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In Over Their Heads

* Americans' competitive nature and a dearth of seasoned instructors mean more injuries on the yoga mat.

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While taking a yoga class in February, Jeana LaVardera of Santa Monica went into a backbend-like pose from which she never fully recovered.

The 31-year-old, who had been taking yoga classes off and on for six years, had assumed a position known in yoga as an upward-facing bow. Her teacher tried to increase the student's arch by pulling her upper arms forward. Instead of gaining height, LaVardera collapsed. The adjustment--which experts say should almost never be done--severed the super-scapular nerve in LaVardera's right shoulder. LaVardera now goes to physical therapy three times a week and may need surgery. She has almost no shoulder strength and can't fully rotate her arm.

As more Americans take up yoga, related injuries are also on the rise. Some injuries are to be expected, of course, as happens whenever overzealous newcomers catch on to a fitness trend. But yoga experts also blame the injuries on inexperienced teachers hastily trained to meet the new demand.

"Five years ago, I used to see about one student in 30 classes with a yoga-related injury. Today it's more like one in five," says Mark Stephens, a well-known L.A.-based yoga instructor. "In the past people were drawn to yoga for the mind-body-spirit connection; today the motivation is a vigorous workout and a great body."

More than 18 million people now practice yoga, up from 6 million in 1994, according to a 1998 survey conducted by the Wall Street Journal and NBC. That number is expected to be much higher now. Yoga is among the fastest-growing types of exercise classes offered in gyms and health clubs. A survey of U.S. fitness centers conducted by IDEA Health and Fitness Assn. found that 69% now offer yoga classes, compared with only 31% in 1996 and 57% just last year.

Popularity, yoga experts say, has its down side. To meet the rising demand for yoga, many fitness instructors are signing up for quickie yoga training--some are jumping on the yoga bandwagon at the urging of their health club, others on their own. And, to make matters worse, consumers often don't check out the qualifications of the instructors they've chosen to guide them into yoga's sometimes-unnatural positions.

"I'm pleased people from all walks are embracing yoga and seeing its benefits, but becoming a skilled yoga teacher takes a long time," says Anne O'Brien, a yoga instructor who, as director of conference business for Yoga Journal, sets up national training conferences for those interested in teaching yoga. "I want to embrace all yoga, but I can't embrace all training programs."

The expedient courses include online, home study and video-based programs, as well as weekend workshops. Although participants may get the chance to call themselves yoga teachers, their diplomas are of dubious merit. No nationally approved certification or license exists or is even required for yoga teachers.

In LaVardera's case, the instructor, it turned out, had been practicing yoga only two years and teaching for less than one. Although that's more training than many instructors have, it's less than ideal, say experts in the field. "If I'd known her credentials upfront, I wouldn't have put as much trust in her," says LaVardera, a massage therapist, who currently can't work.

From Sacred Path to the American Gym

A Sanskrit word that means union with spirit, yoga started in India 5,000 years ago and to many there and elsewhere is considered the sacred path to divine realization. Visionary yoga leaders brought the practice to this country 140 years ago, after which Hatha yoga, the most physical branch of yoga, took hold. Hatha yoga uses poses (asanas) and breathing (pranayama) to enhance the mind-body connection. Other branches focus more on meditation, chanting, selfless service and devotion.

No one can say exactly why it has caught on with the American mainstream, but celebrities, athletes, corporate America, even the medical community, are espousing and embracing its benefits. Madonna, Gwyneth Paltrow, Sting, Shaquille O'Neal and Tiger Woods all assume the occasional lotus. Companies such as Nike, Citibank, HBO and IBM provide on-site yoga classes for employees. Recently yoga made both "Oprah" and the cover of Time. Moreover, Western medical practitioners--in a slow but increasing willingness to embrace Eastern medical practices--are

recognizing yoga's benefits and are recommending yoga to more patients, including those suffering from heart disease, cancer and depression.

However, given our culture's appetite for fast food, fast fitness and a fast buck, American yoga has evolved much differently than its Indian counterpart. Such hurrying, especially for the sake of capitalism, is the antithesis of yoga, which emphasizes tranquillity and spiritual enlightenment.

Historically in India, a person practiced for 20 years, then apprenticed for five more years before becoming a teacher, says Stephens. In the United States, few have that kind of patience. "Ideally, instructors here have 10 years of practice followed by two to three years of apprenticeship," he says. "But now you see aerobics instructors and personal trainers picking up on the trend and starting to teach after just months, sometimes only weeks."

Those offering short-term yoga training defend their practices, saying their instruction fills a specific fitness need.

YogaFit in Hermosa Beach was among the first to bring yoga into the fitness industry, says founder Beth Shaw, training 4,000 instructors since 1994 and now 100 per weekend. Through the company, fitness, health or spa professionals can become a yoga instructor in three days for \$299.

"Fitness professionals are the natural people to spread yoga to the masses," Shaw says, "because they are already familiar with group movement."

To those who criticize her short-term approach, she says: "Who do they think is building their market? Our style of teaching yoga is more likely to flip the switch of someone new to yoga than a woo-woo-style class with lots of Sanskrit, chanting and difficult poses."

Some instruction doesn't even require participants to leave home. Integrative Yoga Therapy, in Hudson, Ohio, offers an online study course that, according to the Web site, "is open to all individuals who wish to deepen their knowledge of and connection to yoga." At the end of the course, which costs \$475, students receive a certificate of completion for a home study course in therapeutic yoga. The program, which is less than a year old, has 44 participants, says company spokeswoman Karen Romani, who considers the course "a foundation for teacher training."

Those who want to study at home, but offline, can take a correspondence course from Yogalink International. The San Diego-based company's basic course targets fitness professionals and includes six

lesson plans designed around nine yoga poses. The 15-to 20-hour self-paced course includes two books, a 60-minute video, a 35-minute audiotape and an exam, all for \$210. To receive Yogalink's teacher training certificate requires 13 more courses, says founder Mara Carrico. To date, none of the 200 participants have reached that goal.

"People ask me, 'How can you learn how to do yoga via correspondence?' Granted, it's not as good as in-person training, but I have students send me videos of them teaching classes and I do phone mentoring. The program is for those who don't have the time or money to go away to spend weeks studying with big masters. And we emphasize integrity."

Many experienced yoga professionals are highly critical of such training. Rama Berch, founder of Master Yoga Foundation, a San Diego-based teacher training center and yoga studio, particularly dislikes online and correspondence programs. "Somebody needs to handle you," she says. "I can't reposition your head over the computer or the phone."

Adds Stephens, who also founded the nonprofit Yoga Inside Foundation, which teaches yoga in inner-city schools and prisons: "There's no way that in a matter of days with any amount of reading, you will be qualified to teach You don't learn overnight or through books, or videos, but through many years of practice with the close guidance of a teacher. To presume you do [learn that way] puts students at significant risk of injury. How else can you know how all the different postures apply to all the different body types and health problems that comprise a class?"

Competitive Edge Can Lead to Trouble

Not all injuries can be blamed on an inexperienced teacher. "Nobody's a beginner in California," jokes Yoga Journal's O'Brien, who herself has practiced yoga for 10 years and has taught for six. "So many students who don't know their limits get into classes over their heads." Once in, students can get competitive. They compare themselves to the student on the next mat and wind up with a wrenched neck or dislocated shoulder.

Risks are particularly high in Ashtanga and power yoga, both popular in Southern California.

"It's a very athletic form of yoga. People jump into new positions without much attention to alignment, so in almost every move there's potential for injury," says Phyllis Pilgrim, fitness director at Rancho La Puente, an upscale resort in Tecate, Mexico, who has been teaching yoga for 40 years.

Mary Jagiello, who wasn't even in a power or Ashtanga yoga class, is one who wishes she'd started slower. The 60-something Mission Viejo woman couldn't wait to take up yoga after she retired last summer. But during her first class, while she was lunging on one leg, her knee started to shake. She ignored the warning and pressed on but then felt a searing pain, and her knee gave out. Now, whenever she knows she'll be on her feet or walking a lot, she wears a knee brace. And she's never been to another yoga class.

She says the teacher never warned her not to try to do what everyone else was doing. But she also blames herself. "I'm still kicking myself. The second I felt pain I should have stopped. Maybe it was a macho thing, but I wanted to keep up with the class."

Although the yoga community can't do much about inflated egos and competitive students, some members are trying, somewhat reluctantly, to set a new standard for teachers. The Yoga Alliance, a national organization with members representing all types of yoga, has taken up the task. Motivating practitioners is the fact that if they don't set standards for instructors, the government or insurance companies will, says Berch, who's also president of the Alliance.

The Yoga Alliance doesn't certify but, rather, registers yoga professionals, explains Berch. The group evaluates a practitioner's education, training and experience, and if he or she meets the criteria, the applicant becomes a registered yoga teacher, or RYT, at either the 200-or 500-hour level.

Though liberal in accepting all varieties of yoga, whether athletic, therapeutic or more meditative, the group requires those who qualify to have received at least 200 hours of training, including instruction in technique, anatomy, teaching methods and philosophy. Once registered, instructors pay \$40 a year for their membership, which includes a listing in the Yoga Alliance registry, where people can go for referral by location and type of yoga. Since the alliance started registering instructors in 1999, nearly 2,000 have joined.

Though the registry is the closest yoga has come to a national standard, not all support it, and many excellent instructors aren't registered. "Traditionally yoga has operated outside structure, so there's much resistance to this idea," O'Brien says. "But given how we are in America, we should have a certain licensing standard." At least it gives consumers some way of distinguishing those who have had only a weekend of training from those with a more solid yoga foundation, she says. Berch agrees and adds it's not injury she worries about but the

fact that people who take classes from fitness trainers-cum-yoga-teachers won't experience true yoga. "What they offer is sophisticated stretching. But yoga is not the poses. It's what the poses do to your inner state. So they, and by extension their students, are missing the point."

Yet, many people are happy with a more earthly yoga experience, and that's fine. "But as students progress," says O'Brien, "they need to be with an instructor who can further their practice in a safe way. And that comes from the teacher's own deep practice and experience."

PHOTO: Los Angeles yoga instructor Mark Stephens demonstrates the urdhva danuvasana, or upward-facing bow.

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PHOTOGRAPHER: ANN JOHANSSON / For The Times

PHOTO: Yoga instructor Sarah Mata helps a student assume a pose at Yoga Works in Santa Monica. Yoga's popularity in the U.S. has exploded.

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PHOTO: L.A. yoga instructor Mark Stephens demonstrates the astava krasana, or eight crooks pose.

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PHOTO: Sarah Mata, center, leads a class at Santa Monica's Yoga Works. More than 18 million people now practice yoga, up from 6 million in 1994, and some 69% of U.S. fitness centers now offer classes, surveys show.

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