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Downward Dog! Bang!

Former pro wrestler “Diamond” Dallas Page has an answer for regular guys: yoga

by NICHOLAS ROSEN

The portrait of America after the 2004 election is now all too familiar: We are a house divided. Our nation can be organized into neat little dichotomies: Democrats vs. Republicans, agnostics vs. the faithful, tree huggers vs. off-roaders. And we could reasonably add another one to the red state–blue state partition: Those who enjoy professional wrestling vs. those who do yoga.

Some people love to pass the time between NASCAR rallies watching large, bombastic men in costumes with names like the Undertaker and the Basham Brothers engage in choreographed combat involving Manichaeian themes and folding metal chairs.

Other people shun perfectly good hamburgers, chant incantations in a language they don’t understand, and force their bodies into improbable contortions in an effort to upgrade their karmic portfolios.

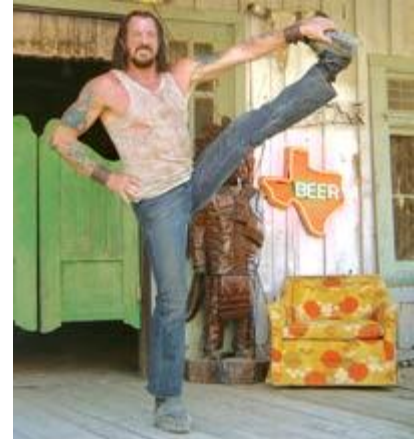
Both of these groups are dedicated to a ritual of pain, sweat and tights. Aside from that, they are on opposite ends of the mat.

“Diamond” Dallas Page wants to change all that. Page, also known as DDP, is a three-time world-champ pro wrestler famed for his bevy of bikini-clad Diamond Dolls and his devastating “diamond cutter” — a move that entails grabbing one’s opponent by the head and slamming him to the floor like an unruly heifer. When the 6-foot-5, 235-pound DDP steps into to the ring, his multitudinous fans — organized under the informal Union of Diamond Cutters (UDC) — are prompted to jump from their seats, throw their fingers together in the shape of a diamond, and holler the wrestler’s no-nonsense catch phrase: “Bang!”

Since Page retired from World Wrestling Entertainment in 2002, his professional reinvention has involved a series of motivational-speaking engagements, a few roles in B-grade movies, and the inevitable stint on *Hollywood Squares*. And now, in the ultimate defiance of our cultural stereotypes, the wrestling legend has recast himself as the yoga guru for the American Everyman, with a new concept, YRG — Yoga for Regular Guys.

“This is yoga for the dude who wouldn’t be caught dead doing yoga,” a says Page, as he preps for our yoga session with an Olympian-size breakfast of 10 eggs, a heaping bowl of oatmeal and a tall glass of greenish liquid. The guys out there may think, “It’s, like, too girly,” but as Page explains it, Yoga for Regular Guys is a “serious fucking workout” he created by adopting traditional yoga postures — sun salutation, downward dog, etc. — and merging them with the fitness techniques of the Western world, like isometrics and calisthenics. Page has already developed a Yoga for Regular Guys book for release in November 2005, and is currently planning a video and promotional infomercial. “And of course, you gotta have lots of hot chicks in G-strings all over the place,” he adds. “It’s gonna be like yoga meets *The Man Show*.”

A few weeks earlier, I stumbled upon DDP while doing research for an upcoming documentary on yoga in the West, titled *Project Y*. The premise takes some jerk who has never done yoga before (me) and plunges him in, headfirst. I wrote to DDP’s manager to find out more about the loudmouthed gladiator’s passion for this ancient Indian ritual. He sent me a photo of DDP showing off his yoga moves on the set of Rob Zombie’s upcoming film *The Devil’s Rejects*, in which the wrestler plays the role of a gnarly, dust-covered bounty hunter named Billy Ray Snapper. The photo (above) shows him in the advanced yoga posture *utthita hasta padangusthasana*, which entails standing on one leg while grabbing the other foot and stretching it up toward your head in a dramatic



(Photo courtesy of Diamond Dallas Page)

forward kick.

For weeks, I myself had been working on this difficult pose (which the ancients credit with loosening the hips, strengthening the testicles and reducing constipation), but couldn't even come close to pulling it off. DDP's execution was perfect and seemingly effortless, despite his costume of tight jeans and welder's boots. I followed up with a phone call to DDP himself, and he cheerfully invited me to come have a taste of Yoga for Regular Guys. "Bang!" thundered DDP. "I'm gonna raise your fucking heart rate fast as fuck!" He added that he would call in his "Yoga Babes" to come join in the fun.

Over breakfast at his apartment complex in Playa Vista (which Page was sharing with fellow bachelor and wrestling legend "Stone Cold" Steve Austin), we talk wrestling. "Pro wrestling isn't fake, it's fixed," says DDP. "They are really hitting each other." Toward the end of his career, the years of body slams, folding chairs to the head, and other stage-managed but no less real forms of violence had done a serious number on Page's body, particularly his L4 and L5 spinal region. "At 42 years old, they told me my wrestling career was over," says Page, who is now 49 and still wrestling pay-per-view matches.

He admits that when his wife, Kim — a tanned, statuesque *Playboy* model and former Diamond Doll — first tried to get him into yoga, he balked. "I said, 'Yoga? You gotta be fuckin' kidding me,'" admits Page. But as his back pain became less and less bearable, he finally let himself be dragged to a yoga class led by Brian Kest, Santa Monica's master of "power yoga" — a high-intensity modification of the traditional form that both eased Page's pain and kicked his butt. Now a full convert, Page credits yoga with prolonging his career and rescuing his body. "Flexibility is youth, dude."

I muse to DDP that yoga practice and professional wrestling are actually born of similar existential assumptions; after all, serious yoga devotees would suggest that, just as professional wrestling is fake, so the entire manifest world is simply an illusion that overlays the deeper reality of the higher Self. Stirring the eggs with one hand, DDP waves the other dismissively. "I don't go in for all that spiritual crap," he says. "Yoga classes usually begin with *namaste* [a common Sanskrit greeting]. My yoga is not about *namaste*. It's more like T&A!"

Soon it is time for the yoga to begin. We drag our mats out into an adjacent courtyard, where I am outfitted with a heart monitor and placed behind — as promised — a pair of skimpily clad Yoga Babes. As the practice begins, I realize this is not your usual yoga routine. Dispensing with the usual *ommm*, we go right into slow-motion isometric pushups. Before I know it, my atria are thumping at around 160 beats per minute, and I'm setting a new record for human perspiration. The postures that follow are a bit more familiar to the regular yoga practitioner — warrior one, cat pose, etc. — but with little attention paid to breath or alignment, and lots of Diamond Dallas Page flair.

"Okay, come up, now call a touchdown!" We throw our arms up like football referees. "Now fall forward, straighten your back, bend your knees and go up, with your hands into the form of the Diamond Cutter!" — we all make diamonds with our thumbs and forefingers, looking like card-carrying members of the UDC.

Yoga traditionalists will likely dismiss Yoga for Regular Guys as an unwelcome aberration from what many view as a sacred, millennia-old tradition. But in fact, the variety of yoga that we now practice in the West — broadly known as hatha yoga — probably bears little resemblance to its original form or intention. Hatha yoga's postures and breathing techniques are only a small part of a diverse tradition, its origins shrouded in history, comprising rigorous mental and physical practices undertaken by Hindu ascetics in their effort to find liberation from the chains of mortality and earthly suffering. In recent years, fitness-friendly aspects of hatha yoga have been adopted by the West and morphed into the likes of *Fat-Blasting Yoga* videos and celebrity endorsements. With or without Diamond Dallas Page, the art of yoga is well on its way to full-blown pop-cultural exploitation. "We are just taking it to the next level," says Page.

Later in the session, when we are all in downward dog, our derrières reaching for the sky, DDP giggles, gestures to the Yoga Babes in front of me, and asks, "How's the view, Nick?" Whoa, I think. Diamond Dallas Page is clearly charting new territory here. After all, yoga classes are filled with taboos. You never giggle when someone farts, and you never even think about sex, no matter how tight the outfit or suggestive the pose.

Clearly, Page is marketing to a whole different audience. The notion of the "regular guy" is worth its weight in gold

in America — beer companies and political campaigns alike have staked their success on marketing to this lowest-common-denominator demographic. It remains to be seen whether Page can tap this cultural gold mine with a gimmick that is so decidedly Age of Aquarius. But the fact that yoga is seen by some as “too girly” may in fact be a hidden strength: With most yoga classes offering very promising girl-boy ratios, the prospect of being surrounded by sweaty chicks is sure to gain some traction with the lad-mag and *Monday Night Football* set.

Anyway, I end up really enjoying my yoga session with Diamond Dallas Page, partly because, despite my liberal-arts education and postfeminist sensibilities, I am just a regular guy, more T&A than *namaste*. And I can't help thinking that maybe he is onto something. For all its popularity among urban professionals and left-leaning sophisticates, yoga has yet to penetrate the supersized heart of Middle America. It may just take someone with the cultural cred of Diamond Dallas Page to deliver a hard workout with many of the benefits of yoga — flexibility, balance and focus — but without any spiritual hoo-ha or unpronounceable Sanskrit names, and push yoga beyond the coastal clusters of liberal elites to the land of monster trucks and Wonder Bread.

“We are gonna get this shit in the schools, get the football teams doing it,” says Page. “Because I am DDP, and I am the guy they are going to listen to. Bang!”