

BOYS TO ZEN

It builds strength, busts stress — and might even boost your sperm count. No wonder men are taking up yoga, says *Edwin Smith*

ILLUSTRATION BY SHONAGH RAE

I've done this a thousand times before. Standing on my mat, with my head hanging down by my knees, before slowly and purposefully straightening up — 'one vertebrae at a time' — has become routine since I started doing yoga a few years ago. Today, though, as I lift my head and take stock of my surroundings, something is different.

Until recently I would have been the only man in this class — or, at a push, one of two or three. Back when I was still playing rugby I tried to convince team-mates that doing yoga would help to ward off injury and aid flexibility, but my entreaties fell on cauliflower ears. In this studio, however, a hot yoga class at Triyoga in Camden, it's a different story: a nine-to-eight split.

Maybe it shouldn't come as a surprise. Hollywood actors such as Jake Gyllenhaal and Matthew McConaughey have been at it for a while, and after Ryan Giggs put the longevity of his Premiership career down to doing downward dogs, other sportsmen have started to fall into alignment, too. Earlier this year Chelsea boss Antonio Conte sang yoga's praises, LeBron James has taught yoga to a class of NBA hopefuls, and Anthony Joshua has revealed he's counting on yoga to prolong his career.

'Recovery of the mind and body is the most important thing for performance in professional sport, and yoga gives that,' says Vinay Menon, a wellness consultant who

works with a top London Premiership football team. Now, the same philosophy is trickling down to weekend warriors like you, me and the future king of England. Not even his tight white trousers could stop the Duke of Cambridge from putting chakras before chukkas when he limbered up with yoga poses before a recent polo match.

Triyoga founder Jonathan Sattin says that back in 2015 men accounted for between 11 and 27 per cent of attendees. In 2018 the figure oscillates between 25 and 50 per cent. So great is the demand that he is launching a series of classes geared specifically towards men, including a Yoga for Jocks workshop focused on sports-related flexibility taught by Chris Miller, who has trained Nicole Kidman.

Triyoga isn't the only company to note the male appetite for asanas. Heartcore and Yoga4Men offer men-only classes, while LA-born London resident Michael James Wong set up the Boys of Yoga collective to make it 'more accessible to dudes. 'More men are coming to yoga to escape the stress in their lives,' says Wong.

Lululemon, the brand synonymous with high-end yoga wear, reports that numbers of male shoppers on its website in the third

quarter of 2017 were up 21 per cent on the previous year and that its men's department now accounts for 20 per cent of overall sales (up from 17 per cent in 2015). Discerning male yogis can even buy a \$1,000 mat, made out of NFL football leather, from Baller, and shop at Ohmme, a yoga-inspired label in north London.

What's going on? For one thing there's a growing awareness of the health benefits. Yoga poses promote blood flow to the pelvic area, which may have the power to boost sperm count. Meanwhile, an evaluation of 35 studies, published in the journal *Alternative Medical Review*, suggested that yoga can relieve stress and anxiety.

And as sports stars and celebrities jump on the bandwagon 'gender stereotypes are being broken down in turbo mode', says Matt 'The Pillar' Miller. A bodybuilder turned yogi, Miller was among the first to persuade British men to give inner peace a chance when he launched Broga in 2013.

'As it happens,' says Pete Cherry, a teacher at west London yoga studio Yoga West, 'Hindu holy texts suggest that until the 20th century yoga was probably 90 per cent male dominated.' So its status as 'something that women do' is a relatively new phenomenon. But as hashtags such as #girlswholift gain traction on social media, both men and women are letting go of the idea that sport or activity should be a gendered thing. 'Thankfully, says Chris Miller, 'we're evolving.'

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