

Bengals embracing yoga

It's a stretch: Class part of off-season fitness program

By Mark Curnutte
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At 6-foot-3, 297 pounds, Bengals defensive tackle John Thornton dwarfs his rubber yoga mat when he lies on his stomach and chest.

His broad shoulders pull at his T-shirt when, at the same time, he lifts his right arm and left leg.

"I guess it helps you get in touch with your inner self," Thornton, laughing, says later. "Really, it does help you relax and stretch more. It helps me loosen up my hips."

A weekly yoga class is a new and mandatory part of the Bengals' three-month off-season strength and conditioning program that started March 22. And even once-skeptical 300-pound men who make their living in a violent sport are seeing the benefits of this peaceful undertaking.

The Bengals are just one of a handful of NFL teams offering yoga to their players. Thornton did it two years ago when he played for the Tennessee Titans.

But for most of the other Bengals players, yoga - a discipline whose exercises aim for control of body and mind - is a new experience. They like it. And if they don't, they're not saying.

"It's a testosterone-laced, westernized version tailored to American football players," is how Bengals strength coach Chip Morton describes the class.

In other words, it's heavy on stretching and light on granola, Morton says. And there's no chanting. The spiritual side was left at the door of Paul Brown Stadium.

Quarterback Carson Palmer, who says he has flexibility problems, had done yoga previously with his wife.

"You get put in some unnatural positions out on the field," says Palmer, who has embraced the class. "Yoga prepares you as much as anything can for what might happen to you in a game."

One of the reasons for the program's success is the structure and instructor. Morton hired Jen Damaska of Kenwood to run the class. Her specialty is fitness-oriented yoga.

She was watching a 2003 Bengals game with her family and saw a player get twisted and injured in a tackle.

"Bent all over," Damaska says. "It just came to mind that, 'Wow, these guys could really use what I do.' I sent a short letter to Chip."

Morton called after the season. He and Damaska met for two hours and designed the class.

The emphasis is on stretching the lower back, abdomen, hips, hamstrings and buttocks.

Sounds of a waterfall and chirping birds are part of the soft music that fills the stadium gym, near the team's locker room, on Wednesday mornings.

Damaska doesn't just make the players stretch. Her sessions are exercises, and many players - particularly 303-pound offensive tackle Belton Johnson - soak their gray T-shirts with sweat.

The class ends with 10 minutes of relaxation stretches.

The first time linebacker Khalid Abdullah attended a class he found it to be more than relaxing.

"I feel asleep," he says, "and when I came to, I was the only one in here. That's some good stuff there."

Abdullah, who has an especially tight left hip, has done some of the stretches at night at home. And deep-breathing exercises that Damaska has taught have already paid off for Abdullah when he runs. He says he's not as winded.

Yoga is just one element of the Bengals strength program, which has evolved from one of the NFL's most dated two years ago to one of the league's most progressive.

"The yoga gives us a chance to improve our flexibility and core strength, and that's what this is all about," coach Marvin Lewis says. "Ultimately, it's about winning games."