

the warrior poses. It was amazing to me that just holding stances and trying to control your breathing will get your heart rate up to the point where you will sweat profusely, like you were on a bike or running sprints outside.”

Intrigued, Mourning began practicing with an Ashtanga teacher at Prana Yoga Center, in Coral Gables, outside of Miami. He spent the next five months adjusting to his medications, cutting sweets and red meat out of his diet, and staying in shape with intense, flowing yoga. Mourning missed the first 69 games of the 2000–2001 NBA season, but slowly, he regained his strength and returned for the final 13.

At first, Mourning seemed to rebound without a problem, playing 75 games in 2001–2002. But suddenly, his condition relapsed, his exhaustion returned, and under doctors’ orders he missed the entire next season. He attempted a comeback with the New Jersey Nets in the fall of 2003, but some people in the NBA community cringed when they watched Mourning go to battle on the court; they wondered if basketball was putting his life in jeopardy.

Apparently, it was. After playing only 12 games, chemical balances of his blood became so unstable that doctors worried he might go into cardiac arrest. Mourning’s kidneys could not keep up with his rigorous lifestyle. Facing dialysis and a

kidney transplant, he retired from the NBA at the age of 33, the number he’d worn on his jersey his entire career.

THE LONG ROAD TO RECOVERY

Zo’s early retirement hit the basketball community hard, and his widely publicized condition drew donor offers from fans and friends, including former NBA star Patrick Ewing. The best match, however, turned out to be Mourning’s cousin,

Trevor Kearney is a freelance writer in Brooklyn, New York, where he lives with his wife, Michelle, and practices at Shambhala Yoga & Dance Center. He’s written about the NBA for eight years.



ULTIMATE WARRIOR Mourning became the second player in NBA history to return with a transplanted kidney.

Jason Cooper, so on December 19, 2003, the two checked into Columbia University Medical Center for transplant surgery. With no guarantees for his career—much less his life—hooked up to a maze

because Mourning didn’t know if his body was going to accept the new kidney. Over the next few months, Mourning couldn’t run at all; he could barely jump; and his energy level fluctuated daily.

“I swear by yoga. I wish I’d started practicing when I was 22, when I first got in the league.”

of tubes, IVs, and monitors, and suffering from excruciating pain, Mourning made a promise: “I was lying in the hospital bed, and I thought, ‘God, if you ever give me a chance to get back on my feet again, I want you to use me to touch as many lives as possible through basketball.’”

Determined to make good on that promise and regain his stature as one of NBA’s best, Mourning returned to his doctor’s initial prescription: yoga. He began practicing with Allison Egan, a yoga teacher at Oxygen Fitness Club in Tenafly, New Jersey, in January 2004—just a few weeks after surgery.

It was a tense time, Egan recalls,

Because his muscles were weak from inactivity, his yoga practice started slowly. The rigorous, athletic sun salutations and other flowing series that he once relished were a thing of the past.

Still, whether he was up or down, exhausted or energized, Mourning brought to the mat the same consistency he’d always brought to the basketball court, meeting with Egan nearly five days a week for intense, spiritually centered, two- to three-hour private sessions. She started each class by asking him to set a simple intention and “give his practice away”—to imagine that his yoga practice would serve for **(continues on page 86)**