

Real Men Practice Yoga

By Travis Ronk

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I've noticed in yoga classes and Yogafit Teacher Training's that there are mostly women in classes, and even fewer men teaching yoga. Don't get me wrong, I'm not complaining about being one of the few men doing yoga with a room full of beautiful women. Knowing the benefits yoga offers, I ask myself why are there not more men doing it, they need yoga as much, if not more than, women. My wife is a Yogafit Trainer and I am a new Yogafit teacher. I am commonly asked with amazement, "How did she talk you into doing yoga?" Steph is commonly asked, "How did you get him to do yoga"? In most cases, these women have been trying for months or years to get their husbands, boyfriends, friend, brother, father, or whoever, to do it. I feel compelled to tell my story because I was one of those reluctant husbands, not so long ago.

I didn't fall in love with yoga overnight. In fact, I didn't like the first couple of classes I took. It took about 4 years for me to come to love yoga. I cannot tell you the secret recipe for getting your guy onto the mat and loving yoga. We each have our own journey -- he has to do it on his own. I can share with you my story, how my wife introduced me to yoga, and what yoga has done for me in my life. Be patient; and, remember, if and when he does come to love yoga, he will thank you.

One of the greatest gifts my wife has given me, besides two darling daughters, is introducing me to yoga. She was patient and persistent and made all of the opportunities available for me to do yoga, if and when I wanted to, without trying to force me or pressure me to do it.

First I need to tell you about my wife, Stephanie. She's a personal trainer and taught all the club group exercise activities, kick-boxing, step, spinning, etc. She had been doing yoga for years and loved it. My view was that it was another girl activity, not something that real men do. Real men play football and lift free weight and get their exercise doing triathlons -- a slight exaggeration, but you get the picture. Steph classified me as a "weekend warrior" -- my idea of the perfect life was working hard making money Monday through Friday and playing hard on the weekends, sort of an adrenaline junkie. I grew up playing competitive sports like football, baseball, racing motorcycles, and martial arts. As I matured into my late twenties and we started our family, I found new weekend athletic passions such as windsurfing in the Columbia Gorge, snow skiing, mountain biking, and running. I loved my weekends. The stress of owning my own business and having a family all became much easier if I could just get away for a few hours on a weekend and be at one with nature on my mountain bike or skimming the water on my sailboard.

Skiing with some buddies one weekend (who were in their mid 30s) the conversation came up about how when they turned 30 their bodies started falling apart and everything started to hurt. Wouldn't happen to me, I told them. I had just turned 30 and felt fine. I don't want to admit that they were right, but shortly after my 31st birthday, the mindbody stress of my "adrenaline junkie" lifestyle began to take its toll on my body. Injuries seemed to be a weekly occurrence, keeping me away from work and the things I loved to do on the weekends. I'd get cranky and depressed.

During this time, Steph was getting more into yoga, loving it, and experiencing some good transformations of her own. She talked me into signing up for an "8-week Introduction to Yoga" class at a local studio. I think I went to two classes. I was so bored. We mostly laid there with our feet up against the wall, or in child's pose. "Where's the fun in this?" I thought. I stayed away from yoga for a few months. Steph talked me into signing up for another, more advanced, 8-week class. She assured me that there would be more movement and some strengthening. I thought, "Cool, some action." I went to the class and started to like it. Still, it did not make it a priority. I wasn't yet in touch with my body enough to know that I was getting some good out of it (even though I was just doing it a couple times a month).

On a weekend ski trip to Mount Bachelor, I started feeling low back pain the first two days and wasn't going to let it ruin my last day of skiing. I thought Icy Hot and Advil would get me through the day, my back thought otherwise. On our second run through the moguls, my back locked up on me. It felt like someone stabbed me in the low back with a kitchen knife. It was all I could do to stop. I couldn't breathe, talk or move. I did get a very painful ride down the mountain in a ski patrol sled. Thankfully, the X-rays and MRI results showed no major damage to the discs. Some seriously irritated nerve endings in my sacrum were causing muscle spasms in my low back. I later came to learn that the muscles in my low back had been weakening due to inactivity from sitting at my desk during the week and were then being shocked into overuse on the weekends. The back spasms occurred frequently over the next few years. Usually, the pain was so intense that I couldn't walk or drive

for a few days. They were occurring more and more often and the smallest things would cause them: bending over to put on my socks, playing with the kids, doing yard work, sitting. My weekend passions were out of the question. I was feeling frustrated and depressed. I felt like someone had taken something very special away from me. I felt like a 100-year-old man at the age of 34 -- limping around, not able to turn my head. I tried everything to improve my back, physical therapy, chiropractic adjustments, acupuncture, massage, -- they all worked and felt great short term, but nothing was really curing the problem. What I didn't know was that, what I thought was my greatest weakness, would turn into my greatest strength.

Steph was teaching a lot of yoga classes and was encouraging me to do yoga regularly. One night, she got a sitter for the kids and asked that I take her class and see the new club she was teaching at. I was interested to see where she was spending all of her time at nights away from home, so I agreed and that became a regular weekly thing for us. I really had to watch my low back and modify every pose. This was quite humbling for a competitive guy, but Steph would encourage us all by saying things like "yoga is not about competition". I felt assured that nobody was judging me. By this time, I liked yoga and was beginning to feel some of the benefits. My back was getting a little better, but I still would get a back spasm, at least, once a month. With yoga, I was recovering quicker, only a couple of days instead of a week.

Three years ago, for our anniversary, Steph wanted to go to a week-long yoga retreat on a 350 acre ranch in the mountains in New Mexico with a local West Seattle yoga teacher, Janet Brugge. I was enticed because there were trails there and I could bring my mountain bike. She really wanted to do it, so we made a deal that we would do whatever I wanted to do the next year, if we would do the yoga thing together this year. "Yeah!" I thought, "we're going windsurfing in the Gorge next year!" We had a great experience in New Mexico -- great food, a good fun group of people, and a beautiful landscape. Doing yoga three hours a day, five days in a row was great for my back. I was beginning to really like yoga and I began to make it a priority in my life. Some real improvement was happening with my low back. However, I was not pain free yet. I began to accept the idea that I was just getting older, I would not be able to do things like I used to do, and that I would probably have to wear a back brace and take pain killers from time to time. I had gotten back into doing the occasional "weekend warrior" adventures, but the fear of the low back pain took a lot of the fun out of it.

Yoga changed my life dramatically in December 2001. Ski season was here and the kids wanted to ski more, so we bought season passes. I looked forward to skiing, but dreaded the inevitable pain of my low back screaming at me and the long recovery time. I was still regularly doing physical therapy, massage, chiropractics and I desperately wanted to fix my back before the season started. I even considered sitting out a year and having surgery. Steph's yoga classes were very successful and she was still pitching me on the benefits of a regular yoga practice. As a last ditch effort, I FINALLY decided to take her advice and try more yoga. She put together a few poses that I could do each morning when I woke up. I would just flop out of bed and spend at least 5 minutes stretching and strengthening my back by doing cat cow, spinal balance and pigeon, no problem I can do that. I committed to 5 minutes, no less. After only a few weeks, I was feeling great improvement. My five-minute commitment turned into fifteen minutes some days, then, thirty-five minutes and, sometimes, one-hour. I began incorporating more poses [CAT/COW, SPINAL BALANCE, FLOWING BRIDGE, KNEES TO CHEST, CHILDS, DOWN DOG, SUN SALUTATIONS, BUTTERFLY, CAMEL, AND PIGEON (holding each side for as long as comfortable 2-5 minutes)]

I skied thirty-five days last season with very little back pain. I was skiing harder and faster than I had in years, many days racing my brother to the bottom of the hill. I can now mountain bike, windsurf, do yard work, play with the kids, run, sit, lift heavy things, and put on my socks with NO back pain. I credit my daily yoga practice for giving me back my young, strong body. And, for giving me back the gift of doing the things that I have a passion for doing. I credit Steph for giving me yoga. Thank you again, Steph.

As you can imagine by now, I love yoga. Steph has been teaching Yogafit Teacher Trainings for awhile and has heard so many great stories of how yoga has helped others. She thought it would be a good idea if I came to a Level 1 Teacher Training. We have a home studio and sometimes Steph needs a sub, so she really wanted me to teach. I wasn't so sure. We would send the kids to the grandparents. I thought it would be like a mini vacation. Plus I thought it would be interesting to see what she does all of those weekends away from home. However, I didn't really think I would be interested in being a yoga teacher. The Yogafit system made teaching yoga seem easier than I thought it would be. It was challenging, but the Training is designed to be fun, interactive and help you build confidence -- it was fun! I have just finished my community service for Level 1. I took the Level 2 Training in September and plan to take Level 3 later this month. I am teaching four classes a week now. I love it -- I am totally hooked on, and believe in, yoga.

We have found yoga retreats to be great growth experiences. For our 10th anniversary, in August, we attended a Yoga Bootcamp/Teacher Training in Maya Tulum, Mexico. Of course, the word "bootcamp" interested me. Steph was open to anything "yoga". Again, there were mostly fit, healthy women (guys, you are missing out!). Seriously, it was the one of the most physically and mentally/emotionally challenging and exhilarating experiences I have ever had. It was an incredible experience for us as a couple. Being there as a couple, while having individual experiences, compounded our personal growth because we were there to support each other.

Today, I am completely committed to yoga. My daily practice has grown to at least five minutes of meditation and breathwork, ten minutes of yoga asanas, and five minutes of journaling. I get up early and let it take me. Most mornings, I practice for over one hour. I am much more centered and focused at work. I am able to think more clearly and get less distracted. I can control the way I react to things around me much better. I'm open to what is real in my life and what really matters. Most of all, I feel great. My daily practice is like having a daily massage. I have learned how to listen to my body and give it what it needs. Sensations are your body's way of communicating. When you are not aware and not listening, our bodies speak louder with pain, until you hear. Yoga teaches us the language of the body, so that we know what it needs.

Looking back, I don't know why it took me so long to get hooked on this yoga thing? Just think of what I could have done had I found it earlier in life. How much better of an athlete could I have been in high school and college? How much better of a student, entrepreneur, husband, father, friend, could I have been? That is all history and doesn't matter, but what does matter is what I can do with it right here, right now, in this moment, and in this breath. I strongly believe that yoga is necessary for every body. And I am so thankful to YogaFit for sending the good message of yoga to the regular people.

Well, it's too late to make this long story short, but, my advice for women wanting to get their significant others into yoga is first to start a daily yoga practice for yourself and you will become a better, more patient, partner. When you begin to experience your own transformation, he will become more interested in the change in you. Make it easy for him to fit a yoga class into his schedule, completely stress-free. If you are a teacher, tell him it is really important to you that he take your class and see what you do. Then, pick-up a class or sub a class that fits into his schedule. He'll feel proud of you, and want to take more of your classes. Attend a yoga retreat together somewhere you both are interested in. If he's not into that -- negotiate -- offering to do what ever he wants next time. If he has old injuries, is out of shape, or just resistant to your suggestions, be patient. He may need to hear it from other people as well -- show him this article!

My advice to the reluctant man is; let go of your ego and just try it a couple of times with a truly open mind. See where it takes you. What do you have to lose? You might not love it at first. However, know that it is an extremely powerful tool to transform your life in whatever way you need it to. You may not realize how important it is at first and that's ok. Be patient with the process. Relax and enjoy the journey. If your lady teaches, go take one of her classes. It will make her feel good to have you interested in what she does. Teaching yoga is more difficult than it looks, be proud of the job she does, and respect her for it. You will soon see how she is changing the lives of the students who take her class. You will be proud of the respect and the gratitude she gets from her students. Maybe, you're scared to try it...that's ok, you don't have to be super flexible and able to do the splits, or bend your body into a pretzel, to get the benefits of yoga. Nor do you have to be able to do the perfect triangle pose, or be able to touch your toes. You don't even need to be in good shape or look good, the lights are usually dimmed and nobody's looking at you anyway. Everyone is too worried that everyone else is looking at them. Every body is different. Men's bodies especially are tight because we have bigger muscles and different hormones (thank goodness!) than women do. With YogaFit style yoga, your muscles will become stronger, more flexible, you'll recover quicker from injuries and soreness, and even digestion will improve. Your "mojo" will improve, you'll shed some of the "body by Budweiser". You will begin to see a new you, like when you were younger, only you are smarter this time. Remember that yoga is a journey with no end, and everyone is at a different place in his or her journey. Those who have begun the journey understand that and respect where you are. No one will expect you to be where he or she is right now, continue your journey and you will be there when you are ready. Also, understand that yoga can be a very challenging physical workout, it's more than just laying around stretching, you will probably be sore after the first few times. Yoga is not about competition, we move and breathe in yoga, and listen to what our bodies are telling us. Pain is a sensation that our body uses to speak to us, yoga teaches us the language of the body so that we can interpret what it needs, bringing awareness, and healing. Yoga is over six thousand years old and was started by men in India. In the early days of yoga, women were not allowed to do yoga.

My story is not uncommon. Pain was a great motivator for me and yoga is the perfect tool for healing. There are countless stories of how yoga has changed people's lives and healed lifetime injuries, chronic pains, emotional suffering and internal disorders for men and women. Yoga really is for every body, so just try it. Yoga is becoming very popular, but is still sometimes misunderstood. It is simply about getting to know your body, mind and spirit. It's all good.

Namaste'
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