


Living well

Questions about getting and staying in shape are answered by personal trainer Eric Hollis • Page 4E



Health & Fitness

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"This is my interpretation [of yoga.] It's the mental quality within the practice — otherwise it's superficial. It's not just about your body."



Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/KAREN E. SEGRAVE

Even with a broken toe, Barefoot Studio owner Cathy Rodgers is a willing participant in Bryan Kest's Power Yoga workshop.

Kick asana!

Power Yoga guru puts workshop participants through paces at a fevered pitch with no posturing.

BY KAREN MARTIN
ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

There are 60 of us in a Hillcrest dance studio. We are all engaged in doing a yoga shoulder stand, our legs thrust into the air with varying degrees of straightness above our heads. We've been in this position for several minutes, with 30 seconds to go. Legs are starting to shake.

"If you don't want to do the pose, don't do the pose," our instructor says calmly. "The normal mode is to want to overcome, and to be competitive. But not this weekend."

Easy for him to say. He's Bryan Kest, the creator of Power Yoga, one of the West Coast's hottest yoga trainers, voted No. 1 Fitness Guru of 1999 by *Women's Sports and Fitness* magazine in its January/February issue. And, although the class never sees him do one, he's probably very good at shoulder stands.

"We [Barefoot Studio and co-sponsor Beans Grains & Things] are really excited about getting one of the big guys here for a

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Bryan Kest assists Marsha Long in achieving a pose during his Power Yoga workshop.



Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/KAREN E. SEGRAVE

Barbara Andri (left) and Ronnie Malik of Dallas stretch upward during a series of sun salutations, part of a Power Yoga workshop at Barefoot Studio.

Yoga

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yoga workshop," says Robin Johnson, owner of Barefoot Studio/Benton.

Kest, 32, is in town on a rainy June weekend for a three-day Power Yoga workshop at Barefoot Studio, which shares space with ballet and other movement classes at 3804 Kavanaugh Blvd. He's 5 feet 7 inches tall, with a slender, muscular physique and a salty way of talking that echoes his origins — born in Cleveland, reared in Detroit.

Almost all the participants bring their own yoga mats, although Barefoot owner Cathy Rodgers usually provides them for the classes she teaches. Power Yoga causes practitioners to sweat profusely (not all that common in most yoga practice sessions), and the workshop organizers don't want to wash 60 mats after each of the four practices planned for the weekend.

And sweat we do, perching in various poses: backsides in the air, hands and bare feet on the floor in an inverted V; quivering on the left leg with the right leg thrust in front of us, right fingers looped around the right big toe while trying to straighten out that right leg stretching legs beyond the shoulder stand downward to touch the floor; in the plough position — holding each pose for what seems like a long, long time.

This is challenging stuff for experienced members of the class, let alone those of us who are newcomers to yoga. Kest defines the difference between Power Yoga and other forms as "the teacher's interpretation of yoga. This is my interpretation. It's the mental quality within the practice — otherwise it's superficial. It's not just about your body."

He emphasizes that yoga isn't about doing a pose perfectly — it's about exploring personal boundaries and limitations. "This is your practice," he reminds us, after admonishing class members not to look around to see what others are doing and to keep quiet in order to focus on ourselves. "If you don't want to be here, you are totally free to get up and leave."

Oh, right. Hey, it cost \$110 to be here. We're staying.

Yoga is a complete science of life that originated in India many thousands of years ago according

to *The Sivananda Companion to Yoga*, by Lucy Lidell and the Sivananda Yoga Center (Simon & Schuster, 1983). It is a system of personal development, encompassing body, mind and spirit. Elements include relaxation (physical, mental and spiritual), exercise through the yoga postures or *asanas*, breathing, diet and meditation.

THE REAL REASON

Lots of people do yoga just to keep their bodies fit and supple. If they stick with it, the other components often become incorporated into their lives, the book explains:

At first glance, it seems to be little more than a series of strange physical postures which keep the body lean and flexible. But in time, anyone who continues with regular practice becomes aware of a subtle change in their approach to life for, through persistently toning and relaxing the body and stilling the mind, you begin to glimpse a state of inner peace which is your true nature. It is this that constitutes the essence of yoga.

Kest doesn't like that one word: flexible. "Flexibility and strength are judgments you make in comparison to something," he says. "I like the words suppleness and tone rather than flexibility and strength."

He pads around the room, quiet as a cat, adjusting a leg here, rubbing a tensed-up neck there.

"Are you still breathing?" he asks repeatedly; breathing through a pose is an essential element of yoga, what he likes to call "ceaselessly cyclical, perpetually fluid breaths." Surprisingly, deep breathing (from the diaphragm, through the nose) helps a novice maintain a difficult pose long past the point where muscles want to cooperate.

The tenderness of Kest's touch parallels his words (although he is prone to cursing in a matter-of-fact manner).

"Isn't this an endeavor to heal or maintain health?" he asks the group rhetorically, since talking by anyone other than him is not allowed. "The body speaks to us in the language of sensation. I look at it as a lovemaking session — I'm making love to myself. Respect your body if it says 'no.' Start listening, start honoring your body."

He's big on stretching hamstrings, so much of the class time is spent folded in half, hands on the floor in front of the feet (though

some of us can't make it that far). This position and variations of it, coupled with heavy perspiration when maintained for a time, results in a lot of interesting spiked hairstyles among the women in the class, who outnumber men by about 10 to 1.

Not all days are good days, he explains, as is evident during Sunday morning's practice — many class members give up on assorted poses and resort to child's pose, a resting posture that indicates the person doing it is OK and simply needs a break from whatever else the instructor has asked him to do.

"The energy in this room is ... low," he says. "This is definitely the wrong practice for this energy level. If you were at home, this is the kind of day when you'd roll out your yoga mat, stand at the edge of it with your hands over your head, then say, 'Aw, forget it. I'll do it tomorrow.'"

That's OK, he reminds us, although we suspect that he didn't get to be one of the hottest yoga instructors on the competitive West Coast by saying to himself, "Aw, I'll do it tomorrow."

"Every day I'm different, and every day my yoga practice is different," Kest says. "Stop trying to get somewhere and honor where you're at."

SPICED WITH STORIES

His opening-night remarks are spiced with earthy stories, graphic names of body parts and off-color language that offends some participants ("I hope you've put him on a plane and shipped him out of here," one class member tells Rodgers on Saturday morning).

Kest starts talking at 6:15 p.m. Friday and keeps going until nearly 9 o'clock. Some of us, thinking we'd be out of there by 8, give up and leave in search of supper; those who stay are rewarded with an hour-long practice.

His lengthy lecture is important, he says, "so that people understand what we're doing here." He has developed this style over 12 years of teaching. It has made him famous in the yoga world, with two studios in the Los Angeles area and a nationwide fan base, thanks to his three Power Yoga videos.

Kest started studying yoga in Hawaii, then later spent a year in India being instructed by a guru. Along the line, he came up with his

very physical approach, which is resulting in packed classes and hot video sales.

"I don't advertise my L.A. studios [one in Santa Monica, the other in Calabasas]," he says. "I'm not in the phone book. People come to me through word of mouth."

Then there are the workshops like this one, which he started about six years ago. People have come to the Little Rock sessions from Tennessee and Texas as well as Arkansas. On his schedule are more workshops and retreats in Santa Barbara, Calif.; San Francisco; Charlotte, N.C.; Billings, Mont.; Miami; Chapel Hill, N.C.; Chattanooga, Tenn.; Richmond, Va. — and overseas in Russia and Peru.

It's quite a success story for an athletic kid who never made it past the ninth or 10th grade — he can't quite remember, as he changes the year from one session to the next. "Start eradicating the things that keep us down," is his advice, which he seems to follow.

There's no evangelical slant, no talking up of Jesus or Buddha or their worshippers. "I look at yoga as a spiritual pursuit, not a religious pursuit," he says. "Yoga isn't physical; the goal has nothing to do with your body. But if all you use this for is to enhance your well-being, there's no better way to do it. Yoga helps your cardio, stamina, strength, balance, coordination. But that's a byproduct — it's really about challenging the mind."

Maybe, but it's our bodies that are being challenged this weekend; especially since Kest insists that Rodgers turn the air conditioning off. By the end of each session, the mirrored walls of the studio are totally fogged. And we are, as predicted, dripping sweat onto our mats. If this is Power Yoga, no wonder Kest cusses.

After the last session on Sunday, a class member, munching a muffin donated by Beans Grains & Things, points to a poster on the wall.

"Another workshop!" she exclaims. "Yes, with Rod Stryker," Rodgers says. "Wait 'til you meet him. He's Cheryl Teigs' husband. He's sweet, and quiet, and graceful, and elegant ..."

"Not like Bryan," another class member remarks.

"Uh ... no," Rodgers says.