

Hittleman's Yoga  
Russ Ebbets, D  
Off The Road Column

One day when I was a junior in college and having a boring day at practice I decided to give the hurdles a try. One misstep lead to an 18-month ride on the medical merry-go-round that ended my collegiate career, seemingly ended my athletic career all together and certainly changed my life.

I had injured my back and no one knew what to do. There was a rapid succession of ineffective hot packs, expensive "I don't knows" and even one joker who was convinced it was all in my head. This was in spite of the fact that at one point I could hardly walk, couldn't sit or stand for any length of time and for over a month couldn't reach my hands below my knees.

The low point was the day I went food shopping. I loaded up my cart and proceeded for the checkout. The problem was I couldn't get the food out of the cart. Some old lady behind me had to help me get the food on the belt. While I was tremendously grateful I was at the same time devastated. I was in the prime of a promising athletic career that had been reduced to semi-invalid status. My anger and frustration was crushing. I had to do something.

Therapy suggestions from teammates, coaches, friends and relatives were frequent and varied. I tried just about everything. I even tried yoga. Somewhere in my eclectic book-of-the-month club collection I had a copy of a how-to yoga book. As I paged through it the contents only fueled my futility. Pictured was an emaciated half-naked man with his feet tucked behind his head, bent over backwards with his feet *on* his head and one where he put a string up his nose and got it to come out his mouth. While there was no doubt some voyeuristic value here attempting any of the postures or procedures in my current condition was probably dangerous and out of the question.

The one thing I could do, albeit on a limited level, was lift weights. At that time the college's weight facility was archaic but there were enough dumbbells and rudimentary machines that I could do something. Often I would see one of the college's professors doing stretching – it looked like stretching to me, anyway. I overheard him tell a colleague that he had traveled overseas and gotten hepatitis and couldn't exert himself until it cleared up. "So," he said, "I just do yoga everyday."

What he did didn't look like any yoga I had seen in that book. There must be another book. There was. What I found at a local bookstore was Richard Hittleman's *28 Day Guide to Yoga*. As I scanned through the book I noted several immediate changes. First and foremost the stretches or what he called postures were pretty simple. Secondly, they were progressive in nature. It was a guided self-study. There was a plan and the title stated it – it took 28 days. The paperback cost \$1.95 and that changed my life.

In truth I could not do all the postures. I still was handicapped with limited range of motion and almost constant pain. But as I progressed through the book I began to notice I always felt better after a lesson. And a weird thing I noticed was that I slept better. It took a while to recognize this but ultimately an evening session led to a subsequent morning when I felt like I had an extra hour's sleep.

In the initial days I would do simple postures that as the body loosened up, in time, became slightly more challenging. At the end of each day's lesson was a short motivational thought that tied in the day's moves, explained how or why this form of yoga worked or explained the why's of certain changes that would be occurring – like better sleep.

Although my collegiate career was lost I was able to recover from my injury to the point that within three years I was training and racing pretty much as I choose. Certainly any success I had in my late 20's and early 30's was directly attributable to an almost daily practice of Hittleman's Yoga.

Yoga can be variously translated to mean control, join or unite. The various forms of yoga strive to develop different spiritual qualities. Hatha yoga's goal is to purify the body and probably is the first step or a stepping stone to other yogic disciplines. Raja yoga involves meditation on the higher spiritual ideals of self-control, blissful awareness and positive love. Karmic yoga is the practice of a union of thought and action. An example of this practice would be selfless service to humanity – like how Mother Theresa has been portrayed. Another example would be the “random acts of kindness” extolled by the bumper sticker but practiced on a continual basis.

Hittleman's Yoga is predominantly a brand of hatha yoga. While there are other types of yoga that seem to come in and out of vogue I have always stayed with the hatha yoga and Hittleman's simple but effective plan. Hatha yoga is a form of yoga that as a discipline prizes posture, graceful movements, diet, breathing and meditation. Taken together attention to these actions helps refresh and rejuvenate the body. If such forces as gravity and aging conspire to “knock the blocks down” a routine of hatha yoga will go a long way towards re-stacking the blocks on a daily basis.

As mentioned above, Hittleman's book is a self-study guide and is progressive in nature. I have recommended this book to countless patients and athletes. In fact the small bookstore where I live started to carry five or six copies all the time because I sent so many people to get a copy as part of their rehab plan. When I coached we always had a copy of the book on the equipment cart along with the jump ropes, medicine balls and balance boards. If an athlete was injured or had something like mono they would come to practice, do the yoga and still feel a part of the team.

In all the clinics I have done Hittleman's Yoga book is always on my short list of recommended reads just for that reason. I literally have recommended the book a thousand times.

