

## Can Yoga Make You Fit?

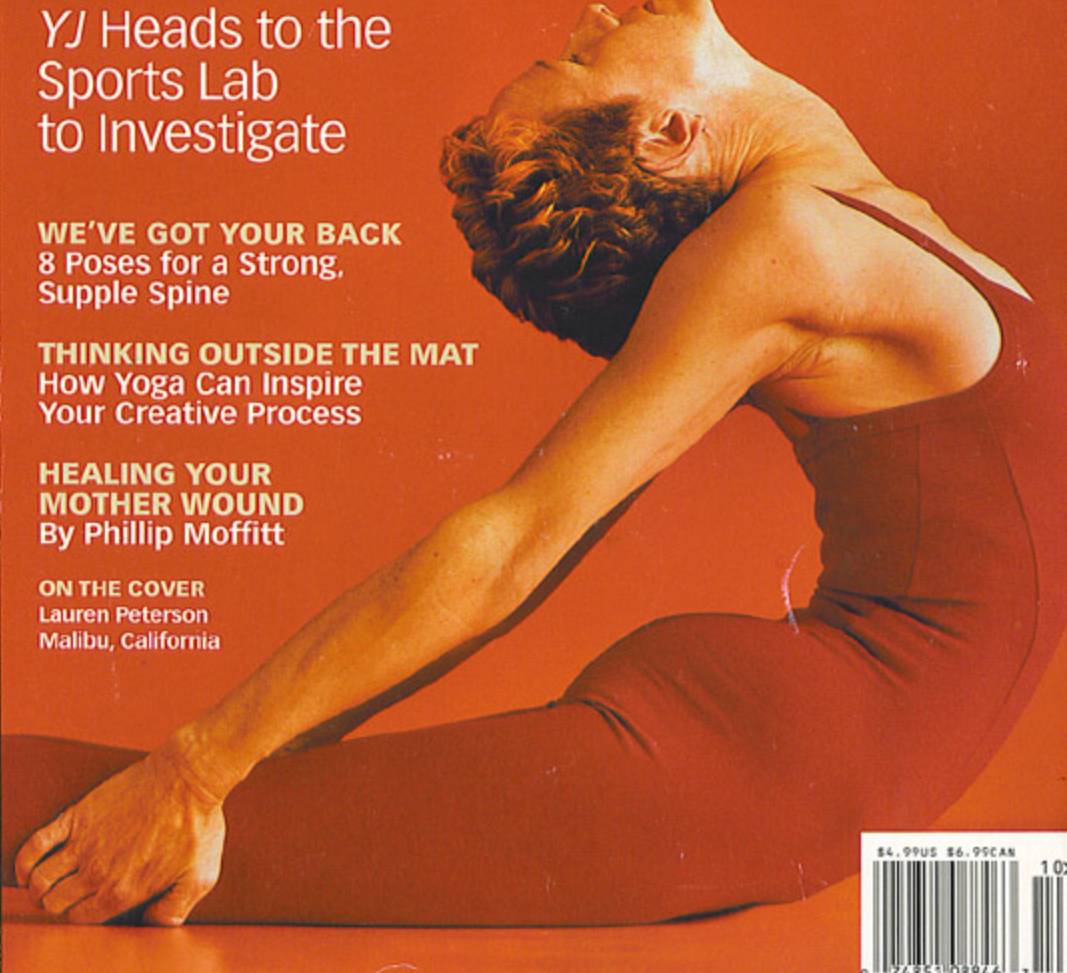
YJ Heads to the Sports Lab to Investigate

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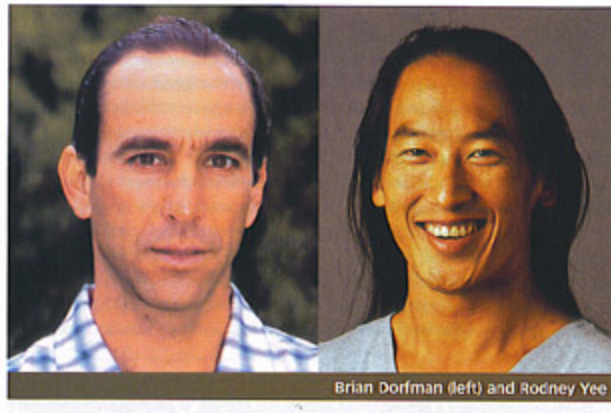


### Teacher to Teacher | BY FERNANDO PAGÉS RUIZ

## Number Crunching

Yoga teachers Rodney Yee and Brian Dorfman

compare notes on the ideal size for a yoga class.



Brian Dorfman (left) and Rodney Yee

AS YOGA'S POPULARITY EXPANDS, so do class rosters. This bodes well for yoga's continued longevity, but when does popularity become overpopulation? Can too many students dilute a teacher's attention and make a yoga student feel anonymous? Or does the support of a growing yoga community bolster a student's practice? To find out, we asked two internationally known yoga teachers, Brian Dorfman and Rodney Yee, to discuss the pros and cons of high-density yoga.

Brian Dorfman, who studied with T. K. V. Desikachar and Sonia Nelson, is a recognized Viniyoga instructor, who leads yoga workshops internationally. He conducts teacher training at his North County Yoga Center in Solana Beach, California. Combining a background in kinesiology with 17 years in private practice, Dorfman served as yoga instructor for several U.S. Olympic athletes and coached several medalists, as well as Paula Newby-Fraser, an eight-time winner of the Hawaii Ironman triathlon. He has published three manuals and a video on flexibility training.

Rodney Yee codirects the Piedmont Yoga Studio in Oakland, California, and stars in numerous videos, including the *Yoga Journal Practice Series*. Having synthesized a personal approach to yoga, he conducts seminars and classes worldwide and recently coau-

thored *Yoga: The Poetry of the Body* (Thomas Dunne/St. Martin's Griffin, 2002).

**Yoga Journal:** How has attendance at your classes changed since you started teaching?  
**Rodney Yee:** I started teaching yoga 16 years ago and my classes had four or five students. Nowadays a class can draw 100. Fortunately it's not just the number of those willing to try yoga that's grown; many students have been practicing 10 to 15 years. There's a strong middle to the pyramid, which means yoga practice has matured in the U.S.

**Brian Dorfman:** Without a doubt there are more men, students are more consistent, and many students already have some background in yoga.

**YJ:** How does class size influence your teaching?  
**BD:** I can teach beginners in groups of 25 or more. But if I'm doing advanced work, I prefer a smaller group. Students who have put years into their practice need a more personalized environment to continue learning. On average, a class setting of 12 to 16 students is a manageable size—this allows for more one-to-one contact.  
**RY:** For the most part, yoga was originally taught one-on-one. It's an amazing and intimate way to learn, but it's not always ideal. One-on-one can be limiting. The teacher's eyes remain trained on you to the point that they can become a hindrance. If a student is intimidated, it limits his or her observation skills. A student can only digest so many things at once, and a teacher notices many different things at any given moment. Certainly with smaller numbers you can provide more specific training, but I prefer working with 25 to 50 students. There's a certain momentum that develops; a sense of community and collective consciousness takes over and allows something magical to happen that goes beyond the teacher's specific instruction.

**BD:** Sure, the sense of community can be very rewarding. But experienced students can feel frustrated when attending a class of 50 people and 25 of them have just started yoga practice this year. I think it's important

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for the teacher to remain clear about his or her intention. I limit the number of students I accept in order to deliver more personalized instruction.

**RY:** Mixed level has its advantages, even for the advanced student. In the martial arts, black belts teach the white belts by example. This engenders humility and sets in motion the teacher training process. One-on-one works in some situations, but because of limited exposure, one-on-one does not allow for serendipity. Much of our learning takes place beyond the teacher. If you isolate the beginners, who are they going to follow? The teacher ends up demonstrating a lot more because beginners need mental pictures. In a mixed class, learning comes by osmosis. Our antennas are out all the time. When you mix it up with people who know what they are doing, you pick up new things and contemplate new possibilities.

**YJ:** Does the size of a class influence which asanas you teach?

**BD:** To a large group including less experienced students, I only present material that creates a challenge without a risk. To an experienced group, I might teach something more advanced, like Headstand. But my interest is not so much in asana per se, but rather in the way it functions for an individual. Therefore, I always provide alternatives so that everyone has an opportunity to experience a class within their level of ability and in response to their unique needs.

**RY:** Handling large groups safely demands very specific teaching skills. While I can see everyone in a class of up to 50 people and provide each with enough individual instruction that it feels like a private lesson, beyond this number it gets more difficult. I've taught classes of over 300 and discovered that I had to develop a high degree of verbal accuracy; otherwise, I might say something and see 300 different interpretations. Since you can't manually adjust everyone in a large group, you have to select asanas that are going to be safer for self-

exploration so students won't injure themselves. But you don't want to bore them either, so sometimes you need to push the borders a little. The mind can focus more acutely when there's a natural interest in the posture and even more when it feels challenged. I like to add a challenging and unusual pose during class just to wake people up. I've designed ways in which even inexperienced students can try more advanced postures safely. It's always engaging for us to approach poses that we can't do.

**YJ:** Would you suggest a student attend a large class with an established teacher or a smaller class with someone qualified, but less experienced?

**BD:** It's important for the students to start somewhere and apply themselves—somewhere where they feel comfortable. The student's process is more important than class size. But on a daily level, it's important to feel some connection with your teacher, some relationship. This can be difficult

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to accomplish in a class of 100 students.  
**RY:** Yoga is taught on many different levels in this country. It can be just a physical regimen, or it can be a way of living. I would recommend going to someone like Pattabhi Jois or Iyengar if you want to experience the depth of yoga. I learned more about Trikonasana—where to turn my foot, where to place my knee, what muscles to draw up or relax—at the Iyengar Institute in San Francisco than I did going to India to study with Iyengar. I learned the technical aspects of asana better in a small classroom with an adequate teacher. But I learned much more about yoga as a way of life in Iyengar's class with 500 other students. So whether it's a class of 500 or a class of one, find a teacher that actually has experience and depth of knowledge. I'd recommend that class, regardless of size.

**YJ:** Are there enough yoga teachers to deliver high-quality, individualized instruction?  
**RY:** That's a serious question, but it begins

with defining what "qualified" means when it comes to the subject of yoga. If you are looking for physical fitness, there are probably enough teachers. When you start talking about teachers qualified to transmit the yoga lineage, then the numbers get a lot smaller.

**BD:** The notion of mentorship has been lost in our society. Beginning teachers should be working with advanced teachers in a mentoring environment. Unfortunately a teacher can make some decent money pretty quickly, and the mentorship relationship, which builds a solid teaching experience, gets lost. I'd say no, we don't have enough qualified teachers.

**RY:** Sometimes I ask people, "Would you take piano lessons from a person who's been studying piano for a year?" No way. Not that you couldn't learn some things from somebody who's been studying piano one year, but you're not going to take lessons from them. You're not going to send your kid to take lessons from them. So why would you take something as serious as

yoga—which concerns your body, your spirit, your mind, your heart, the totality of the human experience—and submit to a teacher without experience? The bar of competence for teachers in our society has gotten pretty low—in all fields, not just yoga. The teaching occupation is not respected.

**BD:** Which brings up the student's responsibility. The application of the student, whether in a big class or a small one, is going to have a lot to do with the results. It's not possible for the teacher to make the practice apply to everybody, but each person can apply himself or herself to the practice. The larger the class, the more important it is for you to remain focused. You may enjoy getting caught up in the rhythm, but you don't want to be swept away. You want to keep in mind the bigger picture of what you're doing and why you're learning yoga.

**YJ:** How should a student approach a large workshop setting to get the most

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