

[INFORMED SOURCES]

Expertise and first-person accounts.

IMPROVEMENT

BULLISH ON YOGA

These guys go to the mat for their sport—and stretch out to get in the zone.

BY JOSH FINE

CHICAGO BULLS coach Phil Jackson is not the holler-till-it-hurts, just-do-the-plays kind of coach. This is, after all, the author of *Sacred Hoops*. This is the man who uses Zen to implement his basketball strategy. For their part, his players are used to it. Michael Jordan doesn't seem to mind getting in touch with his feelings once in a while. Even Dennis Rodman doesn't seem quite as, well, "Rodmanesque" within Jackson's aura. But when the coach hired Paula Kout, his own people were shocked. Paula Kout is a *yoga* teacher, for crying out loud. "I'm too old for that," Jordan said. "My flexibility is bad anyway."

It was Kout who

introduced herself to Jackson through a letter three years ago. Owner of a popular yoga studio in the Chicago area, she enclosed a newspaper clipping that described how Kout counseled a stiff-jointed Kareem Abdul-Jabbar toward the end of his career with the L.A. Lakers. Give yoga a chance, she wrote Jackson.

Two

and a half years went by without a word from the Bulls. Then came a call from Jackson. My team's getting older, he said. Come work with us.

Now: Close your eyes. Breathe deeply. Form an image in your head, a peaceful, soul-enriching image, of... of Dennis Rodman. Lying still and breathing on a mat. He does that. Really. For the yoga instructor. And Rodman isn't the only one: The whole team participates in weekly, sometimes daily half-hour sessions with Kout.

Which leads to the obvious question: Why?

"It goes along with what we teach about being focused," Jackson says without hesitation. "We've done a lot of mind and muscle work, but we haven't done a lot about taking the body to a point and bringing it back. It's about staying centered without losing focus. It's very meditative." Does that answer your question?

Jackson had been looking for something to complement the regular weight

work that the team does so that their nimbleness wouldn't be sacrificed. He had considered tai chi or tae kwan do but finally settled on yoga after learning of the benefits of increased bodily suppleness and heightened awareness of breath.

"In the East there's attention to the inner and in the West there's attention to the outer," Kout explains. "Phil wants them to look inward a bit."

He had looked inward himself, back in the tie-dyed '70s, when he was a player with the New York Knicks. Jackson was part of a group of players that went to

yoga classes and would do the exercises before games.

"He was very roundabout when he called," Kout remembers about the first conversation she had with Jackson. "He was explaining to me who he was."

Initially he just wanted to observe a session but Kout said no. Later he called back and explained, "It's not for me, it's for the team." *Oh.*

Kout at first thought it might be hard to coax the likes

FLEX AND FOCUS

Dennis Rodman along with Jordan and Pippen are balancing yin and yang on their perennial championship stretch drive.



Limbered-up
author

Josh Fine
writes for
Sports Illustrated,
The New York Times,
and other publications.



ZORAN MILICH/ALLSPORT

I M P R O V E M E N T

of Jordan, Pippen, and Rodman into the room. But it was the rookies who balked.

It was Scottie Pippen who set a good example. When an injury kept him from most of the initial sessions, he went to Kout's White Iris Yoga studio and asked for a private lesson. A guy standing outside the studio did a double take that must have required weeks of stretching to fix.

"You here to do yoga?" he said.

"Yeah, man," said Pippen. With him was friend and former teammate Sam Vincent. Vincent, according to Kout, became a star pupil.

Even the rookies quickly learned that there is nothing easy about yoga.

Kout's sessions immediately follow team scrimmages; she uses the first few minutes to work on breathing. "How can you use the breath as a point of focus to release stress?" Kout asks the players rhetorically. She then moves on to a sun salutation followed by twists, hip opens, and shoulder stretches. "They have really long spines," Kout says in a vast understatement, "so we try to work on lengthening their hamstrings and softening their quads." Needless to say, she has a lot to work with. Besides awesome quads and cable-taut hamstrings, there are the equivalent in egos and attitudes, an alarming paucity of yin and surfeit of yang. "Toni gets distracted easily," she confides. "Dennis is pretty intense." She means Kukoc and Rodman. Pretty intense.

The hardest part for the players, she says, is the unprotected positions essential to a yoga session. "It's a very vulnerable, undefended position and these men have to defend themselves constantly," Kout says.

Kout used the team budget to buy eye masks for the Bulls to take on a pre-season flight to Paris last year. Jackson fills in for Kout on these trips. He has the equipment manager pack yoga mats on the team plane in case he finds a space big enough to lead the team in a session of his own.

The proof of yoga's effectiveness with the hoops, as far as Jackson and the Bulls are concerned, is how the players' bodies will react come playoff time. The season takes a special toll on older players, and the Bulls are the oldest in the league. They are seeking their sixth world championship in eight years and their third straight since Jordan returned to basketball. Jackson has indicated that he would like to leave

the Bulls after this season and Jordan has talked of retiring. This may be their final opportunity. To hear Kout tell it, it's also their best chance at greater spiritual awareness. "Phil is all about preparation," she says. "He has done a lot of ground work to bring these people in and it's a sacred kind of experience. He takes this stuff seriously. Practice is protected and completely relaxed, and the players feel really safe."

They feel, um, safe with Kout, too. Joe Klein, 7-foot backup center, approached the 5-foot-8-inch yoga instructor after a session. "We all really like what you're doing," he said.

Mrs. Phil Jackson also gave positive feedback. "I'm so glad you're doing this," she told Kout, adding that her husband had been "looking for something to round out the team."

They sure needed it, according to Kout. "It's major yang over there," she says. "It's just so yang."★

C L O S E
*your eyes, and
 form a peaceful,
 soul-enriching
 image in your
 head....of Dennis
 Rodman lying
 still and breathing
 on a mat.*

THE TICKET
 Paula Kout's
 White Iris
 Studio
 is located in
 Evanston,
 Illinois.
 For more
 information,
 call 847/
 864-9987.