

Yoga at Northcliffe Surf Club



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ABOVE: Shannon Eckstein is the current Australian and World Ironman Champion.

Photograph by www.harvplk.com

Greg Wythes examines how yoga has helped Australia's most successful surf lifesaving club.

The Northcliffe Surf Club is the premier surf lifesaving club in Australia. For the past four years, it has won the national championships and its members include Australian champions in a variety of events and categories. The club has set a standard of excellence in training and performance that is unsurpassed. Thus, in early 2007, when head coach Pat O'Keefe decided to add yoga to the training program, it was greeted with amazement from rival clubs, and skepticism from within his own club. Clearly, many thought that the program was effective enough as it was, and that yoga had little to offer elite athletes already honed to near perfection. Pat himself is regarded as very old-school in his approach. He rarely talks and never gives encouragement or praise to his charges.

The surf-lifesaving culture is tough, as tough as any other sporting culture in Australia. It is rigid in structure, built on an intense physical discipline and a denial of emotion. It demands a mindset that is prepared to take risks to save lives in dangerous surf conditions, and to face down any fear that this may entail. And the training, especially at Northcliffe, reinforced and encouraged this mindset. Success, both on patrol at the beach, and in competition with other clubs, had been bred in these conditions.

"WE'RE BOMBASTIC," SAYS PAT, "AND YOGA IS THE OPPOSITE" so it may have come as a surprise when he chose Gold Coast yoga teacher Santina Giardina to work with his squad. He did not make the yoga sessions compulsory and there were to be only two classes each week. Understandably, the initial response was less than enthusiastic. Some of the team stayed away. Some came for the novelty. Others came because it was a part of the program and they were dedicated to their training, whatever it might entail. There was little encouragement for Santina in those first weeks. The athletes were unprepared to commit to yoga as a worthwhile form of training until they saw results. For them yoga was a fringe activity – unproven and lacking any real credibility in their world. And they saw it only in terms of physical training: stretching, strengthening, and toning. The broader benefits of yoga were entirely outside of their awareness or their interest.



L to R: Bruce, Shannon (back), Elizabeth and Marg (back).

“This was the hardest class I’ve ever taught,” remembers Santina. “I nearly gave up at times. They were non-responsive and closed off. I began to realise that they didn’t have the language to respond to yoga. They didn’t talk to each other and their coaches didn’t talk to them. So I began to look for other ways to reach them.”

SANTINA STARTED GOING TO THEIR carnivals on weekends. She watched them perform in competition, and she stayed behind after the scheduled classes to talk to them individually about the parts of their bodies that were sore or causing problems. She began to connect with them personally.

“It took a while to develop the trust,” says Dan Norton-Smith, assistant coach at Northcliffe. “She had kids aged 14-15, through to 50 year olds, all of them athletes training 35-40 hours a week, with yoga on top of that. So they were sceptical to begin with, but slowly they began to feel the benefits.” And at first the benefits seemed to be mainly physical.

At 24 years of age, Shannon Eckstein is the current Australian and World Ironman Champion. He has noticed significant changes in his performance since he began attending

Santina’s classes. “This is my first season of yoga,” he says, “and I’ve had a great season. I’ve stayed entirely injury free. I’ve got increased flexibility but also more strength in a greater range of movement. Yoga requires a different kind of strength. You think you’re big and strong, but the postures require something different. Before each race I now do three minutes of the full yoga breath to flush my blood with oxygen and to calm me down.”

Bruce Kolkka grew up at the Northcliffe club and now competes in the 50-54 Masters category. He is the current World Champion in the Board Rescue event. “Yoga was an unknown class of exercise to begin with,” says Bruce, “but now I feel like I’m getting to know my body much better. I’ve got increased movement and more awareness, and more reach out of my stroke. I’ve never done any flexibility work before but I can see great benefits.”

AS THE SQUAD GREW TO TRUST SANTINA further, she was able to bring more depth to the classes. “Yoga gives something back,” says Jo Marrable, the current Australian and World Masters Champion. “It’s rejuvenating. I tend to

go back to the breath when I’m fatigued and this really helps with my recovery. Being a little older and more experienced than some of the others, I can see the spiritual side, and I’ve opened up to this broader aspect of yoga. It’s really helped in re-assessing what I’m doing, addressing my life and my spirituality. The way Santina teaches and expresses it, puts it in a way I can understand. I’ve found a strong connection with yoga, and with Santina as a teacher.”

ELIZABETH PLUIMERS IS THE CURRENT Australian and World Champion in a number of events. She took a little time to adjust to the effects of yoga on her training, but now attends extra classes outside the Northcliffe schedule. She has noticed a psychological impact on the way she now approaches competition, as well as the physical benefits. “It’s a different form of training, and it took a while to accept.” says Elizabeth. “After the classes, I was feeling soreness in different places and I was unsure for a month or so. The stretching helps, but there’s a lot of mental training too, especially when you’re holding a pose to push your body a little further. Previously in competition, I always used to think about the other athletes and competing against them.

Santina has changed my focus to think more about my own performance, my own body, so now it's more internal competition than external."

"**THERE ARE A LOT OF FACTORS THAT ARE** out of your control in this sport," says Dan Norton-Smith. "Especially when you're being pounded by the surf. Yoga has helped to strengthen our team mentally, in particular the younger athletes. It gives them the ability to control how they respond in those situations. And it helps you to find yourself before and during an event. Santina's been a big influence. She's very strong with the athletes, and she knows the body so well – all the specific issues for the specific events – but she brings something extra as well. She's certainly got an x-factor to her."

Talking to the athletes at Northcliffe, it becomes clearer that this x-factor is an important aspect of the classes. Santina does bring something extra. She has a particular passion and sensitivity that these athletes respond to, which allows them to open themselves to yoga, allows them to trust her in those parts of

themselves where they are vulnerable, as well as where they are strong.

"I work with the athletes' processes to gain their trust and respect," says Santina, "and I seem to have an eye for hooking into their processes, not just getting them to move in and out of postures. Once I have their trust, I encourage them to exist in their own process without having meaning attached

to it. For example, whether it's a great posture or a bad posture is judged within their own frame of reference. I try to make the practice a balancing out of their training regime and not an extension of it."

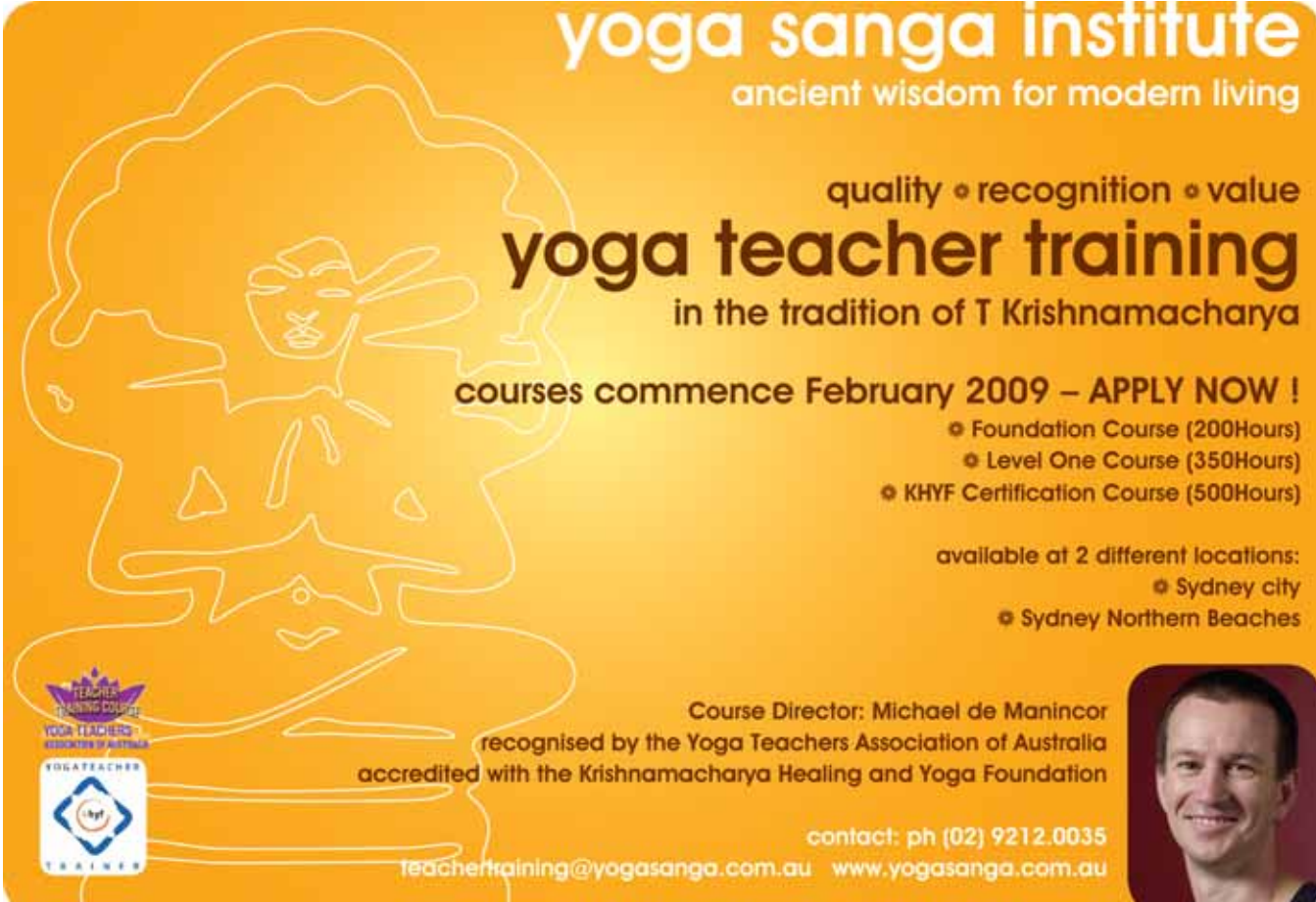
SANTINA BRINGS A UNIQUE SET OF LIFE experiences and training to her work in yoga. She is deeply influenced by Gestalt psychology – a modality that itself draws strongly on eastern philosophies – and one of the key features of Gestalt is

connectedness. This connectedness can be as broad as one's connection to the universe, or as intimate as the connection between one person and another. For Santina, connection is the foundation of her teaching relationship. As Mark Togni, from The Gold Coast Yoga Centre puts it: "All of us teach yoga, but do we connect to our students? Santina has found a way to

Yoga has helped to strengthen our team mentally...it helps you to find yourself.

reach people through yoga, especially elite athletes."

"WHEN WE ARE WORKING IN THE POSTURES, I try to engage all their senses, so that they are fully present, the body working against gravity, time, and space in the postures, but completely aware proprioceptively and biomechanically. They get an experience of *the zone*, so that they can access it in competition. It builds an intuitive anticipation of what



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Santina and Pat O'Keefe.

they need in that moment of competition, so they can draw on it without thinking when it's needed. It's a mystery to me how this happens but it does."

This sense of connection, of contact, came as a breath of fresh air to the Northcliffe athletes. It was the antithesis of the approaches of their other coaches and of the grim, austere culture of their sport. "She gives it all and we respond in the same way," says Jo Marrable. "She allows us to open in the way she opens to us."

Santina recognises in herself one of the major issues that confronts elite athletes. "Through my own life experience and yoga practice, I have developed an understanding of my own all-or-nothing obsessive nature; my drive, angst, grit, and 'fire in the belly' stuff. I have observed a polarity that if I am not the best, then I am not good enough and I run the risk of disappearing. If I am not at the top, then I am not worthy. If I am not powerful, I am not seen, and therefore I don't exist. This is the same polarity or angst that exists in the athlete. If they are not the best, they are not enough, not worthy, and therefore disappear from view. They disappear into the corridors of mediocrity. This is suffering and torture to an elite athlete.

I try to help them recognise this polarity and stay in the 'in-between'. I encourage them to stay in the gap, to move along the continuum of perfection, just being okay with being okay. I build confidence around their extraordinary

ordinariness, and ask them to trust their current state of being. How do I trust myself? How do I learn to be okay with where I am in this moment, today, this year, this training period etc? I ask them to gather awareness around their worthiness in this moment."

Of course, this kind of subtle psychological endeavour has to be built on a foundation of groundwork and trust building. Santina has to satisfy their need to work harder and show them how this can be accomplished in the context of a yoga practice, before she can introduce this new awareness or way of being. This in itself took Santina the best part of 12 months. It's a big step for an athlete to let go and accept, rather than to be in a constant process of trying to change, of trying to improve.

"There is an inherent unworthiness that is built into always trying to change," says Santina. "I try to get them to see their strengths and weaknesses and to accept all this. In this process, something shifts and changes occur without force. When you relinquish trying, and trying to make it happen, filter out the past, the future, and all preconceptions, all the 'shoulds', you move into the zone, and open yourself to the power and potential of the moment."

The World Titles, August 2008

The 2008 World Surf Life Saving Championships were held in August in Germany. Northcliffe came first. Their twelve-member Open team won eight Gold, five Silver, and two Bronze

medals. Their seven-member Masters team won eight Gold, six Silver, and one Bronze. Every athlete who won Gold was a regular at Santina's yoga classes. Head coach Pat O'Keefe was ecstatic.

"I'm delighted with her work," says Pat. "It's hard to make a specific point about yoga's impact, but I think the psychological thing gives us an edge. When people see we do yoga they're amazed, but at this level we need something that continues to give us the edge over our rivals, that one or two per cent extra, and who can say it's not yoga that's doing it?"

Marg Kyle and Bruce Kolkka both won Gold medals at the World Championships, and Marg is the female World Masters Champion. "Bruce and I would not have made it through the Worlds' without the yoga program Santina prepared for us," says Marg. "What with the travelling and the intensity of competition, we needed the yoga. And apart from the physical side, it really helped me to focus, especially with the breathing. I'm sold on it now and I think the pendulum is beginning to turn towards yoga in all sports."

Santina has found a niche in the toughest, most stubborn, unreconstructed areas of Australian sport. Many of the students in her classes are skeptical and distrusting, and as elite athletes they set a high standard in what they want from a coach, trainer, or yoga teacher. They don't accept a new paradigm for training unless they are convinced of its value to them. She has found a way that brings yoga and yoga philosophy – not just a set of stretches and exercises – to a group that would never have willingly engaged with it previously. In doing so, she brings a consciousness to the broader Australian psyche that allows for an even larger and deeper engagement with these ideas. She is spreading the teachings of yoga in the most unlikely of places.

Greg Wythes holds classes at the Moore Street Yoga Room in Austinmer and teaches massage at Karuna College. He maintains a body work practice in the northern suburbs of Wollongong. He can be reached on (02) 4268 2048 or at gwythes@yahoo.com.au.