

Aussies go to bat for Yoga

Yoga teacher Kate Turner accompanied the Australian Cricket team on its recent tour of India. Ironically, yoga was an integral part of the team's success story, for this tour of the 'homeland' of yoga – which even took in an opportune meeting with BKS Iyengar. Kate and champion cricketer, Justin Langer, share their experiences with Greg Wythes.



Photo Caption here.

Right now, the Australian cricket team is at the top of its game. It is the dominant team in world cricket and on its recent tour of India, at the end of 2004, it won the Test series on Indian soil for the first time in more than 30 years.

Not widely known is the fact that yoga played a significant hand in shaping the team for success on this tour. It was the first time the Australian cricket team has taken a yoga teacher with them as part of their support staff.

Yoga has not traditionally been a part of the training, preparation or support for cricketers representing Australia. To reach this elite level, an athlete will already have an individual fitness regime. The tight schedule of matches and the intensity of these matches demands it as a basic requirement, and for most players their approach is built around gym work and running.

But Errol Alcott, the team physiotherapist, wanted to add something else to this mix. In the previous 12 months he had worked with

Russell Crowe on a film project. They'd done some yoga together and he'd seen the value of it. He called in Kate Turner.

Kate is a yoga teacher and massage therapist based in Sydney's southern suburbs. She has been teaching yoga for more than 20 years since she first trained at the Satyananda ashram at Mangrove Mountain. She knew nothing about cricket.

"My brief was to look after the players' well-being," she says, "and it involved both yoga and Thai massage. India is such a difficult tour for them – physically, mentally, emotionally, culturally. And it was an experiment really. In the cricket world yoga and meditation are considered a bit left field, so early in the tour we were feeling our way."

Individual practice

The first yoga class was compulsory for the entire touring party but after that it was up to Kate and the individual players to work out their own system of practice.

"Everyday was different," says Kate. "Sometimes I'd do some work with them at the ground if we were batting, but mainly it would be a session at the hotel at the end of the day. Often this might be a one-on-one session. They have so much to fit in. The game, the training, recovery in the pool, media interviews, sponsorship

work, functions in the evening ... it's very demanding. Sometimes I'd have a yoga class at 2 o'clock and then another at 4.30 because different groups were doing different things.

"Errol would give me my guidelines for the day or the players would come up to me individually to organise classes or a private session. Yoga was one of their training options."

Justin Langer was one player who quickly took advantage of the opportunity.

"On that very first day I said to Kate, 'I want you to become my best friend,'" recalls Justin. "I had tried yoga a couple of times before but I'm never at home long enough to find a regular class. It was too hard to organise. But Kate was brilliant. What she taught me was different to what I had experienced before. A little gentler, but a specific practice, fine-tuned for me."

Justin Langer is no stranger to body-mind work. He holds black belts in both karate and taekwon-do and has been practising meditation since 1993. At 34 years of age he is now at his peak as a Test cricketer. In combination with Matthew Hayden he has set numerous records for opening partnership stands during the last two seasons and in the 2004 calendar year he scored more runs than any other cricketer on the world Test stage.

Langer's contributions were an essential component of Australia's success in India. But he also knows the lows of cricket at this level. Poor form in the late 90s saw him dropped from the Australian squad, but he fought his way back with characteristic perseverance and determination. He is not one to give in easily.

Dealing with pressure

The tour of India lasts for seven weeks. It is an intense period for the players and one with little respite. Cricket in India is more than just a sport. Test players have virtual superstar status and the pressure from fans and media is unrelenting.

So when a two day break in the schedule appeared after the Mumbai Test, a side trip was organised for Kate, Justin, and Jock Campbell, the team's strength and conditioning coach, to the Iyengar Institute in Pune.

"Pune is about two and a half hours drive south of Mumbai," says Kate. "We'd rung the Institute to tell them we were coming,

but we were really surprised when Mr Iyengar met us personally and showed us around the ashram."

"I thought we'd just have a cup of tea," says Justin. "But we were talking and he said – 'I can tell you have trouble with your lower back and shoulder by the way you are sitting there. Come upstairs.' He took us up to the yoga room where there were 20 or 30 people from all over the world practising. He stripped down to a pair of red shorts and told me to strip down too. And this was a bit funny to begin with, with so many people around."

What had started out as a casual visit turned into a three-hour group demonstration under the influence of Iyengar's particular genius with regard to posture, alignment, structure and attention to detail – with Justin as the working model.

"He was extraordinary," says Justin. "A real inspiration to me. He has crystal clear eyes; the eyes of a 20-year-old and he strode

They know you can be physically fit but emotionally or mentally drained. ... I was able to show them techniques in asana or pranayama to change the way they felt physically, emotionally or mentally. Some of them had a real thirst for it.

around that yoga room like a leopard. I don't know how old he is exactly, but he is like the archetypal old man who is wise in spirit and still strong in body."

Learning from the master

BKS Iyengar's assessment of Justin's posture identified shortened muscle groups in the lower back and the gluteals on one side, resulting in an asymmetrical pattern in this area. The tightness in the shoulder was partly a way to compensate for this, but BKS Iyengar attributed both conditions to the long hours that Justin spends batting left-handed.

"He used props to adjust Justin in the poses," says Kate, "and fine-tuned every one, making the most minute adjustments for the lower back, beginning with the standing poses and then twists. He fired a

lot of questions at me – 'Kate, come around here. What do you see? What do you feel?' Then he would ask Justin what he felt as a prop was added or an adjustment was made."

"I was blown away by what he was able to do with me," says Justin. "I found the shoulder work hard but there were no side effects. Later when I was back in Australia my injury flared up but the rest of my body was so supple from this intensive work and the daily yoga with Kate that its effects were minimised. And just at that same time I got an e-mail from the Iyengar Institute with some yoga postures for my back. The timing seemed significant to me as I don't believe things like that are just a coincidence."

What Kate and Justin were unaware of before the trip to Pune was BKS Iyengar's interest in cricket. Like most Indians, he loves the game and is in the process of writing a yoga book for cricketers. As well he has worked with a number of players in

the Indian Test side, especially the team's star batsman, Sachin Tendulkar.

Keen on yoga

Back with the touring party Kate continued the round of daily classes, fitting in to the varying schedule of the team. Some players came almost every day and others used the classes less often.

Matthew Hayden had begun yoga training before the tour and is part way into a correspondence teacher training course in yoga and pilates. He was as keen as Justin.

"The ones who came most regularly," says Kate, "were the ones with good yoga bodies – Justin, Matthew, Michael Kasprovicz and Glenn McGrath. Shane Warne popped in and out as did many of

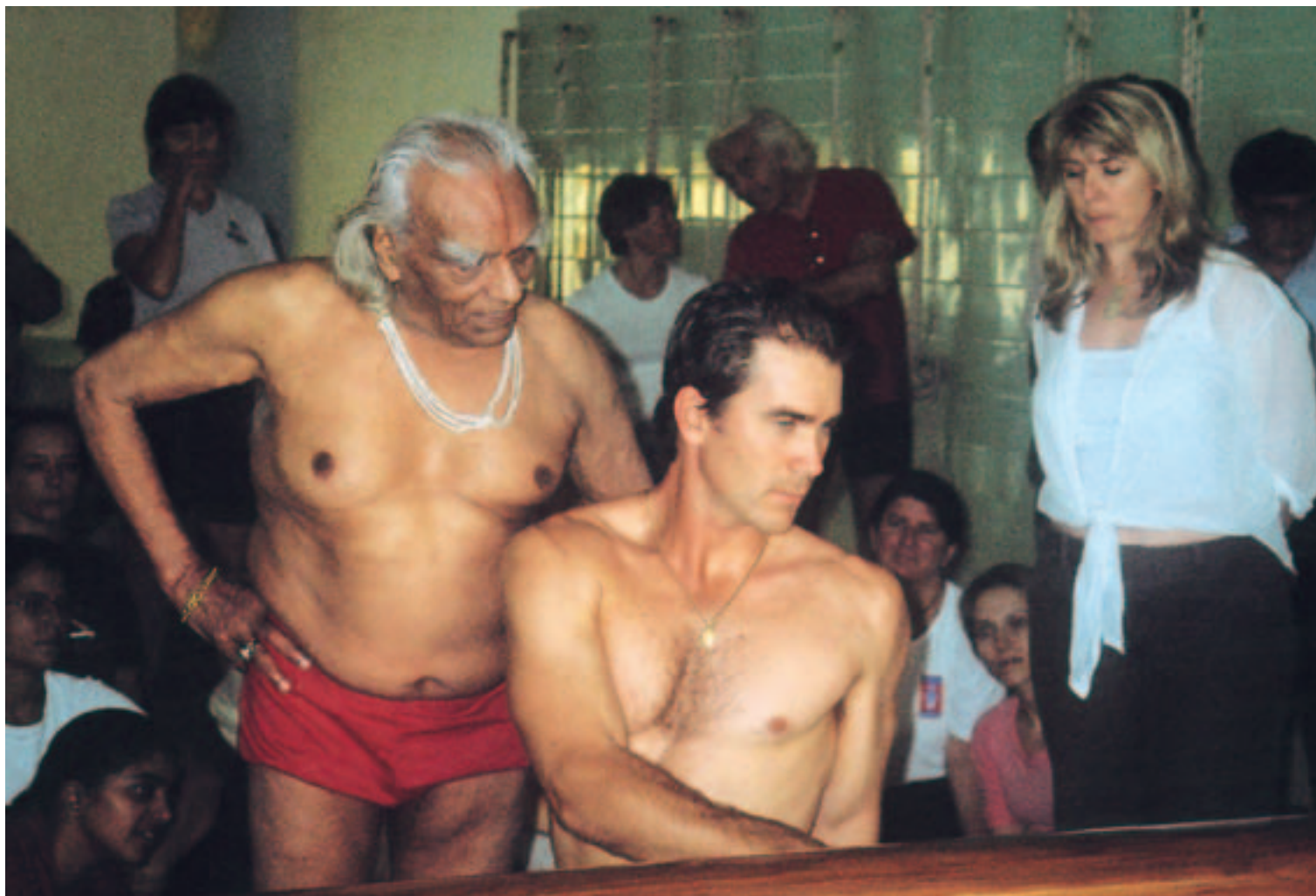


Photo Caption here.

“He was extraordinary,” says Justin. “A real inspiration to me. He has crystal clear eyes; the eyes of a 20-year-old and he strode around that yoga room like a leopard. I don’t know how old he is exactly, but he is like the archetypal old man who is wise in spirit and still strong in body.”

the others depending on what else they had on. There was no set class structure. I would ask them how their day had been, how their energy levels were, and go from there. We did a range of things – some hatha, some Iyengar style, some Ashtanga to get the flow of movement going ... Whatever seemed best in the moment.

“It took time to get to know them individually. Each player had different needs and strengths and limitations – and different degrees of flexibility and different injuries. I had to modify the

postures for each one. There was a mixture of batsmen and bowlers so I had to vary the class to suit each one. For the batsmen I concentrated on opening and balancing flexibility in the lower back, especially through side bending, and for the bowlers I worked more on the upper body to open the chest.

“Specific injuries on the day – like an arm strain from bowling – were mainly handled by the team physio Errol, or by the sports massage therapist. Sometimes I was able to add in a stretch or a yoga posture for that

part of the body. But the players know how to stretch. It was the extra things that yoga was able to bring that they appreciated: the breath, the awareness or the sense of alignment. They would say to me; ‘I do this stretch, but I didn’t know you could add this or that to it.’ And they said they felt better for it.”

Part of the kit

There is a certain irony in taking a yoga teacher into the country where yoga originated, when it would seem quite easy to find a yoga teacher there. However the practicalities of this are not as simple as they appear, especially given the hectic pace of the tour and the load this places on the players and support staff.

As they discovered, having an Australian woman yoga teacher with the team 24 hours a day, seven days a week brought into play other, more subtle aspects of the yoga relationship between teacher and student that served the players well.

“Kate’s personal service was excellent,” says Justin Langer. “She is a born teacher and it was terrific to have a female around in a predominantly male world. India is a tough tour. The country and its people tug at your heartstrings. It was great to have a

different ear to talk to and someone who could give you a different perspective. She has a beautiful way about her.”

“I felt very comfortable with the players,” says Kate. “They would stay behind to talk for an hour or more after a one-on-one session. Our relationships developed and deepened and they were able to open up. Part of it came out of the ambience of the yoga or massage room, and they would talk about things that were central to them. Their family. Their kids. They were able to be a little more vulnerable, I think, because they felt safe. I connected with them as human beings rather than as famous cricketers.

“They used to tease me. ‘Can you read the scoreboard yet, Kate? What’s a googly? What’s a bumper?’ I had no idea, though I did develop a finer appreciation of the game of cricket after seven weeks. I didn’t know if a player was a fast bowler or a slow bowler, but I did learn about him. But it wasn’t a quick process.

“Yoga helps to open up another door. I had amazing conversations with them. They know you can be physically fit but emotionally or mentally drained. They

Like most Indians, he loves the game... he has worked with a number of players in the Indian Test side, especially the team’s star batsman, Sachin Tendulkar.

know about the complete person. I was able to show them techniques in asana or pranayama to change the way they felt physically, emotionally or mentally. Some of them had a real thirst for it.

“I believe in what I do. It’s a part of who I am no matter who I work with. I felt I made a significant connection with the team; perhaps not every one of them but enough to make a difference.”

Justin Langer returned to his home town of Perth at the end of the tour, though his stay may be fairly brief with tours of New Zealand and England not far away. He has set a yoga practice space in his home and is looking for a teacher who can work with him when he is there. He has felt the difference.

“Before this tour yoga was way down my list of training priorities. But that’s all changed now. Seven weeks with Kate, doing yoga every day, changed everything.

“It’s the first time I’ve found a way of training that I look forward to, that can I enjoy while I am doing it, and that I can look back on after the session with real satisfaction. My motivation stayed high for seven weeks and at the end of it I felt like a 21-year-old again. It was awesome.”

Greg Wythes holds classes at the Moore Street Yoga Room in Austinmer and teaches massage at Karuna College. He maintains a body work practice in the northern suburbs of Wollongong. He can be reached on (02) 42682048 or at gwythes@yahoo.com.au