



tales
of
transform

Yōga has made me more aware of my body, both its strengths and its weaknesses. It's also made me really aware of my limits and has made me want to keep working at yoga so I can move past those limits.



Mark

I feel at ease in my body, like a young man. I don't think there's anything I can't do right now.



Leah

Find out what happened when three everyday people turned to yoga to change their lives.

I have a new body now. I'm not going to go back to my stiffer body or running in a robotic way, no matter what.



In the February 2007 issue of *Yoga Journal*, we introduced Mark, Leah, and Edith, three people who stepped up to take part in an experiment. All three wanted to make a major change in their life. Mark hoped to heal a long-standing knee injury; Leah struggled with high blood pressure and extra pounds; and Edith, a triathlete, wanted to improve her performance without pushing herself to

mation

extremes. Each had previously done little or no yoga but was willing to put the

practice to the test. ¶ For six months, each of them attended private weekly sessions with Jason Crandell, a *Yoga Journal* staff teacher, the San Francisco Bay Club's yoga program director, and (full disclosure) my partner. They also went to group classes and did home practice sequences that Crandell prescribed. ¶ Mark, Leah, and Edith stuck it out through many ups and downs; they showed up on days when they were exhausted, sore, and overwhelmed. The results, a testament to their dedication, are surprising and uplifting—and a reminder that yoga is not a quick fix.



Edith

Turn the page to see how yoga made a difference for them.

by Andrea Ferretti photography by Debra McClinton

a lawyer lightens up

Mark's story

MARK WEBB | 59 | Trial lawyer in injury cases

GOALS

stop walking with a limp

reduce constant knee pain

improve range of motion in knee

RESULTS

is no longer limping

has no knee pain during everyday activities

lost 30 pounds

WEEKLY PROGRAM

one private session

three to six group classes

occasional home practice



AFTER SIX MONTHS and more than 100 yoga sessions, it's almost hard to recognize Mark Webb, the lawyer who began the makeover with an aching, injured knee. For starters, he's dropped three sizes and whittled four inches off his waist, and he no longer limps. Webb doesn't just look like a new man—he feels like one, too. “I could lose another 10 pounds if I wanted to be an underwear model,” he quips. “What's more important is that I feel like a young man. I'm not bound by life's restrictions. I've never said that before. I'm completely free.”

Without a doubt, Webb has yoga fever. For several months, he's been practicing five to six times per week—mostly in classes—in addition to his longtime daily *zazen* meditation. He's gained mobility and reduced inflammation in his knee, which has made him

more confident about its strength and resilience. A few weeks ago, Crandell turned Webb toward a mirror to look at his progress in Virabhadrasana II (Warrior II). “Before, my leg was at a 45-degree angle,” Webb says. “Now it can go to 90 degrees.”

That Webb had to be reminded of his improvement speaks volumes about his current state of mind. The benefits he's received from yoga go so far beyond healing his knee that he rarely thinks about the injury. “The knee is no longer an issue. It's not chronic anymore,” he says with a wave of his hand. “It's no longer stopping me from doing anything.”

A few months into the makeover, while Webb was on a yoga retreat, he discovered Ayurveda, India's first form of medicine. When he returned home, he sought out Jay Apte, founder of the Ayurveda Institute of America in Foster City, California. Apte recommended a six-day *panchakarma*, or Ayurvedic cleansing, to detoxify Webb's system and reduce the inflammation in his joints that she suspected was contributing to his knee pain.

Webb's prescribed routine included daily two-hour body-

work sessions with herbal oils, his yoga program, and a diet of only a traditional mung dahl dish, kitchari. He followed the routine to the letter and credits it with prompting him to change his diet: He stopped drinking alcohol, eating sweets, and eating late at night. “Now my eating is no longer an avenue for filling up what's missing,” he says.

Eating more mindfully is not the only change that Webb experienced. Feeling healthier has made him happier. He's also noticed that yoga has given him more equanimity. “When I try cases now, I don't feel so heated, so aggressive,” he says. “I just present my side, and I'm done. It comes from a more detached place.”

Feeling more at ease in his body has helped him engage with the world around him. After a messy divorce, Webb has started dating again. He sold the office building he'd owned for 20 years and bought a condo—his first real home since the divorce. “This is the guts of the story for me,” he says. “I feel unstuck. Guy starts out working on his knee, and you talk to him six months later, and it's like, what knee, you know? What knee? That's where the juice is.”



teacher's notes

When Crandell began his work with Webb, he tried to “take the knee out of the equation,” he says. He taught poses that wouldn’t agitate the knee, then asked Webb to pay attention to how the rest of his body felt. “I would ask him, ‘How do your shoulders feel? Where is your breath moving?’” Crandell says. This helped to shift Webb’s focus from his knee and made him feel more vital in the rest of his body.

When Crandell did begin to work on the knee, he didn’t do it directly, but zeroed in on the joints above and below it—the hips and ankles. For the most part, that meant having Webb do poses to open the groins, outer hips, and fronts of the thighs. Crandell emphasized bearing weight evenly on the feet in standing poses so that they would become stable, flexible platforms.

Yoga hasn’t completely healed Webb’s knee. There are poses he will probably never be able to do without modification, like squats or

kneeling lunges. “It would be preposterous to say that we completely fixed the knee,” Crandell says. The difference now is that Webb has less physical and emotional pain. Judging by how far Webb has come, Crandell predicts that this is only the beginning of his transformation. “He’s on a path,” Crandell says. “I don’t see anything getting in his way anymore.”

Six months into the makeover, Mark Webb’s creaky left knee (see photo at left) no longer bothers him.

less is more

Leah's story



LEAH CASTELLA | 33 | Lawyer

By letting go of expectations, Leah Castella (before the makeover, above, and after, at right) was able to move deeper into the poses.

WHEN YOU TALK to Leah Castella, you can practically see her neurons firing as she answers a question. Her drive, intelligence, and wit have brought her success as a lawyer, a busy social life, and a long list of causes for which she volunteers. But in the past few years, Castella has felt some of the ill effects of being in overdrive. She began the makeover with a desire to gain some control over her life, specifically her weight, blood pressure, and often-racing mind.

Castella's goals were big: to drop several dress sizes and to

lower her blood pressure naturally, since medication was a looming threat. But after a couple of months, she realized that trying to lose a lot of weight in a fixed period of time for the whole world to see—along with her other ambitious goals—was stressing her out. So she began to focus primarily on learning yoga. “I’ve learned that becoming healthier is a long-term process,” she says. “Trying to get extreme changes in six months seemed antithetical to the process of yoga.”

Through Crandell's careful instruction and her own diligence, Castella began to feel how small, subtle connections between her body, mind, and breath could produce radical results. “I’m realizing that little things make a big difference,” she says. “If you put your foot on the ground the right way, you can feel that reverberate through your whole body.” As a result, Castella has noticed significant changes in her blood pressure. On a typical day, it drops about 25 points after her home yoga sessions, which she attributes to 30 minutes of Ujjayi Pranayama (Victorious Breath), in which you breathe deeply and evenly through your nose. She's also grateful for the way yoga calms

her mind. “I’ve always wanted to meditate, but I’m such a frenetic person that I’ve found it difficult to still my body so I can still my mind,” she says. “With yoga, I can be active but can focus on the movement in a meditative way.”

So far, Castella hasn't had any significant weight loss, perhaps because she and Crandell focused on a slow, detailed practice. She's preferred to do most of her yoga at home, rather than in classes as Crandell recommended. But she feels prepared to take fast-paced classes if she chooses. Learning yoga has given her a refuge that she hopes can be there the rest of her life. “I’m learning patience,” she says. “I can be very hard on myself. I need to be kinder to myself and realize that if I’m not going 100 percent all the time, it doesn't mean I’m a failure.”

Asked if she'll continue to practice, she delivers an emphatic “Yes!” “It allows me to get to a meditative state, and the impact on my blood pressure is really phenomenal.” She adds, “I really like the way it makes me feel.”



THIS PAGE: STYLIST: LYN HEINEKEN; HAIR/MAKEUP: CHRIS McDONALD; TOP: ATHLETA; PANTS: STONEISLAND

teacher's notes

Even now Castella finds group classes daunting. She strongly prefers private ones, because she feels it's easier to ask questions and go deeper into her own practice.

Sensing her apprehension, Crandell decided to give Castella extremely detailed instruction and to repeat certain poses—Surya Namaskar (Sun Salutation) and standing poses like Virabhadrasana I (Warrior I), Trikonasana (Triangle Pose), and Parsvakonasana (Side Angle Pose)—in every ses-

sion to make her feel comfortable with them. "The major thing she feared was being in a situation where she didn't know what she was supposed to do. That was really agitating to her," he says. "She didn't demand enormous variety, but she wanted to understand subtle things deeply." After a few sessions, Crandell noticed that Castella's attention to detail was, in his words, "exquisite." "She likes yoga because she understands how sophisticated the work is," he says. "Her mind doesn't check out. It relaxes by focusing on what happens inside, which takes a lot of skill." As a result, he says, her attention spreads evenly

across her body, making her poses steady and full of ease.

The transformation that most delighted Crandell is that Castella now likes Savasana (Corpse Pose). "It means she's giving herself a break," he says. "She's pulling herself off the high-heat burner and letting things cool down internally." His hope for her? That she will challenge herself by attending group classes, while maintaining her ability to "push herself to her edge without going over the cliff."

GOALS

- reduce blood pressure
- drop four dress sizes
- feel more fit

RESULTS

- has 25-point drop in blood pressure after yoga
- has greater body awareness
- is able to calm her mind more readily
- feels prepared to take vinyasa flow classes

WEEKLY PROGRAM

- one private session
- three to four home practice sessions

Edith's story

slower makes faster



EDITH CHAN | 30 | Licensed acupuncturist

TRIATHLETE AND acupuncturist Edith Chan completed a marathon 10 days before we sit down to talk. She looks, as always, fit, bright-eyed, and raring to go as she explains the first benefit she's noticed from her consistent yoga practice: a faster recovery after races. "I feel like I could run a half marathon right now," she marvels. "It's so different from last year, when it took a month before my aches and pains went away." Chan has finished two races since the makeover began—an Olympic-distance triathlon and a marathon—and has been grateful to have a restorative practice to help her through them. "I'm training for my first Ironman [a long-distance triathlon], and there is a huge volume of training

that goes into it. But when I'm heading into a session that requires a 100-mile bike ride or a three-hour run, I now know to show up and just do the best I can at that moment. Yoga taught me that."

Yoga has also helped her hone her athletic abilities.

Chan hadn't expected to gain speed, because she cut her training

time to allow for four days of yoga per week, but she was pleasantly surprised when she beat her previous marathon time by five minutes. And she was downright elated during the triathlon when, for the first time, she felt at ease in her least favorite sport, swimming. At the halfway point of the swim, she looked at her watch and was shocked to find she was close to hitting a personal record. "There was so much less effort," she says. "It was incredible. It's a good sign for a longer-distance race."

How does she explain these gains when her intense aerobic training had decreased? Chan credits yoga with improving the mechanics of her swimming stroke and her running gait. She goes to two classes a week, double what was prescribed, and says the alignment she learned helps her to find the line of energy from her

hips to her fingertips. "I finally understand what it means to swim from my core," she says. She felt only minor aches in her back during the cycling portion of the triathlon. A home practice sequence that focused on side bending and hip opening unlocked tension and loosened up old scar tissue.

Chan is thrilled by the dramatic changes she's seen. "I can't believe what my body can do," she says. But she's equally excited that yoga is teaching her to do less and just be. The lesson came to her one day while she and Crandell worked on pranayama (breathing techniques). She could breathe into her upper chest and lower belly but struggled to find the area in between. She grew increasingly frustrated and finally gave up—and that's when the breath flooded the area. "I had to let go to get optimal results," she says. Now, when she eases up during her workouts, she enjoys them more. "Workouts are not a chore in my quest for performance but an opportunity for fun and discovery, like my yoga practice," she says. "I'm a little less of a brute, a little more graceful in my approach."

While Chan imagined yoga might change her physically, she hadn't anticipated how it would affect the rest of her life. She ticks off the examples eagerly: She became a vegetarian because "it just felt good," and she lost five pounds without trying. She's also sleeping better, has fewer PMS symptoms, and is relating to her patients differently. "Yoga practice opens my eyes to new ways of approaching daily life,

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teacher's notes

Crandell introduced restorative poses and breathwork early on in his sessions with Chan, then gradually incorporated more vigorous work. He found that standing poses—a challenge for most people—were relatively easy for her because she has such a powerful lower body. But anything that required arm strength was a different story. “Her upper body is significantly weaker,” he says. “Since swimming was one of her weaknesses, we worked to

establish strength and stability in her core, arms, shoulders, and chest.” They practiced poses such as Handstand, Pincha Mayurasana (Forearm Balance), and Headstand as well as Bakasana (Crane Pose) and Parsva Bakasana (Side Crane Pose). Crandell saw a dramatic improvement over time; for example, he noticed that Chan has developed a clearer sense of where her body is in space—which could help explain her improved running gait. “She feels where she is at any given time better now than she did before,” he says.

GOALS

prevent burnout from overtraining

improve lung capacity and endurance

be free of back pain while cycling

RESULTS

improved endurance and breathing ability while exercising

shorter recovery time after races

reduced pain while cycling

improved swimming and running biomechanics

lost five pounds, grew one and a half centimeters

WEEKLY PROGRAM

one private session

two home practices

two group classes

Edith Chan began the makeover (see photo at left) fit but stiff. Increasing her flexibility and building upper-body strength has given her a whole new perspective on what she can do.

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 from making mindful choices at a grocery store, to sweet interactions with people on the street, to the way I create treatment plans for my patients,” she says. “Day by day, I’m finding a more peaceful way of being within my sport and deriving a whole new level of enjoyment from it.”

LAB NOTES

At the beginning and the end of the makeover, Chan put yoga to the test at a physiology research laboratory at California State University, Sacramento. During each of her visits, physiology professor Roberto Quintana conducted tests while Chan was at rest and then while she exercised on a stationary bike and on a treadmill. He wanted to see if six months of yoga would improve her breathing mechanics or aerobic conditioning.

Quintana created certain controls—he conducted the before and after tests at the same time of day, in the same order—but he couldn’t control everything. During the after test, Quintana discovered that the

mild asthma he’d noticed in Chan’s first set of tests had flared up.

At the end of the makeover, while she was at rest, Chan didn’t perform well on the lung volume tests, which measured how quickly she could get air in and out of her lungs as well as her total lung capacity. Quintana attributes this to the asthma. Yet he was surprised to find that during her after exercise test, there was a 30 percent increase in her ventilation efficiency. Chan has greatly improved her ability to take in more oxygen per breath, so the muscles that power her lungs don’t have to work as hard, which could help her conserve energy during a long race. “The mechanics of her breathing during exercise improved,” says Quintana, “which might be a result of the yoga.”

Chan didn’t improve on her “threshold” tests, which predict endurance. But she did well on another endurance-related test that measures how efficiently the body uses fat, rather than carbohydrates, during exercise. During long workouts, carbs eventually run out, causing the athlete to

lose speed and power. Being better able to tap into fat stores boosts endurance.

In the final after test, which measured her perceived effort, Chan felt she had to exert 10 percent less effort to achieve the same levels of exercise intensity. Quintana believes yoga may have helped Chan to maintain a more steady, even mental state while exercising intensely. When an athlete gets anxious, the body releases stress hormones, such as adrenaline, which cause you to breathe more shallowly and burn more carbohydrate than fat. “Chan was able to stay more relaxed during exercise, which probably improved her ventilation and metabolism,” he says.

Overall, he found the results promising. “Her results were totally unexpected considering she was training less vigorously and her asthma had kicked up,” he says. “That’s a strong indicator that yoga may enhance exercise performance.” ■

Andrea Ferretti is a senior editor at Yoga Journal. She wishes to thank Mark, Leah, and Edith for their commitment.

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