



**B E N G A L**

How hot yoga changed my back—and my life—for the better

**T I G E R**

By Artis Henderson

**C O U R A G E**

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**It's** five minutes into my hot yoga class, and the first drops of sweat are already hitting the

floor. I hear them as they drip on yoga mats around the room. Plop, plop, plop. My own sweating arms are raised in front of me, and I'm standing on my toes in a posture aptly named "Awkward." It's 110 degrees in the room. We've got another hour and 25 minutes to go.

"You've got to have moxie," the studio's owner, Jim Mahon—Jimmy Ji—cajoles. "English bulldog determination. Bengal tiger courage."

Silently, I repeat my mantra. "I will have a strong, healthy, pain-free body."

Hot yoga first became popular in the 1970s, and though there are different ways to tackle it, I go to a Bikram studio in South Fort Myers known for its 26 postures, 90-minute classes and intense heat. Most days I'd rather do anything than sweat in a hot room with a bunch of other yogis, and yet I go at least three times a week.

The reason?

Hot yoga is the best thing that ever happened to me.

When I was five years old, I was in a plane crash that crushed my lower vertebrae. Surgeons implanted a rod and two hooks along my spine, and after several years of post-op care and physical therapy my body was repaired. Except for the scar running down the middle of my back, it was impossible to tell anything had happened. I walked, ran, swam and played like any other kid.

That all changed in my mid-30s. Almost overnight, my back started giving me trouble. I couldn't walk more than a few hundred feet without pain. I had to give up high heels. Then flats. Then everything except a pair of orthotic sneakers. I spent long hours on the couch, resting. When I complained to a friend about how unlucky I felt, he said I was lucky to have made it this long without any problems.

When things got worse, I made an appointment with a spinal surgeon. Maybe my body had outgrown the hooks and rods

in my back, I reasoned, and though I hated the idea of surgery, I couldn't keep living the way I was. But after taking X-rays and looking me over, the surgeon said the metal in my back still looked good. Surgery wasn't the answer.

"Try touching your toes," he said.

My hands barely made it past my knees.

"Your hamstrings are tight. Let's get you into physical therapy."

I started an intense physical therapy regimen of stretching and core exercises, and though it helped, it wasn't enough. My back still hurt every day. When I'd completed my sessions, I joined a gym and hired a trainer to help me focus on my core and back strengthening. Again, it helped. Again, it wasn't enough.

I talked about my back problems to everyone, crowd-sourcing possible solutions, and finally I



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## YOGA AND PILATES FOR BACK HEALTH

Mary Ann McKenna spent 30 years as a physical therapist before opening Dragonfly Yoga & Pilates in Fort Myers with her sister, yoga teacher Suzy Goldberg, and business partner and yoga teacher, Char Wendel. Now, as a pilates instructor, she brings a rehab-based technique to the classes offered at her studio. According to McKenna, yoga and pilates are particularly suited to help those with physical ailments like back problems.

**"Our body naturally moves in multiple planes," McKenna says. "Yoga and pilates let you mimic more of the body's natural movements. It's different than sitting in a gym and curling weights."**

Because of her physical therapy background, McKenna often works with what she calls "medically involved" students—people with Parkinson's disease, osteoporosis, rotator cuff injuries, total joint replacements and balance issues.

**"Pilates and yoga are for everybody—and every body," she says. "We can always modify poses for people depending on what's going on with their diagnosis and medical history. Yoga and pilates should be a successful movement experience without pain."**

Many of her clients come to the studio looking for relief from troublesome backs.

**"Our classes work the whole body, from the top of your head to the tips of your toes, and we focus on spine mobility along with twisting poses for flexibility," McKenna says. "People with back pain tend to stiffen and tense up to guard their spine. They fall into hypo-mobility and develop tight muscles. If they just start to move with their breath and let the muscles elongate, breathing and moving in their range of motion, then they begin to work the fascial tissue and the spine starts to loosen up."**

And that loosening up? It often translates to a pain-free body and back.

—Artis Henderson

heard something that stuck: hot yoga. A friend who'd suffered from back trouble had been going every day for nearly a decade. He said it changed his life. But the heat? The 90-minute classes? The no-nonsense approach of the instructors?

"All part of the experience," my friend said. "And worth it."

I'd dabbled in yoga on and off for years, but none of it prepared me for my first hot yoga class. Though some of the postures were familiar, I was nearly knocked to my knees by the intensity of the heat, the thirst, the sweat, the full hour and a half of challenge. I pushed through it, dropping out of some of the postures, and at the end of class I lay on my mat with my eyes closed, trying to summon the strength to get up off the floor. I was wrung out, but my back felt better than it had in a long time.

I came back two days later. And two days after that. Each time was a struggle, but I could feel my body getting more flexible. I kept with it, and over time my back began to strengthen. Now, two years later, I have a committed practice. And my back? It's hard to believe the

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**"HOT YOGA IS FOR EVERYBODY," STUDIO OWNER JIM MAHON LIKES TO SAY. "BUT IT'S NOT FOR ANYBODY."**

changes. I still have to be careful, and high heels are permanently out for me, but I'm able to go through a normal day without pain. Last summer I climbed a 14,000-foot mountain with only a few short breaks.

Not to say hot yoga is for everyone.

"Hot yoga is for everybody, but it's not for anybody," Jimmy Ji likes to say.

Bodies respond to heat in different ways, and the strenuousness of the practice may be too challenging for some. Certain constitutions may prefer pilates or a gentler form of yoga, like yin or restorative. Physical therapy might do the trick for some people, and working out at the gym may help others. But hot yoga has worked for me.

Some of its therapeutic benefits come from the heat and humidity in the room, which promotes muscle relaxation and allows for deeper stretching. That stretching has helped to relieve tight muscles in my hips, legs, back, shoulders and neck, all of which contributed to my back pain. Each of the 26 postures in a hot yoga practice is good for back and whole-body strengthening, and together they have made me physically stronger. The back muscles that used to become fatigued from a walk across the room can now support me for hours.

My next goal? Thirty days of hot yoga in a row. Those who make it earn a plaque with their name on it hung on the yoga studio wall. To get there I'll need a special kind of courage and one of Jimmy Ji's favorite mantras: I can do it. I will do it. I'm able to do it. ■