

**It's Time for the Yoga Bears Show**  
**By Jennifer Jones - Staff Reporter**  
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Jacquelyn Cotey expected to meet some resistance when she introduced many of the Bears to yoga last season.

"One guy thought we were going to sit and chant," the yoga instructor said. "He came up after class and said, 'Man, this is so different. I thought we were going to sit there in an Indian pose and chant the whole time.'"

"Now in her second season with the team, Cotey continues to lead the sessions that have become part of the Bears' conditioning program. Some of the players voluntarily take part, while others are required to go as part of their training regimen. The Bears are just one of a growing number of NFL teams offering yoga with the hopes of improving the athletes' performances and decreasing the effects of injuries.

A fierce competitor who relishes a challenge, Booker stuck with it and ultimately was won over. He continues to attend the once-a-week classes with several of his teammates.

"It loosens us up," cornerback Jerry Azumah said. "We play a sport where every week we get hit and banged up, so it definitely has its benefits as far as getting our bodies loose and stretching our muscles. A lot of guys take advantage of that.

"It takes away some of the aches and pains, especially after a tough game. That's the most important thing because after a game, a lot of guys are sore and tight, whereas yoga opens you up."

This season, the Bears can take part in sessions at Halas Hall on Mondays and Fridays. The sessions last between 45 minutes and an hour. Cotey described the Monday class as restorative with the purpose of providing relief to sore muscles and working on flexibility, balance and strength. The Friday class gets players relaxed and focused leading up to the game.

"Athletes, because they are in such a strict training program and tend to overuse certain muscle groups, they become very tight," Cotey said. "It's going to improve their flexibility and give them stress relief so muscles are not cramping as much. There's going to be increased blood flow, so if they do have an injury or are recovering from an injury, it's going to decrease the time they're going to be out. It increases their energy level, and they can breathe better."

The number of players participating each day varies, but Cotey said usually 12 to 16 participate in each session. The Bears also can take advantage of the training during the offseason, when the classes are more intense.

"We're trying to see what kind of results we can get," tight end John Gilmore said earlier this season. "It all depends on if you're open to it. You have to get in touch with your body.

"It's all about breathing and stretching and focusing on your injuries. A lot of football players aren't used to that. We're used to running around and hitting and catching footballs. To really sit down and relax, it's a big difference for us."

Cotey sometimes finds it a challenge maintaining a sense of control in her classes. The players occasionally are amazed by the poses she asks them to do. And at times, they will be in a pose, look at a teammate and break into laughter when they see what they're doing.

But she said the players reprimand each other, telling their teammates to take it seriously, and some of the players even have shown up for the classes she teaches away from Halas Hall. Overall, she has been surprised by how fully some of the players have participated in her program.

"A lot of guys with injuries or guys who have had injuries in the past are doing it," Gilmore said. "It's a way to maintain flexibility, and when you're in the positions you're in, you can feel different stretches with different parts of your body, so I guess it's helping."

Cornerback R.W. McQuarters became interested in yoga shortly before he discovered the Bears were adding it to their workout program, and he has encouraged his teammates to participate in the classes.

"I didn't know what to expect," McQuarters said of his early experiences. "I heard about it and was like, 'Oh, I'm not that flexible.' I always wanted to be flexible, so I figured I'd start at a beginning course and move up. Everybody talked about yoga and how good it was, so I was going in to lengthen my muscles. It's good for recovery, flexibility and relaxation."

But some of the Bears seemed skeptical about the benefits of yoga.

"You're talking to the wrong guy," tight end Desmond Clark said in late September. "They're making me go. I don't necessarily want to be in there. I'm going because I had a hamstring injury. They're trying to do something to help guys out, but I think it's unnecessary."

Clark said he voluntarily participated in yoga classes in the past but did not feel he was getting a lot out of it, so he stopped. He said he understood why the coaches and trainers want him to attend the classes, but he feels his hamstring injury was just a freak occurrence and not an indication that he needs more stretching in his weekly workouts.

Punter Brad Maynard has tried yoga in the past but does not like it and said it hurt his back.

"I'm flexible enough," Maynard said. "I do tons of stretching on my own. It's just a waste of time for me."

Still, yoga is becoming more mainstream in the NFL. Other teams, including the Seattle Seahawks and Cincinnati Bengals, have incorporated it into their training regimens. And Dallas Cowboys running back Eddie George, who started doing yoga seven years ago, described part of his workout to Sports Illustrated in September.

Cotey understands how different yoga is for players who are not used to slowing down their bodies and focusing on their breathing. But she believes the NFL now is embracing it because it is seen as a potential way to get an edge on the competition.

"The quality of the athlete is improving so much," she said. "Teams now are looking for ways to go beyond their normal training and say, 'What can we do to be even better because we're all getting to that level of quality? What's going to make that little difference? And how are we going to help decrease injuries -- because that's a big part of the sport -- and create a more healthy athlete?'"