

## Life in Balance

*A yoga practice provides benefits both physical and mental*

BY MARIA BLACKBURN

Jan Schroeder likes to engage in many forms of physical activity. She runs. She teaches classes in step aerobics and muscle conditioning at the gym. She even teaches a hula-hooping class.

But when Schroeder and her husband hit challenging hiking terrain in Hawaii, she has little difficulty scrambling up and down the steep, rocky trails. Why? She credits yoga.

"Yoga gives me flexibility and balance that I don't get in other activities," says Schroeder, an associate professor of fitness at California State University, Long Beach. She's not alone. "People are starting to realize that they need something else to help them not just look good but to help them move better," Schroeder says. "Yoga provides that."

Hatha yoga, the physical exercise form of yoga, is being embraced by a wide variety of people: by grandmothers and surfers looking for better balance, by professional football players and runners desiring more strength, and by parents seeking calm for their children. Some 15.8 million Americans practice yoga and they spend \$5.7 billion a year on yoga classes and products, including equipment, clothing, books and DVDs like *Yoga Booty Ballet* and *Weight Loss Yoga*, according to a 2008 study in *Yoga Journal*.

Yoga is a combination of breathing exercises, physical postures and meditation that was developed more than 5,000 years ago in India. There are more than 800 forms of Hatha yoga practiced worldwide by about 30 million people. In the United States, where yoga has taken hold more as a physical activity than a spiritual one, Hatha yoga is the type of yoga most people practice.

The benefits of practicing Hatha yoga go beyond gaining balance and flexibility, says Ralph

La Forge, a physiologist at Duke University Medical Center who helps physicians and medical practitioners integrate mindful exercise practices like Hatha yoga into their treatment. Certain forms of Hatha yoga, when appropriately taught, can help alleviate lower back pain, according to recent studies, says La Forge. Studies also have shown that Hatha yoga can help alleviate certain anxiety disorders, improve musculoskeletal health and even reduce blood pressure. "Just yogic breathing therapy has been shown to help reduce systolic blood pressure in people who are pre-hypertensive," he says.

And just because you're healthy and work out regularly doesn't mean Hatha yoga won't benefit you, too, says Leigh Crews, a fitness trainer and registered Yoga Alliance instructor who is a spokeswoman for the American College of Sports Medicine. "Yoga helps prevent injuries so you can continue to do the things you love like running or lifting weights. It balances out all of the stresses you are putting on your body."

Crews, who lives in Rome, Ga., started doing yoga in 1994 as a program developer for Reebok and was surprised by how challenging it was. "Yoga targets your weak links," she says. "If you are out of balance, if one side is

stronger than the other, you can ignore that in traditional strength training.

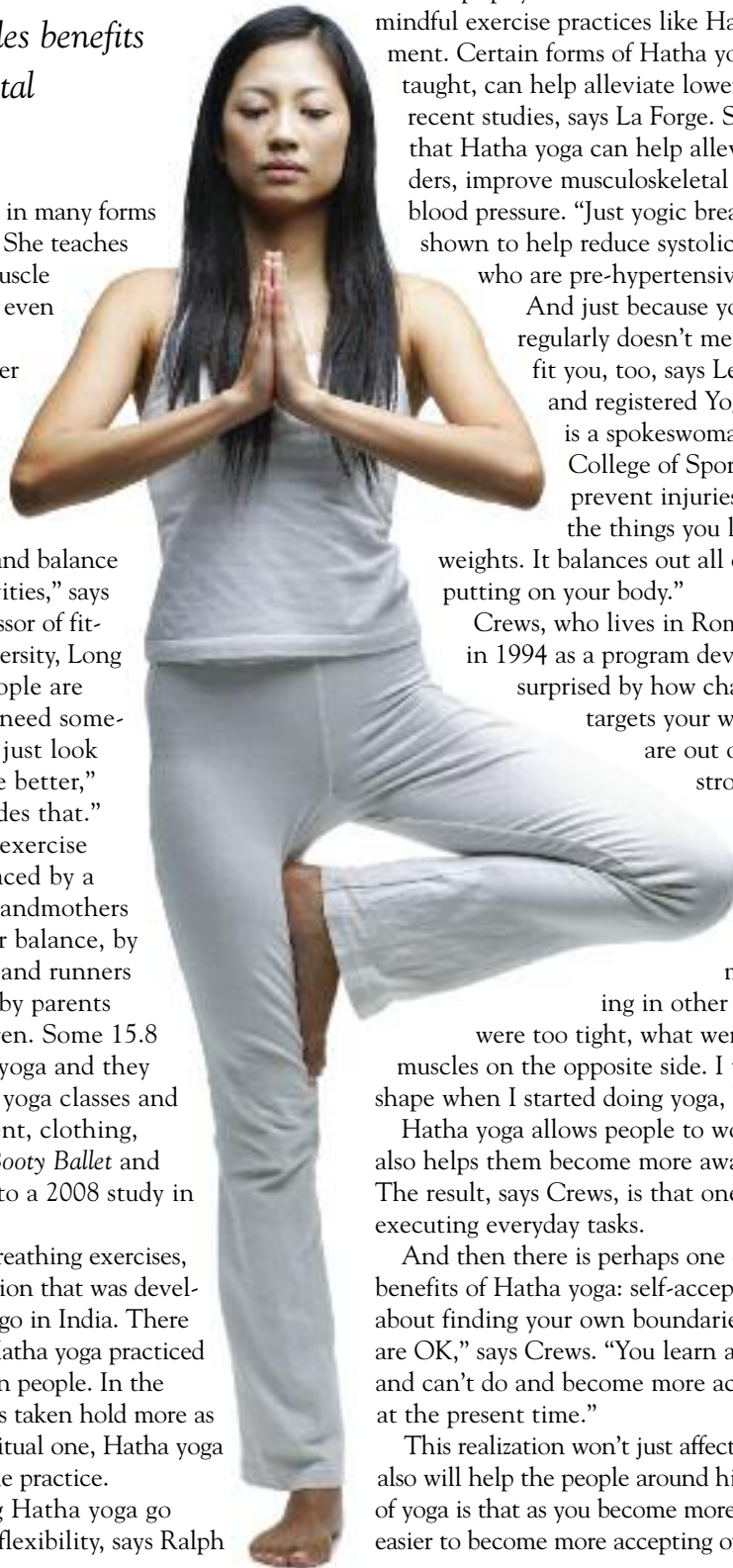
In yoga, you can't ignore it because if you do, you fall. Yoga brought up for me the things I was ignor-

ing in other training—what muscles were too tight, what were too strong in relation to muscles on the opposite side. I thought I was in good shape when I started doing yoga, but yoga kicked my butt."

Hatha yoga allows people to work at their own pace and also helps them become more aware of their bodies in space. The result, says Crews, is that one becomes more fluid in executing everyday tasks.

And then there is perhaps one of the greatest non-physical benefits of Hatha yoga: self-acceptance. "Yoga teaches a lot about finding your own boundaries. And those boundaries are OK," says Crews. "You learn a lot about what you can and can't do and become more accepting of the way you are at the present time."

This realization won't just affect the yoga practitioner, but it also will help the people around him or her. "The philosophy of yoga is that as you become more accepting of yourself, it is easier to become more accepting of others," Crews says. ■



## The Right Yoga for You

Hatha yoga refers to any of the physical types of yoga people practice as exercise, as opposed to the spiritual and philosophical aspects of yoga. There are a number of different styles of Hatha yoga, and although they are all based on the same poses or physical postures, they each have a different emphasis.

Here's a rundown from A(shtanga) to V(inyasa) of some popular Hatha yoga styles:

**Ashtanga:** Also known as power yoga, this is a physically demanding fast-paced style of yoga that emphasizes a set series of continuously flowing movements.

**Bikram:** Sometimes called hot yoga, Bikram is named for creator Bikram Choudhury and based on a series of 26 poses and done in a room heated to between 95 and 100 degrees Fahrenheit (35-37 degrees Celsius) to loosen muscles and encourage sweating.

**Hatha:** If a class is described as a Hatha-style class it will likely be slower paced, focus on stretching and will provide a general introduction to yoga poses.



**Iyengar:** A practice based on the teachings of B.K.S. Iyengar, this style focuses on body alignment and encourages the use of props like yoga blankets and straps to help align the body.

**Kundalini:** This style uses rapid repetitive movements and places special focus on breathing.

**Vinyasa:** In Vinyasa-style yoga classes, poses flow from one to another accompanied by synchronized breathing.

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