



# The Titans turn to yoga

Yoga and rugby league may seem unlikely allies, but thanks to Billy Johnstone – one of Australia’s leading National Rugby League trainers and conditioners – yoga is part of the regular training schedule for the newest team in the NRL, the Gold Coast Titans. Greg Wythes talks to Billy Johnstone and Santina Giardina about how the Titans are responding to their yoga regime.

**B**illy Johnstone is one of a new breed of conditioners and trainers in the hard world of modern rugby league. His approach contains all the components of the professional trainer – though his players would say he works them harder – but he has one further ingredient: yoga.

Billy has a long history in sport and fitness. He trained initially as a boxer and had his first fight at the age of eight. In his late teens and early twenties he was a top ranked light middle weight boxer, with 26 professional matches to his credit. He then played 155 first grade rugby league games, mainly for the Canterbury Bulldogs, retiring in the early 1990s. During his playing career he was renowned for his training ethic, an ethic that kept him at peak fitness and allowed him to continue in the game well into his thirties. Billy moved directly from playing to training and conditioning, and has worked for a number of clubs including the North Queensland Cowboys and now the Titans. He is also the current conditioner for the Australian and the Queensland State of Origin teams.

Billy is a man working at the top of his chosen field and into this field he decided to bring a young, blonde, fine-boned female yoga teacher. The rugby league world is decidedly male dominated. It has a reputation – rightly or wrongly – for an old-fashioned, pre-feminist attitude to women. At worst it is misogynistic; at best blokey. It is not a world where women are normally accepted, and even more rarely into the

training sphere. So when Billy introduced Ashtanga yoga teacher Santina Giardina to the Titans players, he must have known he was taking a calculated risk. It is a measure of their respect for him that they were prepared to give yoga and Santina a chance, but it was not a willing and open acceptance.

“In the beginning they didn’t like it,” says Santina. “They complained. They moaned during the asana work. ‘We don’t get paid to stretch,’ they

balance. A kind of yin/yang thing, if you like. It also helps to get away from the testosterone-fuelled, macho approach of the modern game. But I like to phase it in and out, and I try not to force it down their throats. We do 10 to 11 training sessions a week; things like swimming, cardio, endurance, weights, and so on. This keeps them fresh, but yoga helps to keep the range of motion in the joints and I find they have fewer soft tissue injuries, especially in the hamstrings, the

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would say. It was tough for them. Their bodies are stiff. They found the concentration hard. I had to struggle to keep them involved. And if Billy wasn’t there, they wouldn’t participate.”

Billy had introduced his players to Iyengar style ropes in their home gym at the Runaway Bay Sports Centre at Bond University. He used the ropes as a means of supported stretching to lengthen muscle groups, particularly after a weight training session. But a structured freestyle class was a big step up.

“The main thing for me,” says Billy, “is that yoga is the direct opposite of what they’re doing 90 percent of the time. It’s about bringing in some

quads and the calves. I’ve been using yoga with all the teams I’ve worked with. I used it with the Cowboys when I was there, and some guys embrace it more than others. Some are just more lateral in their thinking. It can be a hard sell to the players because of the image yoga has, but most clubs give me a free rein.”

Billy came to yoga in the early 1990s and went to Iyengar classes twice a week for 12 years in Sydney. Once he began working with the Titans on the Gold Coast, he began attending Santina’s classes. He found the Ashtanga style, with its flowing vinyasa approach, its strong physical demands and its emphasis on the breath, gave a new



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dimension to both his own practice and to what he could offer his players.

“When I first discovered yoga I thought: ‘How stupid have I been?’ It just seemed to offer so much,” he says. “I had started sports very young and towards the end of my career I was looking for something else. I had a hip replacement and yoga helped me a lot. And it wasn’t just the physical side of it. It really helped to give clarity and balance to where I was going.”

Santina’s approach with the team began with the basics and she modified it to suit the culture she was working in. “I don’t use Sanskrit terms and we don’t do any chanting,” she says. “They want to keep moving on all the time but I bring them back to the mind and the breath.

One pose and then another, keeping the focus on their own bodies and not comparing themselves to anyone else in the class. I work on things that will help to open up their bodies, like half lunges. And I try to give them things that will break it up a little for them, like a Headstand or a Handstand or Bakasana (crane pose), to challenge them and give them a sense of achievement. But I make them work. I have a similar work ethic to Billy and I think that’s why we get on.”

Professional rugby league players do not give their respect easily and they are not easily impressed, but slowly things began to change. Santina started to notice subtle differences in the way the team approached her class.

“As you’d expect, they are very competitive,” she says, “especially at the beginning of a session. But as the class progresses they begin to gel better. They’re more connected and there’s more sense of community. They groan till about half way through, and then that drops away. By the end of the session they are much more co-operative and willing to help. And then after one class, Luke Swain, one of the forwards, said; ‘Thank you, yoga’, on the way out and it became a kind of refrain. Now they all say it as they leave.”

Before long some of the players began to stay behind to ask for specific help: “How does my body work?” How does the hip rotate properly? I need some postures for my hips. I need to open them.” Their interest began to grow and their comments to Santina reflected a budding awareness of the processes within their bodies. “I don’t feel as compacted or compressed.” “I feel younger.” “I feel lighter.” And this is exactly the kind of response that Billy had been hoping for when he introduced yoga to his players.

“Rugby league is a collision sport,” he says. “It’s a painful occupation. You have to prepare to be hurt. I find the more props you can use the better because of this collision aspect. The doctors will tell you that the injuries the players sustain are similar to those of a car crash victim. Yoga can help a lot to reduce this effect, and I use it to try to minimize injuries that can often affect players for the rest of their lives. I’m confident that down the track it will be a normal part of every team’s program.”

But for this year’s Titans team, yoga has been something very new, and for a lot of the players the results have been more than they expected. Three months into the program a core group of players began to attend Santina’s classes independently because they wanted more yoga than they were getting as part of the club’s normal training.

“It’s been great,” says David Myles, one of the club’s senior players. “I’d never done yoga before but now I feel so much better. As a rugby league player there are not many times when you’re not sore, except after yoga and then the

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next day. I’m 30, so I’m getting towards the end of my career, but it’s taken five years off the way I feel. As an elite athlete it gets you thinking about things. I’m much more aware of my body now.”

At 21, centre Brett Delaney is one of the club’s younger players. For much of the season he has carried a back injury and has found that yoga with Santina has made all the difference in the management of his pain.

“She understands our job and tailors the stretches and the postures to suit us as rugby league players,” says Brett. “I see

yoga as a means of long term maintenance for my injury. It has made a big difference in relieving the tension in my lower back, my hamstrings and my glutes. I’m beginning to see how I can relax into the postures and go deeper and better. I understand my body in a different way. I don’t think another yoga teacher could do what she does for us. She’s really good at her job. I go every week and I’ll be going back next year too.”

“Santina keeps reminding us not to strain,” continues David Myles. “A big part of it is the controlled way we do the

breathing. She chips away at us to relax our faces and not to clench our teeth, but at the same time she pushes you and she watches you carefully. She makes sure you work, but properly, with the right approach. I recommend all my friends to come to her classes. I think yoga could play a really big role in rugby league.”

The impact of relaxation, and specifically Shavasana (Corpse pose), on the players is one that both Billy and Santina see as critically important. For Billy this is in the carry-over to the mental preparation for each game and the mental strength of the players. For Santina it is in bringing a new psychological facet to the players that deepens and invigorates their experience of yoga.

“In Shavasana they have a taste of ‘no mind,’” says Santina, “and they crave it now. It’s new to them and they don’t know how to respond to it. They are shifting, inside, to a more internal sense. When they work on the mat, when they breathe and they focus and work with intent, and then bring all that to Shavasana, the deeper they go. They probably don’t fully understand what’s

going on but there’s a knowing in their eyes. I love working with them and seeing that. They have come so far in a few months. I’m really happy with their progress.”

“One of the big problems facing players today is how to get themselves up to play each week,” says Billy. “There is so much emotional pressure put into rugby league and so much pressure on the players to perform. Yoga can give them a different mental approach. Some guys have played the whole game in the dressing shed before they go on. Yoga helps by relaxing them so that they don’t use up too much energy prior to the game. And it’s a big plus for me when players start taking responsibility for their own training by going to Santina’s classes.”

For Billy, yoga is no short term experiment. As Australia’s leading trainer and conditioner in his code, he views yoga as an integral part of the training program. It is a holistic approach, based on a much broader perspective than simply winning games, though this too is important. It recognises and addresses aspects of player

health and fitness that are not normally addressed in most clubs. It reflects an innate care and concern for his players as people who will have a life after rugby league, as well as trying to get the best from them during their professional careers. It is an approach based on Billy’s own experience of the benefits of yoga over many years of practice.

Will yoga give a team the competitive advantage to take it to the top of the competition? It seems unlikely, given the range of factors at play at this level of elite sport. It does seem more likely, however, that yoga could provide a team with an important edge in preparing for the unique demands of the NRL. And Billy Johnstone has brought his team to that edge.

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