

LA YOGA

AYURVEDA AND HEALTH

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SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA'S
FREE YOGA MAGAZINE

heart of an athlete

asana + attitude =
performance

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LA marathon

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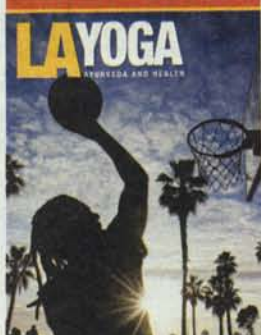
special section

Resolution

Our bodies are meant to move, through yoga *asana*, hiking, running, walking, cycling, indoors, outdoors, on the water or on a court. In this issue, we delve into the heart of the athlete and explore the intersection of yoga, *asana* and athletics.

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talking about the heart of an
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by felicia m. tomasko, rn



Photos: Sara Rubinstein

WHEN MATTHEW SANFORD WAS AN athletic thirteen-year-old, one devastating moment when his family's car slipped off an overpass changed everything. His father and sister died in the car accident that left him paralyzed from the chest down. At the age of thirteen he lost the ability to use his active body as he knew it. The conventional rehabilitation and medical interventions left him feeling disembodied, but in his twenties, Sanford began practicing yoga with Southern California-based Iyengar certified teacher Jo Zuckovich. Through yoga, he found a radical experience of freedom and the ability to find the joy of embodied experience he once knew as an athletic young person.

Sanford deepened his study of yoga, training to teach in the Iyengar system and thanks to the efforts of many in the community, including Jo Zuckovich and Gloria Stenberg,

Mr. B.K.S. Iyengar himself bestowed on the wheelchair-mobile yogi certification as an Iyengar teacher, recognizing Sanford's study and accomplishments.

In his award-winning book *Waking: A Memoir of Trauma and Transcendence*, Sanford documented his experience of physical awakening and uncovering the subtlety of experiencing *prana* (life-force) amidst, or even because of, his disabilities and abilities. Based in Minneapolis, he teaches yoga to people with all types of bodies. Sanford founded the nonprofit organization, Mind Body Solutions, as part of his mission to transform the current practices of rehabilitation. During a raging blizzard, Sanford took time out of writing another book to talk to *LA YOGA* about being an athlete in any body, the yoga of athletics and waking *prana*. And as Sanford himself said, even though he lost his overt athletic ex-

pression through the accident, he didn't lose athleticism at all.

FMT: How did your injury change your experience of athletics?

MS: When I was first injured, since I was such an athletic little kid; there was a big push to say "Oh Matt you could play all sorts of wheelchair sports." I didn't like wheelchair sports because of the violence of it – I'd already absorbed so much trauma in my body, it didn't feel right. Because I'm paralyzed from the chest down, including my abdominal muscles, my balance isn't so great, so when reaching over I was off balance and it didn't have the same grace to it. I ended up breaking my neck so I was vulnerable to any kind of fall, especially with wheelchair basketball. If you've seen murder ball (adaptive rugby) it's pretty intense, people flying out of their chairs. So there was a lot of deadening and grief to

“not follow the path I was supposed to follow” in wheelchair athletics.

But adaptive athletics didn't capture for me what I intuitively loved about athletics and sports. A lot of athletic expression is already a mind/body experience, though not necessarily intellectually a mind/body experience. For me – and I didn't realize as much until after I was injured – athletics is sensual experience disguised as competition.

Feel stuff as a sensation. Take the time when you're swimming, not to swim as fast as you can swim to get across the pool, but feel the change in sound, the feeling of the water against your body.

Any athlete who is decent at it realizes that it's not a series of skills you acquire. Shooting a free-throw is a sensation; hitting a baseball, same thing. If you're thinking too hard when you have to swing at that baseball, you're done. You have to feel it and be in rhythm with it and move. I don't think I would have had these thoughts had I not lost the ability to do some of this stuff. So I'm not sure if I would have seen it the same. The love of sports is the purest love I've ever experienced.

FMT: In what way?

MS: I loved the feel of it, the joy of it. I'm not the kind of athlete that would be a great runner or swimmer. I literally love balls. I love throwing them and catching them. I love what your mind has to do playing catch. If you are too judgmental when you're playing catch and the ball's coming at you fast, you will seize up.

There's a real ability to watch the ball come in and trust your body and hands to get it. One of my favorite things to do now is play catch. I have an eight-year-old son and we play all the time because I want him to be comfortable with a ball coming at you at high velocity. It's a huge experience in trusting yourself. I reconnected to that whole unified, coordinated movement through yoga.

FMT: How is it possible to keep the joy?

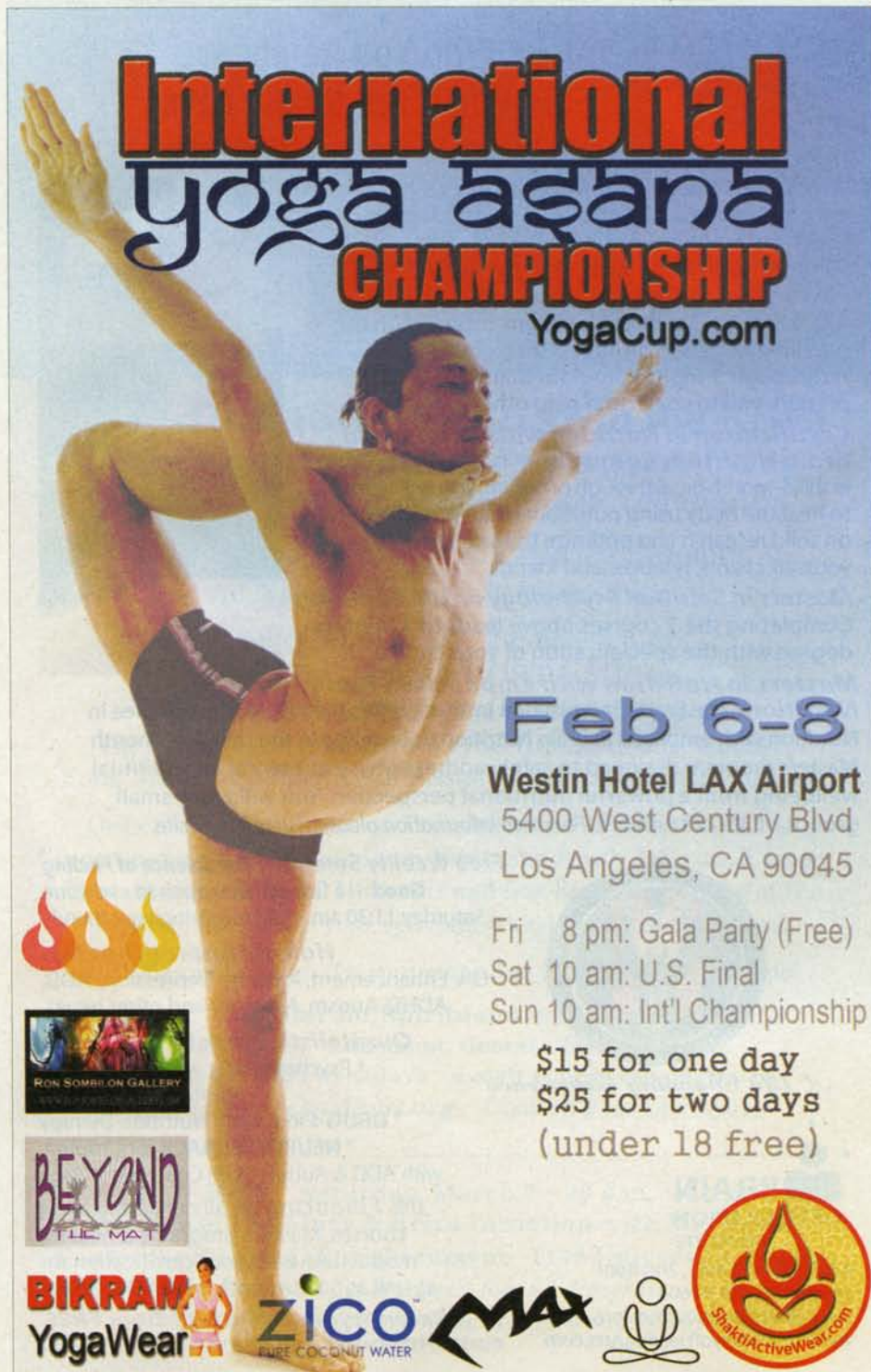
MS: People use competition as motivation, but I really think that some of the time it's

harder to see it when you're involved in a competitive game. I believe you should explore it through your yoga practice. And feel stuff as a sensation. Take the time when you're swimming, not to swim as fast as you can swim to get across the pool, but feel the change in sound, the feeling of the water against your body.

When you're out shooting baskets, feel the

rhythm when you dribble the ball, the way you can let that feeling go through your whole body, the feeling of it leaving your hand. Follow the sensation and the feeling of bending your legs, and then coming up through your spine and out through your hands. You remember what it feels like, as opposed to what you achieve.

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FMT: In yoga, people get attached to the pose they can achieve versus what they can feel.

MS: There are two basic concepts in yoga taught through *asana*: You need to go down to go up, and to move in to move out. Use the *asana* as a vehicle to feel what that feels like. The instruction amplifies this. Let your strength go in service of sen-

sation, of the direction of the pose, as opposed to thinking that your actions create the pose.

FMT: In terms of sensation and yoga practice, I think sometimes people can injure themselves because they're going for a certain sensation.

MS: It's a sensation a flexible person may be lacking because they don't have the tight mus-

cles to give them feedback. They go to the very limit because that's the only way they get feedback and that's how they get injured. So you have to help them develop strength before they get to the limit so the sensation comes from not pushing against the edge of their pose. You have to teach them to bring the muscle to the bone before they get to the edge of their flexibility so they can get more of the inward sensation of the poses.

Think about someone with flexible knees, they stand in *tadasana* (mountain pose), but they hit their knees really hard back. They're pushing against the back of their knees to feel something but they're feeling it in the wrong place. By trying to feel it they're not engaging their thigh right. That person should try to push their calves forward and push their thighs back. When they get that action they can feel the sensation descending into the floor. You encourage them to follow that.

Mr. Iyengar says this thing that has totally influenced everything I do. You only need two things to do a yoga pose: a sense of direction and center of gravity.

If you train only through your muscular action you are missing something. If your strength doesn't go in service of a sense of direction in a yoga pose, it will be violent to your body over time. If your strength can go in service of a sense of direction in your pose, your pose will get more graceful.

FMT: I think that's something that really takes training because people sometimes think that they're going for a sense of direction when they're pushing to that edge.

MS: If you take someone who's really flexible and try and show them a sense of direction in their pose, then they won't have to push against the edge of their flexibility to feel the pose. You have to help them see it a different way, to feel in the poses.

FMT: You can use that same thing whether you have full use of your body or not, whether you are flexible or strong or whether you have some sort of disability (for want of a better word) or injury.

MS: That is exactly where the insight comes from. You show someone how to feel sensation, a sense of direction that's trying to be manifest in a yoga pose and then they can follow that with their muscular action, even if they can't you still have to help them see it and feel it.

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FMT: Do you now have sensations in parts of your body that your doctors told you after the accident you would never feel again?

MS: Absolutely, without a doubt. That's the whole cornerstone of the level of sensation that I was told about by doctors that were phantom feelings.

If you're thinking too hard when you have to swing at that baseball, you're done. You have to feel it and be in rhythm with it and move.

Alignment and precision amplify that level of sensation, that's why I ended up being an Iyengar student. For sure I can feel energy move down. Right now I'm lifting my chest, hitting my femur bones and grounding my heels. But I'm doing it on the inside. What I find though is that level of inward sensation is the level that receives breathing better and the breath as energy better. So the development of inward sensation within the *asana* is crucial, I think, to helping you realize *pranayama*, feel it in the poses, or your breath in your poses.

FMT: You've described *prana*.

MS: *Prana* travels more through bones than it does through the muscles, in my opinion. In my experience, you can get that sense of direction if you're sitting in *dandasana* (staff pose), and someone put their foot on your sacrum, all of a sudden your chest will lift you'll feel energy in legs. You will have done nothing and you've done no muscular action. But you changed the direction and feeling in your bones, and you will see something and then you will learn how to work the muscle.

When someone pushes at my sacrum and I can feel the sensation but I can't direct the energy but if I belt my thighs and get my femur bones hitting straight up and down towards the ceiling, that helps my experience. I'm doing exactly what you would do as you roll your inner thigh up and down. Mr. Iyengar uses a prop to help you see the direction in the pose. I think people haven't fully appreciated why there are props.

What's wonderful is you encounter all

that instruction that's come down over the years. Like in *dandasana*: with your sacrum in, your chest lifts and all of a sudden you feel the energy in your upper thighs and then out through your heels. That level of sensation occurs even if you are paralyzed. I can't ground the femur and hit the thighs down and stretch out through my heels the way you can through your mus-

cles. But I can feel the sensation from that adjustment.

FMT: Because then it's *prana* and *prana* moves whether your muscles contract or not.

MS: That is how the work I'm doing will revolutionize how we teach rehabilitation.

FMT: In everyone's life, the body's ability to
(Continued on p.44)



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perform or respond changes, some more dramatically or suddenly than others.

MS: What I confronted as a thirteen-year-old and eventually reclaimed as a twenty-five-year-old through yoga is a process every recreational athlete or professional athlete goes through, such as when your body starts to get more sore when you go out and play a pickup basketball game and you have to go take Advil because your knees hurt.

I think yoga has a lot to teach an athlete, especially an aging athlete. There is another way to do it that doesn't take so much will or physical strength.

One reason why I love sports and watching sports is the grace of how people use their bodies. You can see this watching how someone at their peak uses their body in space, like Michael Jordan or Tiger Woods. They have brilliant mind/body integration shown through beautiful athletics. When an athlete's done with their career they close the door, I'm sad about that because they should find a way to still experience the core of what they love and realize that it wasn't just about playing basketball, it was about these other things.

I think yoga has a lot to teach an athlete, especially an aging athlete. There is another way to do it that doesn't take so much will or physical strength. After all, Mr. Iyengar can practice drop-backs at ninety.



It's not unlike when you're holding a pose for a long time. Where does the strength come from? Some ancient texts talk about the fact that yoga doesn't begin until the point of failure. I don't teach that way, but I can see exactly why they say that. Right when you grip so hard you can't hold anymore, you have to find another type of resource. As you age, you find another type of strength, one that comes more from the breath, alignment, precision balance rather than muscular action.

When I realized that, the sad little boy who

had lost his athleticism got way happier, because he entered my yoga practice. The joy of movement came back to me. I feel, and write in *Waking*, that athletics is sensual beauty disguised as competition. What's going on in athletics is so much of what happens in yoga, that sensual beauty disguised as competition. You can say yoga is sensual beauty disguised as *asana*.

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For more information about Matthew Sanford, visit: mindbodysolutions.org; matthewsanford.com

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