

ROWING: 11/3/2004 Nagambie, Victoria. 2004 Australian Rowing Championships. Semi-Final of the Elite Women's Single Scull, Jane Robinson of AIS/DARAMALAN Club. Photo: James Worrell.



taking yoga to athens

[the story of jane robinson]

Jane Robinson is one of Australia's leading athletes. Her preparation for the Athens Olympics has been a combination of both conventional training and yoga with her teacher Bill Giles. In this article they talk to Greg Wythes.

Rowing may not have the mainstream media profile as some of the glamour sports like swimming or cricket, and though we may remember the achievements of the Oarsome Foursome, generally the individual stars of Australian rowing are not household names. But now, as the Australian team makes its final preparations for the Athens Olympics, one name stands out. Jane Robinson is at the peak of her career. In 2003 she was named A.I.S.' Team Athlete of the Year and in 2004 ACT Qantas Senior Female Athlete of the Year. She is the current World Champion as a member of the Quad Scull team and is the only woman ever to be world champion in the Four, Eight and Quad events. The story of her rise to world domination is one that ranks with any in Australia's sporting history. And it is a story linked strongly to yoga.

Jane came to sport late. She was decidedly non-athletic through her school years but then in 1992, at the age of 23, she accompanied her father in the Murray Marathon Race, an event he had taken part in the two previous years. This was the turning point for her, when she discovered a competitive part of her character after finishing third in her division. Her confidence soared and she made the switch from kayaking to rowing. By 1996 she had made it to the Australian Olympic team. It had been a meteoric rise.

The world of Australian rowing is intensely competitive and for someone to enter this world as a complete novice and within three

years succeed at top level was totally unexpected. For the next four years Jane continued to compete in Australian crews at different events internationally and though she had some successes at this level, the upward spiral of her career had seemed to plateau. Then after a disappointing fifth in the 2000 Olympics Eight event, paradoxically her career began to lift to new heights.

"Coming fifth was devastating," says Jane. "We really thought we were a medal chance. But after the Olympics a number of factors combined to turn things around. The sport matured at an administrative level and this was a help to athletes in achieving their goals. As well I got a new coach. And the effects of my yoga practice really began to kick in."

In the middle of 2000 Jane started yoga classes with Bill Giles in Canberra. Olympic team mate and good friend Kerry Knowler consulted with Bill, an immunobiologist, to overcome chronic fatigue, on the advice of other Olympic athletes Ian Ruff (sailing) and Robert De Castella (marathon). Part of Bill's advice for Kerry was that she take up physical yoga, so Jane went along, initially to keep Kerry company.

"We were hooked after the first session," says Jane. "It's a very practical yoga. Bill has developed a blend of many styles based on all his background. He uses PNF techniques, cues to activate transversus abdominus, core stability work, numerous ways to develop upper body strength and lots of variations to sun salutations. In his class you learn to understand your body, and as an athlete he gives me more 'tricks' to put in my bag."

"Every yoga teacher is informed and enriched by the breadth of their experience," says Bill. But the wealth of experience that Bill Giles brings to his yoga classes is remarkable. In his early teens he began learning the martial arts, a practice he continues today. Later he studied corrective exercise and then in the early 1970s he studied bone setting - what would be called chiropractic in Western terms - with a Japanese sensei. This led to further study in acupuncture and shiatsu. Combined with these bodywork and energetics studies, Bill also followed a formal tertiary training at university, first in engineering and then in science.

"I was first drawn to yoga by its philosophical

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aspects," he says. "My introduction came at a four day Satyananda workshop in the early 70s. I'd been interested in Western mysticism for a long time, especially the Rosicrucians, and this workshop revealed the commonalities between Eastern and Western traditions."

Bill's approach to yoga, an approach that pervades and informs his working and personal life, is rooted deeply in his study and interpretation of the *Sutras* of Patanjali. For this purpose Bill studied Sanskrit for four years and, with an understanding of both the classical and the normal everyday use of the words and their roots, he translated the original text from Sanskrit.

"Personally I am strongly attracted to classical yoga," he says, "and have found wonderful reward in the dualist metaphysics of Patanjali, both as a clinical approach for practical lifestyle changes with clients and for my own life. This dualistic approach suggests that yoga is not simply a union, as many interpret the word yoga to mean, but more a yoking, like joining a horse and cart in order to undertake particular activities or experiences.

"Patanjali's dualism is generally presented as a simple differentiation of the material world, *prakriti*, from the spiritual essence, *purusha*. However, for me the metaphysical extension of this allows both *prakriti* and *purusha* to be viewed as expressions of *Isvara*, the Lord within, which is itself an expression of *Brahman*, the Ultimate. From this foundation a practical transformation of conscious

evolution and merging with the ultimate can be more consistently achieved. People should be able to be with any person, anywhere, anytime, collecting the experiences of their life, and feel happy and contented with themselves."

In 1989 Bill founded Samyama Yoga in Canberra. His style is distinctive and quite unique, and it is one that has served Jane Robinson well.

"It's the little one percent things that Bill has taught me that have made all the difference," says Jane. "When I began I had chronically stiff ribs. The breath work combined with the stretching and *asana* work has really helped to free my ribs and my back. My hips and my ITBs (the band of tissue that runs down the outside of the thigh) were very tight; this tightness had developed over time from all the rowing. Physiotherapists from the A.I.S. had worked on them, but it was the yoga that really turned them around. This was one of the little things that changed and it helped to give me the length I needed in my rowing stroke."

Much of the general training for elite athletes at the A.I.S. involves strength development, often through the use of a weights program in the gym, and though flexibility work is encouraged, it lacks the sophistication and thoroughness of yoga. Weight training, in the main, will strengthen but at the same time shorten, muscle fibres, and this can lead to reduced overall flexibility and reduced joint mobility. Jane uses what she

has learnt from Bill to counteract these effects.

"Yoga has given me more control over my recovery from the training schedule at the A.I.S. After a weight session, I know I need to get my mat out and now I know how to get the muscles to let go. I feel better physically so I feel better mentally."

"Jane was a very diligent student right from the beginning," remembers Bill, "but coming from an athletic background she thought she could handle the more advanced classes. At the start she found it somewhat of a challenge, probably more of a challenge than she had expected, but being focused and disciplined, she advanced more quickly than most. Many people attend classes for a workout under guidance, finding it easier to pay a yoga teacher to do the planning and thinking for them. Jane and her rowing friends attended yoga classes purposefully, to learn as much as they could, and the rewards have certainly been in line with their efforts."

Rowing is a very demanding sport on the body. It requires strength and stamina and the technique to deliver at maximum efficiency over a sustained period. Jane, now at 30, found that to compete with girls 10 years her junior she needed to use every technique available to prevent injury and speed recovery. But more demanding is the mental aspect. The continual demands of the training program and the toughness of the selection process within the domestic ranks require a particular brand of mental stability, especially if one is to remain at the top for any length of time. Jane's results at the 2000 Olympics had been disappointing and it took great determination to keep rowing for the next four years in order to gain another shot at the Athens Games.

"Jane was down psychologically when I first met her," says Bill. "There was pressure from the coaches for her to retire. They felt that as an older athlete she had passed her peak and was beginning to lose it and that she should step aside to make way for the new crop of younger athletes who were coming up. It's very difficult for anyone to withstand this kind of intense psychological pressure.

"But she wanted more and she asked lots of questions, about yoga and about improving her health and performance. She eventually came to my medical centre³ and we made some lifestyle changes to complement the

yoga work. Elite athletes require individually tailored diets to maximise health and fitness as well as performance and recovery⁴. On the emotional level we worked to bring her non-conscious conditioning more into harmony with her conscious goals and expectations. Her health and performance improved and the extent of her injuries reduced compared to those of other elite athletes. Now she may just win gold in Athens, and we all hope she does. The techniques she has learnt in the physical yoga classes will assist her through the rest of her life. I believe everyone can benefit from the yoga approach to health and fitness."

Not only did Jane's times improve, but the following year marked the beginning of Jane's dominance of world rowing, when she became 2001 World Champion in both the Four and the Eight events.

"Yoga has certainly played a very significant role in my success after Sydney 2000," she says. "What yoga and Bill have done has helped me to stay at an international level and to maintain myself at this level. There are always younger and more talented athletes vying for a place in the team. Success breeds pressure and it can be very tough. Whilst I've never really dominated at a national level, what I do is to combine well in a team and bring strength to that team.

"Technically I should be getting injured but I'm not. Yoga gives me a better quality of training life: less pain and more gain. I rarely see the physios at the A.I.S. or any of the sport psychologists. Bill is a good counsellor and a good mentor; someone out of rowing and my field who can give me advice and strategies to deal with personal and professional issues. He is someone you can turn to in a crisis. And he's very positive and supportive in class, like many yoga teachers would be. This is such a relief after the intensity of my training where the emphasis is on how much weight I've lifted or how fast the boat has moved."

Bill's approach to hatha yoga and diet are quite different to what would be considered the standard yogic view and much of it is informed by his background in biology and his lengthy clinical experience. His view on the most beneficial times to practise seem to reverse the normal approach, but it is a view that takes account of, and explains, the common experience of stiffness early in the

morning. It also seeks to deepen the healing and balancing effects of yoga by practising prior to sleeping.

"I have always thought that an appropriate time to use physical yoga techniques is in preparation for sleep," he says. "For me, this involves realigning all the joints, releasing all muscular tension and balancing as much organ and energetic activity as possible on the night. In this way, the healing capacity of my body is optimised. With most people, the lymph system will be sluggish after sleeping and in the morning the body will feel stiff. It takes a little time for this system to function normally, especially if there is any low grade infection. I recommend kriya exercises during the morning to assist this process as it is less painful and reduces the possibility of injury. I have found it more rewarding to undertake strong workouts for conditioning and discipline well after the lymphatic system has normalised. Generally I don't plan my classes ahead of time. We begin with several minutes of meditation and in this period I assess the needs of those in the class – I observe them closely and I base the class on what I see."

Another major improvement that Jane noticed was in her ability to deal with stress, especially when travelling overseas and in particular on race days.

"I always take my mat overseas and do a session every day, or as I need it," she says. "I spend a lot of time sitting around in hotel rooms, waiting. This used to be a stressful time but I've learnt through yoga how to deal with the waiting and how to use it to develop a good winning focus. On race days I practise an abdominal massage with the fingers to reduce the butterflies in my stomach. And if I'm getting wound up I find that warrior pose – one of the ways that Bill has taught it to me, with the wrists turning at 180 degrees and the tongue on the roof of my mouth – helps to reduce outside thought and allows me to focus. Bill also teaches a technique for swishing the brain around inside the head in sync with the breathing that I find brings me into my body. Or I use circular breathing to empty my mind."

Jane's lung capacity is quite large: her VO₂ max⁵ is in the top percentile of all athletes ever measured at the A.I.S., but she initially found the breath aspect of yoga difficult.



ROWING: 28/5/2003 Milan, Italy. 2003 World Rowing Championships. World Champions, Australia, competing in the Women's Quad Scull. The crew (from left) Amber Bradley, Kerry Hore, Dana Faletic, and Jane Robinsons. Photo: James Worrell.

Though one would expect that improving breathing techniques could lead to benefits in training and performance, breathing is not often taught specifically in sports training.

"Bill has introduced our class to breathing exercises that require control and relaxation. I still find these challenging but am getting better with practise," she says. "When I'd learnt any stretching before, breathing simply wasn't mentioned and I think I'd just held my breath in the stretch. So at first I found it a challenge to work with the breath in postures and in pranayama, but now it gives me a good sense of control and I have a sense of how the ribs work with the breath.

"From Bill I have developed a practice that works for me on many levels. It has helped me to understand my body so I can recognise what I need at any time. Eventually I will leave Canberra but I know the lessons Bill has taught me will give me independence and skills that I will have for life."

What the relationship between Jane and Bill illuminates is a relationship that is being played out on a wider scale throughout Australia. Yoga is no longer an activity

practised by a minority. Yoga is now mainstream. The relationship between yoga teacher and student may no longer fit into the cultural confines of yoga's birthplace, India, but the essential qualities are still there; with added richness. The sense of individuality of today's student brings with it different needs and requirements; the needs of an individual deeply rooted in Western culture. And the contemporary yoga teacher brings to his or her teaching a broader range of talents and skills honed by immersion in both Eastern and Western traditions.

All great traditions are transformed in some way by the cultures and the environments they come into contact with. If the transformation is organic and sensitive, what can grow out of the contact can be both unique and authentic – as we have seen with Buddhism in its various forms throughout Asia and now in the West. The relationship between Jane and Bill is one example of how this process is now occurring in Australia, as yoga's influence and impact continue to grow.

The Olympic rowing events take place August 17 to 22 and will be televised on channel 7.

References

1. Australian Institute of Sport
2. A Neurological approach to stretching which involves contraction of the targeted muscle and then re-stretching.
3. Bill runs a clinic called The Canberra Medical Ecology Centre
4. Bill's research into diet, especially with regard to auto-immune disease, is quite compelling and will be detailed in a future issue.
5. A scientific measure of lung capacity

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