

A Yoga Conundrum: Why are so Few Men Interested?

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On a visit to Kripalu (The premier yoga training center) for dinner with my wife, Judy, during our recent vacation in the Berkshires, it struck me that there were many women present but very few men.

Similarly, my yoga classes which I have faithfully attended two or three days a week for the past six years, since the dreadful illness and death of my daughter, Jennifer, have always been predominantly women and only a handful of men. I have many male friends who, knowing my wish to share the stress-reducing virtues of yoga, have made it clear that they had no interest in joining me some time to give it a try. I am reminded of my summers at tennis camp with a friend Ted Saretsky and of the many Adelphi University colleagues who joined us there or gladly participated in the frequent tennis tournaments we organized. Certainly, I seldom felt the reluctance or resistance of men to participate that I have noticed since I gave up tennis, no longer being able to tolerate my poor playing.

Perhaps my own circle of male friends consists of men who are not interested in an activity that does not involve “keeping score”. I have noticed my own admiration of the women in my classes and their wonderful body flexibility compared to my own rather tight muscular development which seems to restrict the range of my flexibility for the various postures and stretches that we do during each class. I guess I am furtively “keeping score” but am also fully aware that I am not supposed to do that in these classes. Over time, I have become more accepting of the limited flexibility of my body and mind, although I hate to admit it, and have felt less competitively aware of what I vs others around me can do. This is something I was never able to do with my tennis game.

Since I am feeling in a somewhat confessing mood, I must also admit that the idea for this article comes from missing the male camaraderie that I always had during my tennis days. Since I have little desire to go

back to tennis and am restricted to ESPN for my competitive sports fixes, I am yearning for more men to join me in my love of yoga-thus far, to no avail. I have vaguely heard of the idea of yoga Olympics which, not to be too chauvinist, might draw more men in. But to me that seems to be out of sync with the very nature of yoga.

Perhaps I need to resign myself to being surrounded by women in a beloved non-sport-or is it a sport? I have begun to interview the few men who are in my classes about their thoughts about the seeming disinterest of men with yoga. I recently attended an exciting International Association of Yoga Therapists symposium at Kripalu on the topic of how yoga is more and more being integrated into the U.S. military as an antidote to PTSD, with the blessings of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The largely female audience once again was evident. The presenters made it clear that the word “yoga” was not to be used in the program description for the soldiers. Instead, some much more palatable term such as “health and wellness” training was to be utilized for the mostly male participants. Indeed, a young West Point graduate, who happened to be a marine commander, in the audience spoke up and emphasized that the attractive mostly female yoga instructors need to be aware of their potential impact on their mostly male class members because their contact with women may be limited during their military service.

This gives me an idea for how I might be able to get more men to participate in my classes. Maybe if I don't use the word yoga and instead use a more palatable term such as health and wellness, I will succeed in inducing a few male friends to join in. Indeed, this may revolutionize the already extremely popular yoga industry by bringing more men into the fold. Anyway, I dream on. Perhaps, an interesting research study might be pursued on this topic.

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Received January 13, 2012; **Accepted** January 23, 2012; **Published** January 25, 2012

Citation: Kissen M (2012) A Yoga Conundrum: Why are so Few Men Interested? J Yoga Phys Therapy 2:e107. doi:10.4172/2157-7595.1000e107

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