



YOGA STRETCHES BEYOND OLD LIMITS TO NEW FANS

Aging, the economy send more to the mat

By Helena Oliviero / Sunday, March 08, 2009



Allen Sullivan/AJC Yoga trainer Lori Sugarman works with children at The Goddard School in Marietta. Sugarman says yoga offers the children, from 2 to 4 years old, the 'seeds of balance, coordination, flexibility and strength.'

Yoga for rockers. And yoga for people who use rockers.

Hot yoga. Cold yoga. Stone yoga. Yoga for moms and babies and yoga for guys too stiff to stretch.

Even as the economy twists us all in knots, this mind-body discipline created millennia ago in India appears to be thriving, with more kinds of classes offering new adherents a soothing respite from today's troubles.

Yoga, an ancient Eastern discipline weaving together a series of static poses held over a period of time with controlled breathing and meditative focus, took off in earnest in the United States about two decades ago. Until recent years, though, yoga devotees seemed to be mostly women who looked like classically trained ballet dancers on vegan diets.

But as celebrities and baby boomers began turning to it to help combat aging, the popularity of yoga exploded. These days, classes are taught everywhere,

from dozens of yoga studios across metro Atlanta to senior centers to public schools to the Georgia Aquarium. And in many cases, the number of rubber mats are on the rise, with many studios saying their numbers are steady or even up.

"People always say at the beginning of the year: I am going to get healthy," said Ann Ritter, a longtime yoga instructor who teaches at Callanwolde Fine Arts Center and at a new studio in Dunwoody. She has seen her enrollment double during the past several months. "But this year, there's an extra incentive. People thinks it's absolutely essential to stay calm and reduce stress."

Larry Rosenberg, training specialist for Arizona-based Dahn Yoga (which has six studios in metro Atlanta) says emerging research demonstrating a connection between stress and many health woes including heart problems and high blood pressure also has helped buoy yoga into mainstream.

Crunch Fitness — which has two locations in metro Atlanta — offers 39 varieties of yoga, including stone yoga (incorporating crystals), buff yoga (focused on strength training), even a naptime yoga. The club will soon unveil an "antigravity yoga class" that uses a soft, hammock-like trapeze to mimic a floating-like feeling.

Mats are mobbed

"It's my time to unwind," said 25-year-old Chris Iglinski, who works in real estate and started going to yoga about three months ago. "I run and go on a bike and push myself physically, but with yoga, it's more internal, and after a class, I definitely feel more relaxed."

About 16 million Americans now practice yoga, and it's estimated almost \$6 billion was spent on yoga classes and products in 2008, almost double the amount spent in 2003.

Even those without cash to spare are turning to the discipline long championed for uncluttering the mind and providing a feeling of serenity. According to Yahoo.com, the number of online searches for “Free Yoga Exercises Online” was up 59 percent during a recent 30-day period.

Improving overall health was the No. 1 reason cited by people practicing yoga in early 2008, according to a Yoga Journal study released recently. In 2003, the most common incentive was to increase flexibility.

Seeking peace of mind

At the Yoga Hive on Cleveland Avenue in southwest Atlanta, owner Mechelle Davis has watched a steady stream of newbies walk through the thick, cream-colored curtains and take a seat in a room decorated with a waterfall scene.



Allen Sullivan/AJc Chris Iglinski, 25, attends a yoga class at Crunch gym in Atlanta. He says he's using yoga to gain flexibility for an upcoming triathlon and acknowledges, 'It's my time to unwind.'

Some of the yoga newbies include 46-year-old Renard Mills, a former college football player who checked out a yoga presentation on a whim last year.

“At first, I thought, ‘This is just stretching and a whole bunch of ladies.’ I just didn’t see how I could get any benefit out of it,” he said.

When he started, Mills, who stands more than 6 feet and weighs 270 pounds, couldn’t do a basic Lotus pose, which involves sitting on the floor with legs crossed.

But the personal chef, who says he is facing a major slowdown in business these days, said he remembered feeling more at ease after the class at Yoga Hive. He now goes twice a week, clad in gray basketball pants and toting a purple yoga mat.

“I used to be a worrier, but I don’t do that anymore,” he said. “I just breathe. . . . I walk this earth differently now.” In his family budget, he said, “yoga” is the second line item, after food.



Allen Sullivan/AJc Sugarman mixes yoga and language in a children's class: 'They learn to use words instead of tantrums.'

Fun and flexibility

At a children’s bookstore in Decatur, the class “Reading Comes Alive With Yoga” does just that. On a recent Monday morning, a group of preschoolers barked like dogs and did the downward dog pose every time “George,” star of Jules Feiffer’s book “Bark George,” barked in the book.

And at The Goddard School® in Marietta on Providence Road, groups of preschoolers erupt like volcanoes and yell out, “go away sadness.” They also take deep, sweet breaths from empty cinnamon jars.

Yvonne Beazer, who is 70, is glad to see so many youngsters get into yoga. She has been practicing for more than 30 years and credits it with allowing her to dance salsa. It also soothes the aches and pains of aging and helps in coping with stressful situations. Her Stockbridge home was recently burglarized and she could barely wait to do swan dives at her Monday morning class.

“I just knew it would make feel better and calm me down,” she said. “And it did.”

And while surveys show that achieving greater flexibility is no longer a top reason for yoga, she says it definitely should not be dismissed.

“My husband likes it because I am more flexible,” she said. “And let’s just say it makes our house a happy home.”