

Yoga Classes Winning Bears Over
By Larry Mayer
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LAKE FOREST, Ill. - No one has absorbed more monster hits without batting an eye than Marty Booker, but the Pro Bowl receiver was nearly knocked out of action recently by a 5-5, 122-pound woman who has never played a lick of football.

The Bears have incorporated yoga into their offseason conditioning program for the first time, and Booker still grimaces when recounting his first class with certified instructor and personal trainer Jacquelyn.

"I was hurting like I had just lifted weights," Booker said. "It was rough. I went home and my whole body was sore. When I first did it, I was thinking, 'This is not for me.' It takes a lot of flexibility and the stuff she had us doing was impossible."

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.

"After you get into it for a while, it starts to get easier and you can tell that it helps you a lot as far as stretching and flexibility," Booker said.

"If you keep doing it, I think it will really help with (preventing) injuries, like pulled hamstrings and pulled groins, because it really stretches you out. It takes you to the limit, I'll tell you that."

"After a while, you start to feel a little more fluid. You start to be able to do stuff like touch your toes, bend down and touch your head to your knee and stuff like that. After you get into it for a couple weeks, you start to notice results."

Cotey teaches two 60-75 minute yoga classes every Tuesday at Halas Hall. About 10-15 players attend each session. Regular participants include quarterback Kordell Stewart, wide receiver Dez White and cornerback Jerry Azumah, among others.

The players may or may not know that the science and practice of yoga originated in India more than 5,000 years ago. Yoga consists of stretching, postures, breathing, meditation and relaxation. It develops flexibility, stamina and strength while fostering concentration and calmness.

While yoga may seem better suited for a cerebral sport than one known for its violent collisions, several Bears are already seeing benefits on the practice field.

"I'm kind of tight, so it helps with my stretching techniques," said safety Mike Green. "And when I get tired I feel myself doing yoga breathing, so it's helped a lot."

"My problem is with my hips," said cornerback Todd McMillon. "I try to work on them, and by doing that I feel my hips loosening up."

The Bears were decimated by injuries last season, but that isn't why was brought in to teach the classes. Most of the injuries in 2002 were more serious than muscle pulls or strains.

"The injury factor from a year ago really didn't play any part in the decision to have yoga," said coach Dick Jauron.

"In our offseason program, our No. 1 goal obviously is to get our players better prepared for the football season and yoga fits in well for us."

"Everybody on our team could gain something from it in terms of the flexibility, the discipline necessary to work in the class and to get something out of it, and just the mental side of it."

"It's another thing you have to prepare for. You have to understand what you're trying to get done and you have to work at getting it done to get something out of it."

Cotey was apprehensive about how she would be accepted by the players, but she has been pleasantly surprised. The athletes check their egos at the door and don't balk at trying anything she suggests-even if that means doing a headstand to improve circulation.

"They really are pretty open-minded," Cotey said. "They've all tried everything and most of them have done better than they thought they could. They have a lot of strength, which is really a big component of it."

"They're working on their flexibility and they participate pretty well. It's not like any of them sit out, so that's a good thing for them."

Cotey plays soothing music and prohibits gum chewing in an effort to keep the players focused on the task at hand. But that mission isn't always accomplished.

"She's doing flexible moves and hardly anybody on this team is flexible, so when we see her get in those positions, people start to laugh," said receiver Ahmad Merritt. "Everybody else is trying to get in those positions and they're falling over. Sometimes it's hard to concentrate in there."

"If somebody can't do something, we may laugh," McMillon added. "It's not all quiet because she's playing the music. We still have our fun. Guys will be guys."

It's good seeing them trying something new.