

Yoga helps reduce runners' pain

This article appeared in several dailies across Canada.

TORONTO – A side glance into a streetfront window can serve up many revelations: one might spot a mannequin sporting a must-have outfit or marvel at a dazzling display. For Christine Felstead, it was a glimpse of her own image that prompted the longtime runner to take notice.

"I had really horrible posture," she recalled. "I would go by a store window and see my reflection . . . and go, 'Oh, my God.' I was in my early 40s at the time and I thought, 'This isn't going to be pretty old age.'"

Felstead decided to sign up for once weekly yoga classes to improve her posture. She continued to run five to six times a week, and the wear and tear from pounding the pavement was gradually taking its toll.

She recalled Thursday night pub outings following 12-to-19 kilometre runs and the stiffness in her hips when she'd stand up.

"In a really sick way, I used to enjoy that feeling," said Felstead, who ran in at least 50 races including two New York City marathons over 20 years. "That kind of reminded me of how hard I worked, not really appreciating that really wasn't a good signal my body was sending me."

The feelings after attending her first yoga class were far different. "I just remember feeling really good after, just feeling lighter, feeling a little bit more balanced, feeling taller."

"When I was running marathons, of course, I thought I was really fit. Then when I started doing yoga, I thought, 'You know what? Fitness is more than just being able to run long distances.' My whole definition changed of what a fit body was."

A two-week yoga retreat in Hawaii officially triggered the shift from a casual interest in yoga to a calling. "I think because I didn't run in that two-week timeframe . . . my body was just starting to respond, it was starting to feel the effects of yoga on a deeper level," she said. "It was transformative."

Felstead, 54, would eventually give up running for good, and while studying to be a yoga instructor she seized on an opportunity to leave the corporate world.

Despite having traded in her trainers for a yoga mat, she decided to draw on her own experiences by targeting runners and their needs. Yoga for Runners offers a slate of services for the novice to the experienced, including an eight-week introductory series where students learn about the foundations of yoga and how to incorporate it in their post-run routine. Drop-in classes also focus on key exercises, targeting hips, hamstrings, core strength and breathing.

Felstead recently released a DVD broken into short segments for runners to incorporate into their workouts, demonstrating poses like spinal twists for the lower back and hamstring stretches using yoga bands to help soothe and rejuvenate their bodies.

Workouts can also be tailored to the season, Felstead said. For example, when there's more ice on the ground, hip flexors and pulled groins may be more of an issue, so time is spent focusing on opening up quads and hip flexor work, she said. "When I geared my classes to runners, it was 'Don't make the same mistake that I made. Integrate yoga now very early in your running career so that you can run forever.'"

Bruce Craven of the Sport Medicine and Science Council of Saskatchewan said his organization has held yoga sessions for athletes, and he has encouraged marathoners and rowers alike to take up the discipline.



Christine Felstead, Creator, CF Yoga for Runners™

Not unlike pilates and tai chi, the benefit yoga presents is that it offers core and flexibility training with a relaxation component, he said. "Most people will stretch for probably 15-20 seconds, whereas yoga tends to have more sustained holds, and the longer you hold the stretch you can get bigger benefits because you learn to relax that area and focus on staying strong in the core."

Emma Followes started interspersing yoga into her exercise regimen four years ago when she first attended the Yoga for Runners workshop series. Followes goes to at least three yoga classes in addition to running 40 kilometres a week. While she credits both yoga and visits to the chiropractor for helping ease nagging hip pain caused by running, incorporating the new discipline has reaped unexpected benefits.

"In the longer term, as I was doing more yoga and doing more long distance running, I noticed that my stamina had gotten even better," she said.

Yoga for Runners currently offers classes in Ontario and Alberta, and Felstead hopes it will continue to expand.