



Tom Carroll.

TOM CARROLL IS ONE OF AUSTRALIA'S GREATEST SURFING CHAMPIONS. HIS INTRODUCTION TO YOGA BY TEACHER SIMON BUTTONSHAW WAS ONE OF THE TURNING POINTS IN TOM'S CAREER. BOTH MEN SEE AN INTRINSIC CONNECTION BETWEEN YOGA AND SURFING AND IN THIS ARTICLE DISCUSS THEIR VIEWS AND EXPERIENCES WITH GREG WYTHES.

Surfing photographs: Taken by Jeff Hornbaker, courtesy of Quiksilver.
Posture photographs: Courtney Raynor

During the 1980s Tom Carroll cut a path of achievement, innovation and principle across the world of professional surfing, pushing the sport's boundaries and accelerating its evolution, and in doing so setting standards that are still held as benchmarks today. In 1983 he won the Association of Surfing Professionals world title and held it again in 1984 with his trademarks of power, precision and high-risk manoeuvres.

In 1985 Tom's boycott of the South African leg of the tour to protest the Apartheid regime brought an edge of ethics and serious thought to the sport, giving surfing a political profile

and credibility it had not previously shown. It seemed at that moment surfing stepped out of its insular adolescence, found a new maturity and came of age on the broader world stage.

But at the end of the 1989 tour Tom found his life at a point of crisis. After not winning a third world title, on what seemed a judging technicality in the final event, and after 10 years on the world tour, he was close to burnout.

"I was disillusioned with competition," Tom says, "and frustrated with life. I needed something new. This was a time of serious soul searching."

At 28 years of age Tom still had a reputation as the most powerful surfer in the world. Highly focussed and motivated, and seemingly fearless in the big waves of Hawaii, he continued to aggressively advance both technique and performance. As well he was considered the fittest surfer on the tour.

"I'd always trained hard," says Tom. "I've done a lot of weights and resistance training and also a lot of stretching. I'd developed the strength in the centre of my body, my core strength, and this was the focus of my power. But I'd noticed my surfing was getting stiff and

rigid. It was very sharp and accurate and still very powerful, but there wasn't much fluidity. This didn't matter so much in big waves, but in smaller waves it began to become a problem."

At this time Tom was a sponsored Quiksilver rider and a good friend of Simon Buttonshaw, Quiksilver's art director, a fellow surfer and a yoga teacher. Tom had approached Simon a few times previously for instruction, but for various reasons Simon had said no. But then time and circumstances coalesced. Simon was in Sydney for two months, staying in Dee Why, close to Tom's home.

"I told Tom that if he was there at 6am every morning with his shorts on, I'd teach him," says Simon. "And he was. He showed real commitment."

Initially Simon began Tom on a modified vinyasa style practice that was tailored specifically for Tom's needs. An important aspect of Simon's approach is that the practice should not be generalised but rather personalised for each individual, as in the traditional way yoga was taught one-to-one, from teacher to student, and where tradition dictated the form payment took. (It's interesting to note here that Simon asked for no payment from Tom.)

"Tom had a long history of injury and his knees and neck were both problematic," says Simon. "However, once we began working it became clear that his hips would need the most attention. I chose a dynamic, vinyasa approach because Tom is a surfer and the flow of movement is very important for surfing."

The bottom line for Simon was to strengthen Tom's weaknesses, and in the beginning this meant the use of a lot of props. The asanas had to be adapted to suit the specific injuries Tom carried and then practised with supports. As Tom opened into the poses Simon was able to progressively remove the supports. There was also the question of equating strength and flexibility.

"Too much mobility, without the balance of strength, can create problems for surfers," says Simon. "The ocean makes few concessions and they can get hurt out there. So we began with standing poses that would address both strength and flexibility, particularly the *virabhadrasana* or warrior poses and downward dog."

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Tom had complete confidence in the process and that all the time he was becoming more and more self-reliant. For Simon this was a positive sign because to a large extent he measures his success by the level of independence achieved by the person he is working with.

"By the end of a month I had a good daily practice established, and I felt everything had turned around," says Tom. "I sucked it all in. Before I'd thought yoga was mainly relaxing. A downtime kind of thing. But now I saw it had everything in it."

Tom had come to Simon ostensibly for sporting reasons, but for Simon the true responsibility of a teacher is to open the student up. So as the practice developed, deeper issues began to manifest, issues that cut closer to the real needs within Tom's body and psyche.

"Tom was blocked," explains Simon, "and at some level he knew it. It wasn't just about physical performance. He had achieved just about everything possible in the surfing world, but still he wasn't fulfilled. He'd gone as far as his ego-drive could take him and he had to look somewhere else. He's a very intelligent man. You don't get to be a world champion without a high level of innate intelligence. Now he was clever enough to look in the right direction."

Simon had set up the conditions and with time the emotional and psychological aspects of the practice began to take on more relevance. In the standing poses Tom began to experience something that had eluded him previously. He gained access at a primary level into what was troubling him. He felt this deeply, within his body, and then, when Simon introduced twisting *asanas* into the process, the real release began.

"The twists were the key," says Simon. "By revealing the non-egoic, intuitive intelligence in the back of the body, by bringing it forward to the front into awareness, they tripped an intensely profound release. And it wasn't just in Tom's head. It was a deeply visceral experience."

"All that emotional energy – the frustration, the ego issues – that had been trapped and blocked in Tom's body was released. He could see it, experience it and let it go, but it overwhelmed him. It was a very powerful moment and the foundation of Tom's re-invention of himself."

As this resolution of a core issue consolidated within him, Tom began to notice the impact it was having on his surfing.

"My motivation changed," says Tom. "Rather than just trying to win, I began to try to get the best out of myself. This gave me more detachment in competition and I felt inspired and able to respond to the young guys who were coming up. My surfing performance improved in that period."

Simon is acutely aware of the difficulties for a teacher working with a class to achieve a result of this kind.

"Yoga is alive today," he says, "but authentic yoga happens best in a one-to-one situation: the traditional way. The class environment gives a yardstick of health for the students, but accessing deeper levels and opening students up, though it may occur, just can't be given the degree of attention it deserves within a class."

This is a dilemma for many contemporary yoga teachers, particularly with the numbers that are being attracted to yoga at present. People come to yoga for a wide variety of reasons but often they find more than they'd

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Ross Clarke-Jones in adjustment with Simon Buttonshaw

expected. It is not at all uncommon for students to find emotions or energy surfacing during a class and this can be confusing if they are unprepared. A teacher has to be very sensitive to pick up what is occurring and the student has to be open to the process without retreating from it in fear, or projecting the emotion onto the teacher or onto yoga in general.

In this sense yoga is a form, perhaps the original form, of transformational bodywork, where the teacher provides the platform for the process of transformation and the student experiences and takes responsibility for whatever surfaces from within.

"I like to work with surfers because I know them and what they go through," says Simon. "Surfing is a warrior culture. Surfers pit themselves against something that is greater than them. They have a lot of heart. And this is why they take so well to yoga. You can take them deeper because they're not afraid of their own reactions. They've already had to face them out in the surf. So in their yoga practice they are able to face whatever comes up."

Simon has been practising yoga for over 35 years and surfing for just as long. He regards yoga and surfing as a great union and sees many parallels between the two.

"Surfers are very wilful," he continues. "They have strong wills and strong determination. But they're not in control. Essentially they are responsive to the ocean. It's a paradox really, and it's one that they share with yoga students. To practise yoga you need the same strength of will and discipline, but ultimately what you get from yoga is beyond your control. And I like the idea of the ocean as a metaphor for this."

After two months of intensive training with Tom, Simon returned to Torquay on Victoria's coast. Tom continued his practice and is still involved with yoga today, 13 years later.

"I practised the postures in the morning and *pranayama* in the evening," says Tom. "Simon was cautious about teaching me the breathing techniques, and said you had to be guided through them very carefully. It's extraordinary stuff and I found it really helped when I was travelling."

"Yoga has taught me how to treat myself. You're just so aware of how you feel. It's a bit of a two-edged sword. Awareness of things that appear to be wrong can get you down. I just try to stay positive."

A third world title ultimately escaped Tom but he won the Pipe Masters in 1990 and 1991 and Hawaii's Triple Crown Championship as well in 1991, working his way back to third in the world rankings before retiring from

competition in 1993. Tom is now married with two young daughters.

"I've got a family focus now," he continues, "and it's much harder to practise at home with kids, so I like to go out to a class. The Ryoho School has classes at Newport near home, so that's been good for me. I'm still practising and learning and as time goes on, getting more interested in the meditation side of things."

Simon and Tom have continued their yoga relationship through the program for the Quiksilver team riders. This program monitors the progress of the athletes sponsored by Quiksilver and holds regular training camps internationally to develop the skills required to compete on the professional world tour. Tom has been involved since the inception of the program and Simon came on board in 1996 to bring more yoga into the training.

"I take a different approach in this context," says Simon. "I give them enough technique so that the posture is correct and nothing more. As professional surfers I want them to be able to sustain the highest level of concentration – but comfortably while under pressure – for the time they need. For a surfer in competition this might be 30 minutes, the length of a heat. For someone like Ross Clarke-Jones the needs are appreciably different."

Ross Clarke-Jones is one of the world's most experienced tow-in riders and an acknowledged leader in taking on the biggest waves the ocean can produce. Ross is on the Quiksilver team and was brought to yoga by Tom when he began to develop a sore back. Ross and Tom both participated at the last Quiksilver camp held at Bellshala, a yoga school

run by Roz Buttonshaw, Simon's wife, on the coast near Torquay, Victoria, and timed to coincide with the annual Easter Bells Beach surfing event.

"I still focus on equal gains in strength and flexibility, but that is all worked around an even greater skill development," says Simon. "My aim is to help them become more observant. And the way we work forces them to pay attention under pressure – the kind of pressure they are going to experience out in the water."

With the enormous growth and expanding popularity of yoga over the last 10 years, there has sometimes been a tendency to reduce yoga to simply a physical therapy, an adjunct to health, or an instrument of fitness. Certainly yoga can play these roles but its depth and potential is much greater.

"Yoga can't be commodified," says Simon Buttonshaw. And this is true. But yoga is both an art and a science. The science of yoga can be delineated, its parts examined and systematised, its structures illuminated and made comprehensible for all to grasp. But the art of yoga cannot be so easily prescribed. Here, where the whole can be seen to be more than the sum of its parts, where yoga works to bring lightness, awareness and harmony, where the process is about the growth of the human spirit, the mystery of yoga is perhaps its most intriguing and defining quality.

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