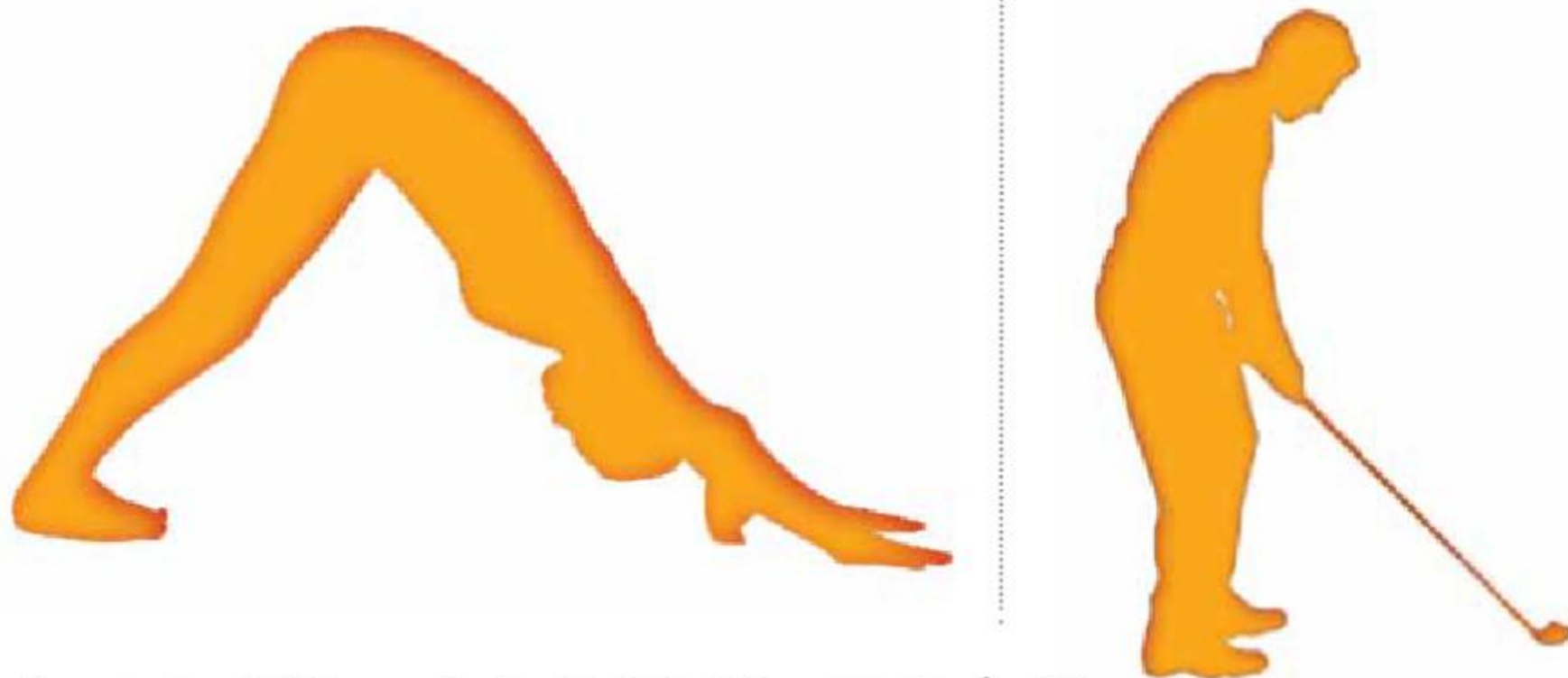


FROM DOWNWARD DOG TO A DOWNSWING



YOGA MEETS GOLF

BY BARBI WALKER

If you think of golf and yoga simultaneously, you'll probably imagine Bill Murray in *Caddyshack* explaining how, after a round of golf, the Dalai Lama promised him total enlightenment on his deathbed. But golf and yoga just don't seem like natural companions, unless of course you actually do both – then you will quickly learn a secret: yoga makes one a better golfer.

Yes, that's right, the downward swing gets better if downward dog shows up frequently in your workouts.

Avid golfers will attest that their back and shoulders need to be loose to hit the ball, but flexibility and strength are equally important. Dr. Steven Wood, who has been golfing for 25 years, said, "Yoga has strengthened both my physical and mental balance, adding confidence and distance to every shot I hit – not all shots are great, but now more of them are closer to where I planned."

Yoga is about improving flexibility, strength and balance, but yoga's golfing benefits go even further. Yoga quiets the mind, teaches one to block out distractions and improve focus. Golf needs all of the above.

As I was researching this story, the benefits of yoga to golf became undeniably clear. I am surprised most golfers don't practice yoga to improve their golf game. Even some golf terminology sounds like it came straight from a yoga class.

"Power, balance and weight transfer all depend on fluidity of the body," said yogini and golfer, Katherine Roberts. "The basic

element of golf and yoga start the same – connecting to the ground."

Roberts has been golfing since she was 15 years old and is the creator of Yoga For Golfers. Roberts developed a comprehensive yoga program tailored to the golfer's body movement and will adapt to any current injuries. Roberts focuses on yoga poses that help the golfer play and feel better. Poses like pigeon pose and bridge help open the hips and strengthen the glutes, two body parts that are utilized heavily in golf.

"My golf game improved immediately after I started yoga," Roberts said. She created Yoga for Golfers as a way to blend eastern philosophy with western sports science.

"Everything we do is based on western technology in terms of golf – and I wanted to bring a demographic into the gifts that yoga has to offer." This led her to focus on yoga for men, more specifically male golfers.

Professional golfer and yoga aficionado, Benoit Beisser, is one of them. In fact, he loves yoga so much, he's said if he couldn't play golf, he'd teach yoga. "When I first got into yoga, the guys laughed at me," Beisser said. Beisser, who recently appeared on the TV reality show, *The Big Break* (VI and VII), on The Golf Channel, credits his injury-free days to yoga.

"I wasn't hurt as much," he said, explaining how he first started

yoga and cut back on gym time. "I feel and know I'm stronger."

Beisser admitted it's disappointing that more men aren't into yoga, especially golfers. Beisser thinks men should realize that golf is just like any other sport, in that, if you don't warm up, don't work to strengthen weak areas, and end up overdoing it, you will injure yourself.

Roberts agrees. "About 63 percent of injuries I see are low back," Roberts said, adding that shoulders, hand and wrists also top the list of golf injuries. "Increasing flexibility reduces these injuries."

When you practice yoga, it's easy to spot your body's weaknesses and strengths. One day you are flexible and your forward fold is effortless, the next, your hamstrings are tight and you struggle to reach your toes, let alone your shins. In golf (like many other sports), the focus is heavy on developing technique needed to hit the ball well, that awareness of weak spots decreases. This lack of awareness increases the athlete's risk of injury. But the golf-yoga connection doesn't stop there. It flows through the body and finds a resting place in the mind.



Native Arizonan and golf instructor at John Jacobs Golf School, Laura London, says she can tell right away if a golfer practices yoga.

"When I work with someone, especially on their short game, I can tell right away if they do yoga or not," London says. "When someone is so tight in the forearm, I always ask if they do yoga, and the answer is always the same, 'No.'"

London, also a professional golfer, isn't a yogi like her brother, Beisser, but does yoga once or twice a week. London says though that if you want to improve your golf game, yoga is key.

"The men who do yoga, when I am instructing them on their swing, get the hand/eye/body connection and can still execute the swing. They're more centered and understand body awareness," London says. "Whereas the ones that don't, they can't relax because they are so focused on my instruction."

Yoga is about balance, both mentally and physically. Even longtime yogis and yoginis experience daily challenges in their yoga practice. But the practice is also about acceptance and

balancing desire and want, with accepting what "is." In golf, players often say, "Play it as it lies." That phrase shares the same philosophy as yoga, accepting what is, instead of thinking of what should be.

Mark Williamson is another pro golfer turned yogi. Yoga changed his life and golf game so much that when he stepped down from the pro golf circuit, he started teaching golfers how to use yoga to improve their game. "The Golf Yogi is golf instruction using yoga as a tool," Williamson said of his new career. "The mental side of yoga, the calm, clear mind, is what yoga really does for the golfer," he said. "You learn to let go of the expectations."

So it is – letting go of expectations and accepting what is happening is essential to yoga and to golf. Maybe that's why people passionate about both often explain that practicing yoga improves their mental and spiritual attitude in life as well as their golf game.

Now if we could just convince golfers and yoga lovers to spend more time together, maybe they would both find total enlightenment a little sooner. ■

"The men who
do yoga... get the
hand/eye/body
connection and
can still execute
the swing. They're
more centered
and understand
body awareness"

Photography by Brittainy Williamson

Barbi Walker is a freelance writer and an award-winning journalist. Barbi lives in Phoenix with her husband and young son.