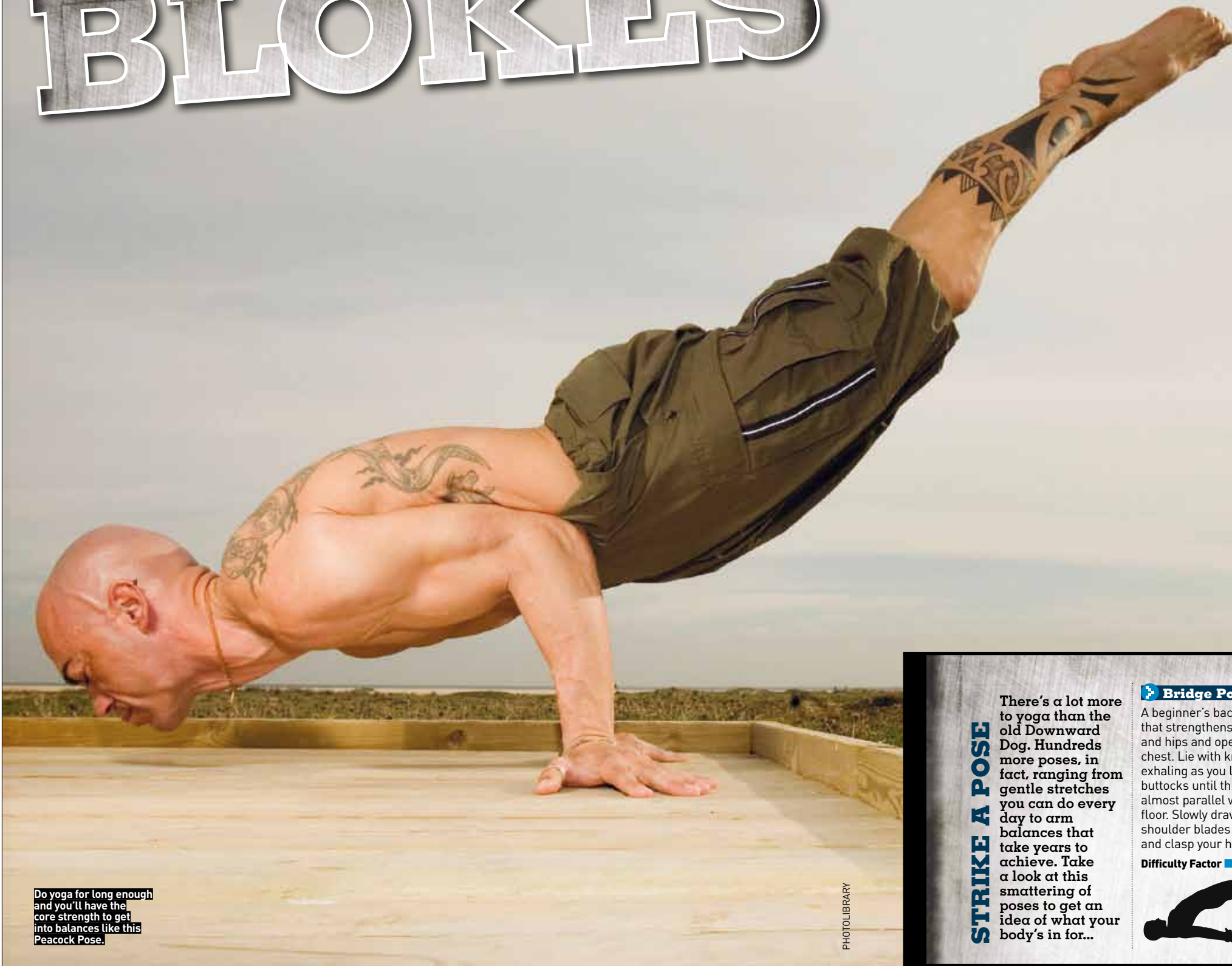


YOGA FOR BLOKES



Do yoga for long enough and you'll have the core strength to get into balances like this Peacock Pose.

PHOTOLIBRARY

So, you think yoga is just for mums fresh from playgroup and incense-burning hippie types? You couldn't be more wrong. We give you the lowdown on why elite sportsmen are taking up yoga, and the difference it can make to your own body.

Rugby legend George Gregan does it. Surfing great Tom Carroll has been doing it for 20 years. Dozens of Aussie sports teams now use it in their fitness programs, including reigning AFL champs Geelong, as well as NSW rugby union team The Waratahs and NRL team The Gold Coast Titans.

Yep, that's right, all these guys do yoga. Surprised? You shouldn't be. Over the last decade, sports scientists, fitness experts and elite athletes have all started to take note of yoga's physical (and mental) benefits. Yoga can give you the flexibility of a Slinky Spring as well as all-over body strength and a calm, focused mind, which is exactly what you need to perform better and ward off injuries.

"If you want to have a body that can do any type of sport—running, football, weights—yet remain healthy and safe, you would do yoga," says Duncan Peak, 34, a former officer with the Parachute Regiment of the Army and 1st grade rugby player, who now runs his own yoga school and teaches yoga to sports teams like the Waratahs. "It creates less chance of injury because it gives you more range with your body."

Peak's yoga school, Power Living, teaches at least 2000 people a week in Sydney, Brisbane and Canberra, and a hefty 40 percent of them are men. His isn't the only studio reaching out to men, though. In Manly, the Lunge Yoga & Health School has been running yoga courses for surfers for the past six years, and 95 percent of students are men. "Men that would never have imagined doing yoga, men of all walks of life and age groups, come along to the classes," says teacher Louisa Kolega.

Chris Samuel, 28, is a Sydney-based photographer who started doing weekly yoga classes at an inner-west studio a year ago. He had previously been recommended yoga by his osteopath, who told him

STRIKE A POSE

There's a lot more to yoga than the old Downward Dog. Hundreds more poses, in fact, ranging from gentle stretches you can do every day to arm balances that take years to achieve. Take a look at this smattering of poses to get an idea of what your body's in for...

Bridge Pose

A beginner's back bend that strengthens the legs and hips and opens the chest. Lie with knees bent, exhaling as you lift your buttocks until thighs are almost parallel with the floor. Slowly draw your shoulder blades together and clasp your hands.

Difficulty Factor ■■■■■



Upward-Facing Dog Pose

A strong pose that will strengthen the spine, wrists and arms. Lie with your hands at your waist. Exhale, push down on your hands and lift up torso, activating your core.

Difficulty Factor ■■■■■



Camel Pose

An advanced pose that stretches the entire front of your body. Kneel with your knees hip-width apart. Place palms on the soles of your feet and push pelvis forward. Push down on hands, lengthen the chest and drop head back.

Difficulty Factor ■■■■■



Cat Pose

A gentle stretch for the back, torso and neck. Start in a table-top position, with wrists in line with shoulders, the knees below hips and eyes gazing at floor. Exhale as you round your spine to the ceiling, relaxing your neck muscles.

Difficulty Factor ■■■■■



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YOGA TIP

Breathe, man! It's common for people starting yoga to hold their breath because they're concentrating so much, causing their muscles to tire quickly. As a general rule, inhale through your nose and let your diaphragm and belly expand.



Poses like the Crane strengthen all major muscle groups at once.

he had the "hips of a 40-year-old", thanks to a stint as a semi-professional BMX rider. "After I started yoga, I felt that my body was becoming aligned," Samuel says. "My back was straighter when I sat, I could feel all my core starting to tone, as well as muscles where I didn't think I had any." Samuel says that yoga also gave him the flexibility to touch his toes for the first time in his life, which has helped him with the karate training that he's recently started doing.

The beauty of yoga is that it strengthens your body at the same time it conditions and aligns it. "Yoga is all power-to-weight ratio training, it's all your own body strength," Peak says. "Men are realising that yoga requires so much strength

work, and they really admire it in other men. For instance, if you see a bloke bench pressing you might think he's strong, but see him do a handstand with perfect form and you know he's got a rare kind of strength."

YOGA 101

So, what is yoga? Because yoga has existed for thousands of years, lots of different types have evolved, so it's hard to answer that question definitively. But the yoga that is mainly taught in Western countries is called Hatha yoga, and it's based on a system of physical poses (or "asanas") that aim to purify your body—in other words, poses that make your body strong, aligned, supple and energised, and that make you more aware and relaxed in your own skin.

There are hundreds of poses in yoga, and they can be divided into these categories: twisting poses, standing poses, arm balancing poses, core-strengthening poses, backbends, forward bends and inversions. They're often named after animals or things they resemble: Downward Dog, Cobra, Warrior. If that's all sounding a bit weird, then

you'll be comforted to know that there are plenty of poses with completely straightforward names like Handstand, Low Lunge and Plank—that's right, the plank that you've been doing in toning sessions for the past five years is actually yoga.

You'll find that the poses that feel the most challenging are usually the ones most useful for your body. Forward-bending poses are great for runners, because they open up your hips as well as lengthening hamstrings, calves and glutes, while standing poses and lunges are brilliant for improving a new surfer's balance. Arm balances and backbends are excellent for strengthening the upper body.

A yoga class goes for 60 to 90 minutes. It will usually begin with some breathing exercises, and then your teacher will lead you through a variety of poses, depending on the skill level of the class. Yoga is done barefoot and on mats that give cushioning and grip. Teachers will perform "adjustments" on you while in a pose, helping you to be properly aligned. Classes will often finish in a relaxation pose where you lie down on your back with your palms facing up, allowing your muscles to relax and focusing on your breath. This is called "Shavasana", or Corpse Pose, and you will often stay in it for 10 to 15 minutes. If you enjoy Shavasana, you'd probably get a lot out of meditation.

It's important to note that within Hatha yoga there are dozens of sub-styles, all with their own name. Each one is based on the same system of poses, they just implement them in different ways. Iyengar yoga, for instance, holds a single yoga pose for up to a minute, and uses cushions, straps, chairs and wooden blocks to keep the body aligned. Ashtanga yoga and Power yoga, on the other hand, are more dynamic styles, flowing quickly from one pose to another (this flow is called "vinyasa") and synchronising the breath with movement. These styles give you a cardiovascular workout as well. For the ultimate in sweat-inducing yoga, though, there's Bikram yoga, which is done in 40-degree studios.

GETTING STARTED

The first step is to find the right style and environment for you, so try out a few different places, including your gym. Many yoga schools will allow you to sit in on a class, or they'll have a special offer for first-timers, where you get a free first lesson or pay a flat rate for unlimited classes in a time period. A good criteria for choosing a class is asking yourself: do I feel comfortable here? Is my teacher properly qualified? Will I get one-on-one attention?

Samuel found that going to a smaller yoga class, of between six and 15 people, helped him as a beginner. "There's greater attention to detail," he says. "I'd have found it hard to concentrate in a big class."

A good yoga teacher will have gone through a teacher-training course that requires several years of study, and will practise yoga themselves every day. They should be able to clearly explain what's going on in your body with each pose, and give easier and harder alternatives.

That being said, there are several things that you need to do as a student to get the most out of yoga. Most importantly, don't be cocky—start with the beginner class. Also, speak up—tell your teacher about any injuries or stiffness you have before you begin and let them know if a pose is causing you trouble. Finally, don't compare yourself to anyone in the class, just concentrate on your own body.

Like any form of exercise, the more yoga you do, the greater effect it's going to have. So while going to one class a week will adequately complement other sporting activities you do, Duncan Peak recommends going at least twice a week to see some tangible benefits quickly. "I say to a lot of clients that yoga is like doing a degree in your body—it takes about three years to completely understand it," Peak laughs, "but within two to three months you can see massive changes." ■

Liz Graham is the editor of Australian Yoga Journal.

Shoulder Stand

This pose strengthens the back and stimulates the thyroid and pituitary glands. Lie with palms face down and knees bent. Curl knees towards face, lifting your torso, walking your hands up till they support the mid back. Straighten legs up to ceiling.

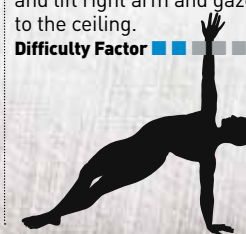
Difficulty Factor ■■■■■



Side-Plank Pose

Strengthens the arms and core and legs while improving balance. Start in a plank, with wrists underneath shoulders. Shift weight to left arm and roll onto left foot, stacking right on top. Activate core and lift right arm and gaze to the ceiling.

Difficulty Factor ■■■■■



Lotus Pose

This looks simple but requires a lot of flexibility in hips, knees and ankles. Sit with legs straight out. Bend one knee, grasp the foot with both hands and place on top of opposite thigh. Repeat on other leg. Keep knees on ground and soles of feet facing up.

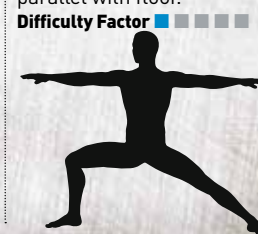
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Warrior II Pose

Strengthens and stretches legs and ankles. Start in standing position with feet parallel. Step left leg out 1.5m in a lunge with knee above heel, foot pointing out 90 degrees and aligned with right heel. Raise arm parallel with floor.

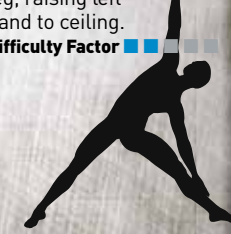
Difficulty Factor ■■■■■



Triangle Pose

Stretches the chest, hips, groin and hamstrings. Step right leg out 1.5m with foot pointing out 90 degrees. Turn left thigh so that kneecap is in line with ankle, exhale and place right hand on lower leg, raising left hand to ceiling.

Difficulty Factor ■■■■■



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