

Yoga and the athlete: better fitness

By Martha M. Loomer
staff writer

Ellen Thompson adjusts her goggles and clips her 5-foot-2-inch 112-pound frame into the pool. She moves easily through the water, counting laps, shutting the world and everything else out.

George Wisman at 32 regards the 10 years of his life he "wasted" before making an emotional, mental and physical commitment to becoming fit. His training program has given him more than fitness, it's revitalized his outlook on life.

Pam Touhey moves fluidly into the position: the dog, the triangle, the lotus. . . Her classes on yoga draw young and old. Not many who learn the moves with her ever say "I can't," "I wouldn't" or "I shouldn't" again. The lives of these athletes are straddled with the ancient heritage of hatha yoga. For each, it is a separate

road to physical goals that provides a strong base for their lives.

Touhey has this picture of herself taken several years ago, after the birth of her twin boys (now 7) and before her daughter (now 4) was born. It's not the ordinary before-and-after picture. Although she's now thinner, the sparkle in her eyes witness a new stature that bespeaks a confidence one can easily feel envious of.

The new "toughness" Touhey found in herself wasn't accidental. It was through a combination of a background of yoga with a search for fulfillment as an athlete.

"George Wisman was in one of my yoga classes," Touhey said. "He'd been competing in several triathlons, and I was impressed with his approach to athletic training."

"He was looking at yoga for both mental and physical benefits. I was looking to George for direction in training. I thought I'd really like to be

able to run a 10K (6.2-mile) race."

Since Wisman began helping Touhey with a training program for a budding athlete, she has taken seven minutes (about one minute per mile) off her first 10K run. Her last six months of training has concentrated on efforts to prepare for her first triathlon this spring. Wisman is coaching her in swimming and biking as well as the running.

Wisman doesn't hesitate to mention how badly out of shape he was when he tried to re-enter the athletic world. Smoking a half-pack of cigarettes a day, eating a rich diet and feeling the stress of the scramble for money and success in the working world made him a self-confessed mess.

"A friend begged me into entering my first triathlon in 1982. I had about six months to prepare for it: a one-mile swim, seven-mile run and 25-mile bike. It really beat me. . . I didn't do it with style. I was hurt, but I finished."

Wisman vowed, for his own satisfaction, never to feel that out-of-shape again. He started to read everything he could find about swimming, biking and running, and any combination of the sports.

He began to notice a pattern through the publications. He saw through the words that most people couldn't follow what the experts were suggesting. Everyone has a different body; everyone must set his own limits.

Wisman saw the need for personalized training programs. He also saw the need for a balance between mind and body, so he took up yoga to help him with concentration, flexibility and endurance.

"The average person is totally capable of everything," his second triathlon, run several

months after the first, was a little easier on him. He became more committed, more efficient and there was a shift for the better in performance as he worked at total training.

Now, having competed in 15 or so triathlons, he is finishing in the top 20 percent. To Wisman, however, the joy is in the training, and he doesn't weigh success on how the race ends.

The discipline and determination that Wisman brought to his shape-up program was the same base that Touhey used to spring from in her first athletic endeavors.

To Touhey, the athletic training blends nicely with her career of helping people become fit. Wisman's help in her fitness training breaks

down to five parts: (1) strength; (2) speed — comes naturally, do not pay attention to it; (3) endurance — body uses oxygen better; (4) flexibility; and (5) coordination and skill that comes from practice.

"Yoga is an exercise in mind, body and spirit," Wisman said. "It's what the triathlete is trying to do."

Running has gotten some bad press because most people overdo it, Wisman said.

"They aren't prepared. . . to make such physical demands of their bodies."

Yoga is an important part of the athlete's life: not only helping him get in shape, but in preventing injury and enabling a faster comeback if injury does occur, Wisman said.

A generic 10-speed bicycle stands ready for triweekly workouts in Wisman's recreation room at home. He finds bike riding the most demanding of all the parts of a triathlon and one that can also keep a person the fittest. Indoor cycling is also the most boring.

"I practice yoga positions on the bike: move forward, lean forward, stand up. It helps keep my muscles from tightening up."

With the headwind roller system, Wisman uses for his indoor roadwork, the challenges of just staying upright would prevent boredom for the average rider.

"Bikers are prone to knee injuries and road rash (if you ride a bike, you will fall). Biking is the most high-tech and complicated part of the triathlon and one which demands sharpness and alertness."

Wisman does admit to off days, but says that they are there to provide balance for the emotional and mental sides of the athlete.

In the training program set up for Touhey he encourages her to think of different aspects of the exercise as she works out. For instance, in swimming he might implore her to concentrate on her breathing one day while yelling at her to keep the elbow bent at another practice. Changing focus during training, he feels, makes for the total athlete.

A rather reluctant athlete, Ellen Thompson likens her swim program to the awareness she gets from her daily yoga sessions.

"I use yoga to follow my body, to see how it feels, to tune in and even allow rest when it needs it. I never attempt sports activity without a yoga warmup," she said.

It was to improve her tennis game that she first took up yoga 10 years ago, but it was a combination of her athletics and the Hatha way that has brought her to a fitness level that she says guides her life.

"Yoga helps the swimmer get a streamlined feeling, working with each part of the body, then bringing it all together. . . I think about moving

through the water as efficiently as possible," Thompson said.

"I think with yoga you learn how to control yourself and the things you can't control, you learn to adapt to. I'm now working on a different approach to yoga at classes at the Ann Arbor Y to build strength," she adds.

A former elementary school teacher who stayed home to raise three children, Thompson has found yoga to be the way to build strength and be able to enjoy many athletic sports and feel the best she has ever felt.

Touhey has made yoga, and athletics, a family affair. The 33-year-old often runs with her twin sons and preteens. On an average weekend, Patrick Touhey, 37, joins the family for a run along Hines Park Drive. Pat, involved in several area businesses, uses exercises to unwind before he starts running.

As Pam Touhey became more involved in developing her athletic abilities, she began to see another niche for herself by combining yoga intuition and sports massage. In the last New York marathon she went along with runner Doug Kurtis of Novi to be his massage therapist.

"You have to be able to sense how the muscles feel, what the runner needs. The massage can help the tightened muscles relax and renew themselves without injury," she said.

Kurtis finished 40th in the New York event; not the best he had hoped for, but with his worldwide competitive schedule, a very good showing nonetheless.

"Use yoga to measure tension in the body," suggests Touhey. "Yoga can help reduce injury by helping a person stay tuned into the body. . . each message you get, be open and aware."



Being as fit as you can be — and then doing what you want with ease — is the goal of the classes Pam Touhey teaches. She's been training as a triathlete herself this spring and will be balancing her yoga workouts with swimming, running and bicycling.

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