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Yoga and the AFL

Greg Wythes talks to leading AFL clubs, Geelong and Hawthorn, about how yoga fits with their training schedule.

The world of professional sport is exacting and demanding of success. There are manifold pressures from many different sources, including sponsors, coaches, media, management, the public, and family. The strain on teams and individual athletes is one of the facets of modern sport that is now being addressed in a conscious and deliberate way. As well, sport at this level is looking for every possible advantage, no matter how small, that may lend their team or athlete the winning edge. Increasingly, yoga is becoming a factor that sport is utilising to help provide that winning edge.

In AFL, the stakes are high. Though not a sport played at international level, it is a sport that displays the glamour, athleticism, professionalism, and skill to match any other sport played at the elite level. This is Australia's own sport: born, bred, and developed on Australian soil. For this reason, it invokes a particular passion and spirit in its followers. In its home state of Victoria, the game excites an almost religious zeal, and club affiliations are passed on from generation to generation through families in the way that church membership once used to be.

THE CLUBS OF GEELONG AND HAWTHORNE are close to the pinnacle of success in the AFL competition. Geelong won the 2007 Grand Final and was then beaten by Hawthorn in the 2008 Grand Final. In the early stages of the 2009 competition, Geelong holds the edge in their endeavour to reverse the 2008

result. One afternoon each week, at separate locations deep in their own club heartlands, each team meets to practise yoga.

Tim Oddie runs an Iyengar school in Geelong. He is a passionate advocate of the Iyengar system, its pragmatic approach to yoga, its consistency from school to school, and especially its application to sport and to athletes. Tim has been teaching yoga to the Geelong players since the beginning of the 2007 season. The club had tried yoga in a gym setting previously, but did not find what they wanted there. They are now into their third season with Tim.

"THE CLUB WAS LOOKING FOR RECOVERY, in particular, injury recovery", said Tim. They were not so interested in working or training their bodies, but more in working out the niggles and minor injuries that they incur in the game. In AFL, as in many other sports, fitness is acquired in the off-season. The players begin the season at their peak, and as the season progresses, and as injuries and fatigue accumulate, the emphasis shifts to maintenance of fitness and week-to-week recovery for the next game."

Tim's biggest supporter at Geelong is Paul Haines, the head fitness coach. At 27, Paul is young for the job. He comes from a sports science background and is credited with much of the club's improvement over the last two seasons.

"We use yoga principally as a recovery program," says Paul. "It's optional for the players, but we strongly recommend it to injured players. We also

use it as an education for the younger players to learn how to stretch, how to read their bodies, and how to use it outside the yoga class. The beauty of working with Tim is that he finds a way to give them all a stretch, so that each player is working on the things that are most important to him."

Tim and Paul work collaboratively to design an individualised yoga program for each of the players in the squad. "Each player has his own program, which is tailored to his specific needs," says Paul. "So when they come to the class, they are all doing slightly different things and Tim orchestrates this so that each player gets whatever he needs."

Tim recognises the intense physicality of the players and uses this as an entry point and as a way to hold them. But for him and for Paul, the physical aspect of the practice is not necessarily the most important.

"I TALK ABOUT HAMSTRINGS AND GLUTS," says Tim, "and what first brings people through the door is the practical workout of the class. But it's not what keeps them. What keeps them there is 'something other.' It doesn't need definition but it does need trust to allow it."

Tim's 'something other' is the most compelling aspect of yoga for defender Harry Taylor, one of Geelong's newer recruits, and one who has made a dramatic impact on the team since his debut season in 2008.

"It's the internal focus and the shutting out of everything that really works," says Harry. "Basically, yoga

simplifies life for me. Tim uses certain words in the half hour relaxation at the end of the class that creates an empty space within. As a result, my mind is not so cluttered with all the things going on around me. Practically, this helps me to increase my focus, so that when I train I can focus entirely on what I'm doing."

I can now see how important both sides of the breath are.

"The players are under a lot of pressure," says Paul Haines. "They have a hectic schedule and yoga provides mental and psychological recovery as much as it does physical. The Tuesday yoga class is a chance for them to relax and zone out, to take their mind off their particular stresses. We do our yoga class early in the week, because at this time the players have a lot going on in their heads. They have a lot to process, especially things like the match review of the last game and the one-on-one session each player has with the coach to go over their last game. They feel this pressure from different areas, and at the same time they need to recover for the next game. Yoga answers both these needs. Yoga begins the recovery process, and at the same time quiets their minds so that they sleep much better; sleep is the most important part of the recovery process. The feedback from the players is that they love the class and that they do sleep a lot better after it."

TIM SHAPES HIS APPROACH TO THE recovery regime in a specific way that is different to what may occur in a typical yoga class. "They lap up Shavasana," says Tim, "Their bodies thrash and twitch as they begin to unwind. There is so much structure in their bodies and their minds. As well, these players live in each others' pockets and there is a lot of competitive banter. I encourage them to drop this and it gives them some internal freedom. I ask them to observe rather than react, especially when opposing players nigger at them, and I think this helps them to be mentally quiet during the game."

Tom Harley is captain of the Geelong club and one of the most respected leaders in the AFL code. Tom began practising yoga four years ago and

is a regular at Tim's classes. "Football is mentally draining," says Tom. "Yoga, especially the last half hour of the class, teaches you to let your thoughts drift in and out, and not to dwell on them. One focus with Tim is rehab. and stretching for football – I like the way the Iyengar system uses props to help with this. But

the other focus is on controlling your thoughts. You have to be open to these ideas, and I am. I take some of the ideas with me to practise at home."

HARRY TAYLOR HAS FOUND OTHER WAYS TO use the yoga ideas from Tim to enhance his recovery, not just between games, but during the game as well. "Tim emphasises the importance of the exhalation in the breath cycle," says Harry. "In footie, they teach us to inhale, to suck the breath and the oxygen back into the body. But I can now see how important both sides of the breath are. I use this in the game when I get a small break. I use the exhale to create the space for the inhale and it really helps my recovery to be ready for the next play."

Tim is encouraged by the response of the players and has seen a change in the perception of yoga in his community, since an article appeared in the local newspaper about the Geelong players practising yoga. "Most yoga classes are 80 per cent women," he says. "But after the article appeared, mothers brought their sons along to class, or their partners. Some men came off their own bat. One woman had been trying for years to get her partner to yoga, but after putting the article on the fridge, he finally came and got lots out of it." Sometimes, it takes a sporting role model to help change long held prejudices; but once this kind of gender barrier is down, men too, can find that yoga has a lot to offer".

Similarly, the Hawthorn AFL club has been practising yoga for more than eight seasons, and for most of this time they have been under the guidance of Tony Rothberg at the Bridge Yoga Studio in Richmond. Tony has a strong affinity with the players. He played Australian Rules football at a junior level and is still an

avid observer of the sport. The decision to begin yoga was made at the club by a fitness coach who, nine years ago, attended one of Tony's classes. He then decided he wanted to bring the players along as well. Clearly back then, before yoga had settled into the mainstream, the club had seen something that they valued, something they thought would add to the quality of the training process – and they have been coming back ever since.

Andrew Russell is the current Head of Fitness at Hawthorn. He is one of the new breed of fitness coaches, who bring a scientific perspective to their work, without losing sight of the traditional methods of training. He is a strong advocate of yoga for his players. At Hawthorn, yoga is a compulsory part of the training program.

"FOR HAWTHORN, YOGA PROVIDES TIME away from the world," says Andrew. "We take the players away from the club to Tony's studio. They need to relax and release stress. They lead such busy lives, with so many things trying to invade their time and energy. Yoga creates emptiness, where there are no words, and this provides the avenue for physiological and psychological recovery."

"The change of environment, away from the club, is an important facet of the yoga program," says Tony Rothberg. "The yoga studio becomes associated with recovery and relaxation, separate from the world that creates stress and pressure for them."

Like Tim Oddie, Tony shapes his classes to suit the players, and he uses many of the Iyengar tools to do so. "I target the hamstrings, gluts, and lower back," says Tony, "but I use ropes and props to reduce the effort required to get into the poses. The emphasis is on passive stretches because I feel that's what they need."

Tony's understanding of the football culture and his background in the game are major factors in his success with Hawthorn. "I'm a blokey kind of yoga teacher," he says. "I've worked with a lot of AFL clubs and I try to make it accessible for them and not too yog-ish. They are stiff and don't move freely and a stronger session would possibly be beneficial, but they are so highly trained that it's not appropriate."

“Tony has a really friendly way,” says Andrew Russell. “Players can relate to him. He creates an open, relaxing atmosphere. But we don’t do neurally and physically demanding poses because the guys can’t tolerate it.”

Andrew recognises the neurological demands many yoga poses can place on the nervous system and the motor cortex. He prefers to avoid this kind of work in the class, but when it comes to the effects of yoga on the autonomic nervous system, he is certain about what he wants.

“WE DRAW ON RESEARCH INTO PATTERNS OF brain activity and MRI’s,” says Andrew. “We know how powerful the stress hormones are on the body, especially with respect to recovery. Yoga is a great benefit in this process. There can be vast differences in the time and the quality of recovery. The psychology of recovery is also important. The players have to believe it’s helping them. So what we’re looking for is not anything hazy or vague. It’s quite specific.”

For Tony, there are two facets to recovery. The first is in the short term,



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Geelong AFL club.

the week to week demands of the AFL competition. The second is longer term, the players’ careers and also life after football. “The players are totally wasted at the end of a game,” he says. “They really need to recover, to be able to come back and do it again the next week. They comment that they feel better for the

yoga sessions; they sleep better, and that it’s great to have that time for themselves. If we look from a longer perspective, we realise that for these players their income depends on their body. In some ways, the body is like a formula one car. It has to be maintained, serviced, and looked after. One more season can mean a lot of

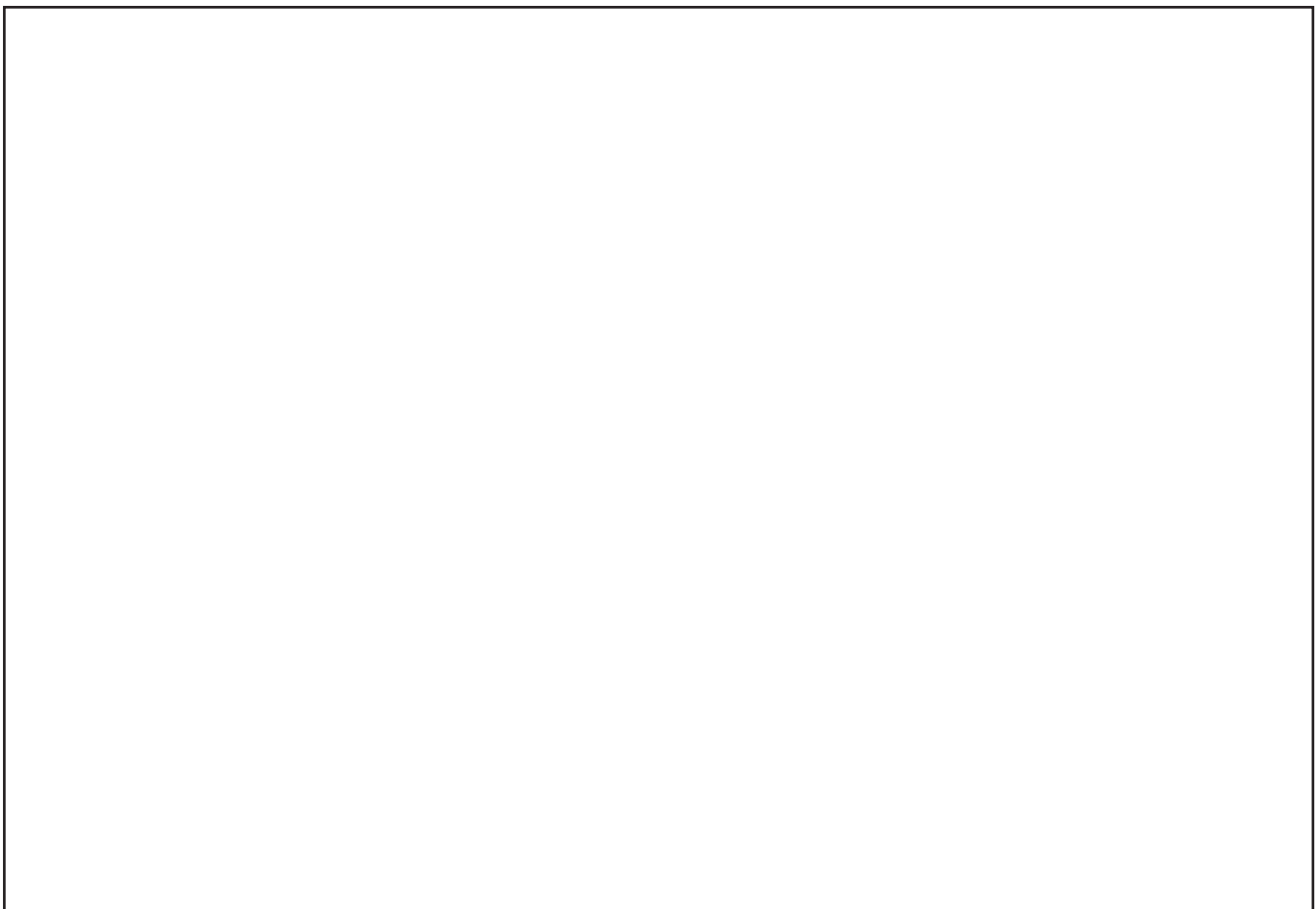




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Hawthorne AFL club

money. Yoga adds to their longevity, both in the game and their long term health. Former AFL players, Nathan Buckley and Robert Harvey, have said to me that they wish they had started yoga earlier in their careers because they could have played for longer.”

FORWARD JARRED ROUGHEAD IS ONE OF Hawthorn’s younger stars. In the 2008 season, he was named the club’s most consistent player. He has been doing yoga for four years and is convinced of its benefits. “It’s a different approach to our normal training, more enjoyable and beneficial.” he says. “I enjoy it a lot. It’s a chance to lie back for an hour every week and let the body and the mind relax and recover. Some of the players do more yoga and if the club didn’t organise it, I’d do it outside the club. You’re trying to get an advantage over other clubs and everyone’s beginning to realise that yoga can add something extra to the mix.”

For Geelong and Hawthorn, yoga is not simply a shot in the dark, a chance taken on a nebulous promise or a

gamble on a fashionable approach to exercise. Each club comes to yoga with specific goals in mind, and their goals are supported not by hunch or anecdote, but by results and science. They have found professional and sensitive teachers who can help them to achieve these goals, and what might at first appear to be an unlikely

All movement and asana work involves the brain as well as the body. Neural connections in the motor cortex are developed through practice, and some movements or asanas require very complex neural structures. When we speak of ‘muscle memory’ we are in fact referring to these neural pathways, not the physical muscle. The memory is actually embedded in that part of the brain that is dedicated to movement or position of the muscles and joints.

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.