

Yoga-New NFL Trend

By Teresa Varley
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PITTSBURGH - It's a typical morning at the Steelers practice facility at the UPMC Sports Performance Complex. Players are in early working out, getting their bodies in shape for the season.

In the weight room you can hear the pulsating beat of rap music. You can hear weights clanging. You can hear laughter and shouts.

But in a room next door that looks out onto the field, there is silence. Eyes are shut as players lay stretched out on the floor in peaceful relaxation.

It's anything but that, though.

Some Steelers players have been taking yoga classes during the off-season and while the thought of yoga brings up images of stretching and not much more, it's so much more.

"That's a whole other workout itself," said Hines Ward. "A lot of guys didn't know much about yoga. You always hear about it. It is a workout itself. It's as tiring as lifting weights and running. In the game we play that's a necessity we need. You are stretching muscles you never knew you had. That's good to be able to be flexible like that."

As the yoga class starts, the players look fresh and relaxed. But it doesn't take long for the sweat to start. Someone says they are feeling some cramping and instructor Sara Azarius-Eichmiller from Shadyside Yoga says cramping is good, but not where the player is feeling it.

The players are told to breath continuously. Looking at their faces, there are times you wonder if they are breathing at all. You can hear bones cracking. But they are focused, they stare with an intensity that is usually only seen on game day as they do their yoga poses.

They are asked to do sit back on their ankles in a pose that looks harmless enough. When one player says, 'this is a nightmare,' you learn fast it's not as easy as it looks.

"Tell anybody to sit back on your ankles and you will see," said tight end Matt Cushing. "Some of the stuff is not a lot of effort required, but it's poses your body doesn't want to go into but needs to be to be properly aligned.

"People think it's stretching and flexibility. There is a lot more to it – strengthening muscles that you are not used to using and that's what is difficult about it."

Running back Chris Fuamatu-Ma'afala is working on a pose. He struggles some, feeling pain. When asked what's bothering him the ankles or the knees, his answer says it all - "Everything cuz."

His comment causes laughter to break the intensity for a few minutes. There is some light banter that follows. Azarius-Eichmiller tells the players to put the bottom lip against the top lip so no words can pass.

Ward smiles as the class moves along. Despite the struggles, despite forcing the body to work extra hard, the ever present smile is there.

"It's a necessity, I want to do it," said Ward of taking part in yoga. "I'm going to have fun doing it, though. It hurts like crap doing it, but in the long run it's going to help all of us out better, especially with injuries and as the season goes on your body gets fatigued. If you are doing yoga twice a week it will help you out.

"With the position I play I do a lot of running and stuff with my legs. This helps your legs recover faster and gives you more flexibility. It helps you work muscles, your groin muscles, hamstring and quads. I go home and sit and watch TV and do yoga. A lot of people sit on the couch and watch TV or lay in bed. I am doing some of the yoga poses while watching TV and it helps me come in the next day fresh. You want recovery time."

On this particular day the players have already completed four weeks of the yoga class. Progress has definitely been made.

"We have seen tremendous progress in these guys," said Azarius-Eichmiller. "A lot of them could not touch their toes. Most of them are touching their toes now. The others will soon. It's not stretching, though."

No, it's not. But it's something that the players think will benefit them greatly.

"It's a good thing," said Ward. "It's good for anybody. I would recommend it for a lot of people. It gets frustrating at times. We are working moves we can't usually do. It's frustrating when you can't do something. They work on our weak spots. That's how you get better. You work on stuff you're not as good at. You are going to get better all-around. That's what yoga does."