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Delaware football players stretch during a recent power yoga class. Coach K.C. Keeler may make yoga a permanent part of the team's conditioning regimen.

Gurus of the Gridiron

National champions take training to a new level with power yoga

By KEVIN TRESOLINI

NEWARK — Yoga instructor Johnny Gillespie walks between rows of University of Delaware football players whose limbs are stretched and muscles are rippling.

He speaks gently, but with non-stop conviction.

Much of what he says is instructional. Breathe through your nose. Extend your fingers. Squeeze your shoulder blades. Keep your knees straight. Wrap your hands around your heels.

In between those commands, as players lean, reach and bend, come others that aim to create a harmonic convergence between mind and body.

"You're creating length in your spine . . . Your arms are engaged and you're tapping into your breath . . . Focus on being in the present, in the moment . . . Teach your quadriceps to work with your hamstrings . . . Let the breathing open up the body . . . Pay attention to the four corners of your feet . . ." Otherwise, the Field House

room, where UD wrestlers once tangled and rowing machines now reside, is quiet except for the occasional grunt, puff or sound of a slight stumble. Maintaining bal-

strength and balance while helping to heal existing injuries, especially hamstring pulls, and prevent new ones.

As Delaware prepares to defend its Division I-AA national championship this fall, he hopes it gives the Hens an extra edge.

"At the end of every season, we evaluate every single offensive, defensive and special teams play in an effort to continually get better," Keeler said. "Same thing with our conditioning program.

"I thought we were successful last year because we were the best-conditioned team in the country," added Keeler, whose team had nobody out with injuries in its 16th game, the 40-0 national title rout of Colgate. "We saw the yoga and thought it would really help us."

On the cutting edge

While NFL teams, including the Eagles, have been employing yoga since the mid-1990s, it is just beginning to become part of college football teams' regimens. Ohio State, Georgia Tech and Colorado are among the few schools that have incorporated yoga training.

A recent book, "Real Men Do Yoga," has helped push yoga more toward the fitness mainstream. It focuses on 21 professional athletes who have benefited from yoga.

On the book's cover, Tennessee Titans running back Eddie George sits in a yoga pose. Inside, pro football players such as George, Dan Marino, Shannon Sharpe, Amani Toomer and Cris Carter extol the virtues of yoga, as do NBA MVP Kevin Garnett and former American League Cy Young Award winner Barry Zito.

"It's more challenging than you'd expect," UD wide receiver Justin Long said. "Like Johnny said, it's 50 percent physical and 50 percent just reaching and stretching. But to be able to hold the pose, you have

ance can be difficult.

In their ongoing quest to become better football players, the Blue Hens are rolling mats onto a concrete floor and assuming positions that make a three-point stance seem mundane. When coach K.C. Keeler told them they would be gathering twice a week for 45-minute sessions of "power yoga," they didn't know what to expect.

"We'd either be miserable and it'd be one of those things you don't really want to go to, or you're

going to love it and take it to the next level," said defensive tackle Rachid Stoury. "From the first workout, it felt so great."

Friday's session was the fifth of 10 for the Hens, and Keeler is already considering making yoga a permanent aspect of Delaware's conditioning program.

"It exhausts you fully," freshman defensive tackle Bubba Jespersen said. "You give everything you've got. When you're done, there's nothing left. But once you're rejuvenated, in about two hours, it's a great feeling. I enjoy it a lot."

Keeler's hope is that the ancient movements developed in India improve players' focus, flexibility,



Blue Hens linebacker Mondo Davis stretches at a power yoga class. The team has been gathering twice a week for the 45-minute sessions.

to exert all your strength. It fatigues you. If you're holding your arms up, after a couple minutes, your shoulders start burning."

The idea was suggested to Keeler by former Christiana High and UD fullback Danny Reeder. From 1982 through 1984, Reeder rushed for 2,067 yards at Delaware. But he was plagued by hamstring injuries throughout his career, and missed several games his senior year.

As part of his present fitness regimen, Reeder had taken classes at Wilmington Yoga, operated by Gillespie on Pennsylvania Avenue. A friend had suggested yoga might ease the back pain that had lingered since Reeder's football career, which also included a stint with the Pittsburgh Steelers. It actually made Reeder feel better all over.

"If they had this when I was playing, I wouldn't have had all those hamstring injuries," Reeder said. "It opens up that whole hip flexor area. It's so valuable to guys who are lifting weights and moving explosively.

"I give K.C. credit for keeping these guys on the cutting edge. Anything that increases range of motion should be beneficial."

Striking a balance

A native of Aston, Pa., and a graduate of West Virginia University, Gillespie, 31, has a background in strength and condi-

and the benefits are psychological as well as physiological, he said.

"It's called 'kinesthetic awareness,' your ability to perceive your body in space," Gillespie said. "It's not only being able to strengthen and stretch with yoga postures, but focusing on their minds. That's why, during the sessions, I want them to be there [mentally]. I don't want them thinking about their girlfriend or a math test."

While the word "power" indicates that this brand of yoga is slightly more strenuous, it also refers to an athlete's ability to be within his or her zone, Gillespie said.

"You're 'In your power,'" he said. "I can help an athlete make his hamstrings more flexible and his hips more open, so when they're on the football field, they're 'in their power.' It can really get very spiritual."

At the same time, restraint must also be exercised. Gillespie frequently urges players not to exert all their force and energy, to find that delicate balance between strength and serenity.

"The thing that makes yoga poses so powerful also makes them dangerous," Gillespie said. "If a teacher doesn't understand the anatomy of the hip and proper alignment, next thing you know the back is thrown out."

Players needed some convincing when told they would be performing yoga. Keeler found that most seemed hooked after one session.



Johnny Gillespie (right) teaches a recent power yoga class for University of Delaware football players.

tioning. He was working as a personal trainer when, about five years ago, he became interested in yoga. The more he learned, the more interested he became in its healing qualities.

"It's funny, because there are so many different directions you can go with it," Gillespie said. "But it's basically getting your body in harmony and balance through strength and flexibility."

Personally, Gillespie found yoga eased the physical toll his body had taken through activities such as ice hockey, running and weight lifting. He felt it would be the ideal therapeutic antidote to some of football's inherent ravages, including the muscle tightness caused by weight lifting.

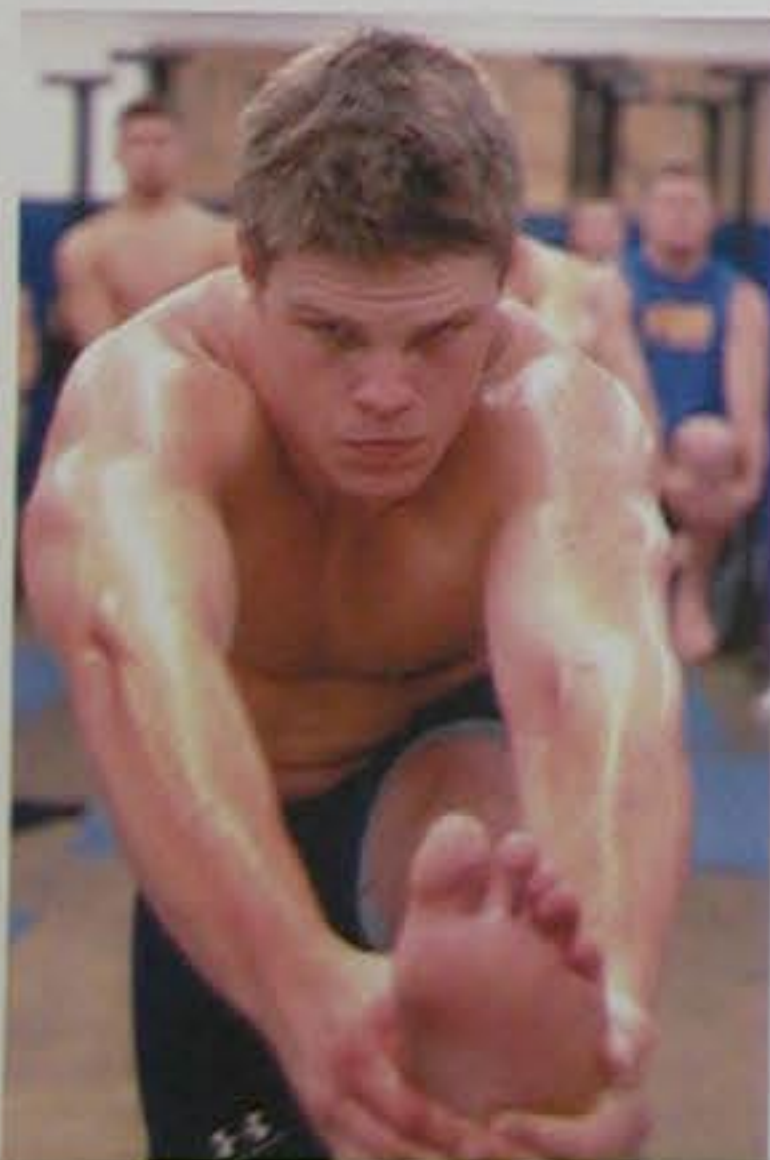
The approach

"Some of them rolled their eyes when I told them, but not as much as the coaching staff did," Keeler said. "It should be great for building team chemistry. You get the benefits of increased flexibility, which limits injuries and helps with body control."

"When you have 20,000 fans in the stadium going crazy and a player is trying to perform his assignment, he needs to have the focus to lock in and get it done. It's a focus, and this should help."



Blue Hens quarterback Santino "Sorny" Riccio grabs his toes during a power yoga class.



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