



# BEND IT LIKE BIKRAM

Welcome to the Australian Yoga Asana Championships, a balancing act for competitors where the judges can tell if you've been naughty or nice to your body in a twitch.

BY VANESSA MURRAY PHOTOS BY WARREN CLARKE



**D**ARREN MA is feeling a bit nervous. This seems an impossibility for a man who is tied up like a sheet bend knot – his torso between his legs, his shoulders hooked behind his knees, and his head dangerously close to his backside. On the other side of the room, Ma's main rival, Dave Reid, is being wishboned. One foot planted firmly on the ground, the other slices through the air and hovers impossibly above his head (which, just for the record, is facing in the wrong direction, turning away from his body in a spine-crunching twist).

"Nice legs, Dave," calls 44-year-old Ma from firefly, the term for the yoga pose he is practising. Reid grins and throws a relaxed comment back. Elsewhere in the room, five yogis (male practitioners of yoga) and 22 yoginis (females) stretch and flex, putting themselves through their paces in preparation for three crucial minutes on stage in competition for the ultimate prize ... Not enlightenment, but the title of Australian men's or women's Bikram yoga champion, and an all expenses paid opportunity to represent Australia at the fifth annual International Yoga Asana Championships in Los Angeles from February 1-3.

Yoga comes in many different flavours, from slower, more sedate disciplines, to rapid and cardiovascular types. All have in common a focus on controlled breathing (*pranayama*) as the meter by which practice progresses, and the postures, or *asanas*, themselves. Yoga, particularly Bikram yoga, as part of sports training regimes, is nothing new. Professional teams at home and abroad, from the Montana Grizzlies (college football) to the St Kilda Football Club, incorporate regular Bikram yoga sessions into their programs to assist with strength, flexibility and rejuvenation. It's also a favourite on the celebrity circuit, with Madonna, Gwyneth Paltrow and Raquel Welch all swearing that sweating it out Bikram yoga style keeps them lean and toned, fit and flexible, healthy and injury-free.

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Others argue that it's been around for centuries and is a natural progression of human behaviour. "Competition is the foundation for all democratic societies. Without competition, there is no democracy," says Bikram Choudhury, founder and namesake of this particular yoga. Choudhury won the national title three years running before retiring as the undisputed All-India national yoga champion in 1962.

Now a resident of the throbbing heart of competition and democracy, Los Angeles, he is no stranger to yogic controversy. He's been criticised for attempting to "own" yoga by patenting his particular style, and for sullyng yoga's Eastern allure with that most Western of idols, money. Bikram yoga is the world's fastest growing yoga, and it's big business. Instructors must be trained and certified (at Bikram HQ in Hawaii) by Choudhury himself, and studios operate in a franchise-like fashion. And it's hot, literally: a 90-minute series of 26 hatha yoga postures, each performed twice in sauna-like conditions of 38 degrees Celsius and humidity of 60 per cent. There are an estimated three million students practising in more than 650 Bikram Yoga College Of India studios worldwide – and growing. Australia hosts 20, with five each in Melbourne and Sydney alone.

Jodie Robertson introduced Bikram yoga to Australia in the mid '90s and organised today's competition. She's also a judge at the international event. "Each contestant is scored on a points tally of 80, ten for each pose and then ten for grace. They start with a perfect score, and get points deducted if they're nervous or trembling, if they've got bruises or blemishes or pimples. We're looking for concentration, grace and ease. Even though we know it's not easy for them, it's performance. We're looking for that 'happy smiling face', as Bikram would say."

Bruises, blemishes or pimples? I wonder if this is a sporting event or a beauty contest. "Everyone's got an idea about what that perfect yoga body looks like; we're not so interested in that. But you can tell when someone has a bad lifestyle. We don't deduct for birthmarks etc, but we are definitely looking for vitality."

"Judging yoga has been around for a very long time – it's a traditional Indian thing," explains fellow judge Murray Hatton, another of the panel of five presiding over today's proceedings. "We've been trained to judge by professional Indian judges. It's based on an assessment of people's confidence, how they present themselves. You've got three minutes to be in your zone. It's an amazing mental challenge. To have the balls – if I may say so – to get up and practise alone, to really pull it off being minimally nervous, that's fantastic."

"If you want to have a really fascinating look at where your ego is really at, at how attached you really can be to outcomes and dreams, then compete in a yoga competition," says 2006 women's champion Phiona Voyazis. "I could float around thinking I'm not competitive, I'm not ego-invested and all that stuff, but I'd be lying if I said I didn't want to win! I'm not ashamed of that. I don't feel bad about that. It's awesome to be acknowledged for what you do. The competition is hot, it's massive. It's intense, it's scary. It's very inspiring."

Ma is equally pragmatic. "I enjoy competing," he explains. "I really do want to be a world champion, and the work I do towards that is good for me. I'm involved in a health industry, I look after myself, I eat ▶

Back and side bends are all the rage prior to hitting the stage.



Dave Reid's "nice legs" that Darren Ma was talking about. BELOW Alex Stone escapes it all.





well and I do lots of healthy, physical exercise and push my body. I used to race dragon boats for ten or 11 years and we raced at world championship level for years and years and years, and we finally won a bronze medal at the Beijing championships in 2004. The absolute joy of bringing home some steel, winning a medal at such a high level of competition when you know you've been working so hard, training and killing yourself every day, it's amazing. When you win, you can't beat that feeling."

But back in the warm-up room, not everyone is as relaxed as Ma and Reid. In fact, the air in the warm-up room at North Sydney's Independent Theatre is veritably humming with nervous tension. One competitor is so nervous she can hardly talk to me. I can smell cigarettes on her breath. Voyazis is wide-eyed and a little tongue-tied, and tells me if she could run a hundred miles from here, she would. Alex Stone sits with her back against the wall, eyes closed and spine straight, plugged in to her iPod. I ask later what she was listening to, expecting yogic chanting or dolphin noises. But these are yogis with their feet planted firmly in the modern world, and Stone was listening to her feelgood songs of the moment: *Better Than* by the John Butler Trio and *Happy Ending* by Mika. A crew of yoginis from Adelaide with the bodies and leotards of acrobats are here for the first time and keep to themselves, chatting and preening and warming up in the corner, using the weight of their own bodies to increase each others' stretches. They tell me they don't expect to place today, but they wanted to experience training and competing.

Eventually, the contestants are lined up and introduced one by one on stage, then shuffled off to await the beginning of the competition proper. The men's division will lead, followed by the women. Contestants aren't allowed to watch each other compete until they've done their own routine, so they're bound to the warm-up room to await their call, where a pregnant silence descends. Contestants still themselves, run through last-minute stretches, touch up their make-up. One sneaks outside and applies hair spray to his hands and feet to prevent slipping. Finally the buzzer sounds. Ma is up first, which is just the way he likes it. There is absolute silence as he steps up on stage to work through his three-minute routine of five compulsory and two optional postures.

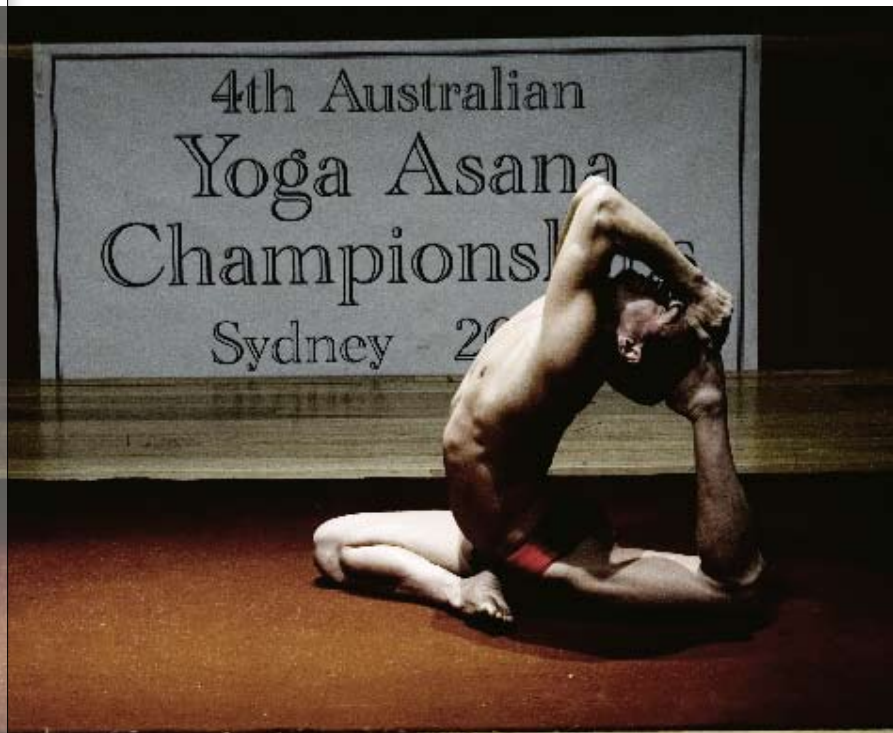
These are the poses that enable judges to assess strength and flexibility throughout the body, and Ma has plenty. His body is pure muscle in motion as he moves through the five compulsory postures: standing head to knee, standing bow pulling pose, floor bow, rabbit and deep stretching, then into his optional poses, king pigeon and lotus hand stand. The 200-strong crowd erupts as he exits, falling into a hushed silence again as the next competitor takes the stage. There are some unforgivable wobbles, and one competitor has pimples, so he's out.

Reid is fifth up, and recovers from an early upset in standing head to knee to stun the crowd with his peacock and locust postures. He's left uncertain. "I didn't really hit my straps this year. My knee buckled during standing head to knee, and I was just stuck in that pose for the rest of my series, replaying it over and over in my head."

The two go on to tie for first place. "Darren had a couple of nice optional postures, and Dave really showed a lot of confidence and vitality," Robertson ▶



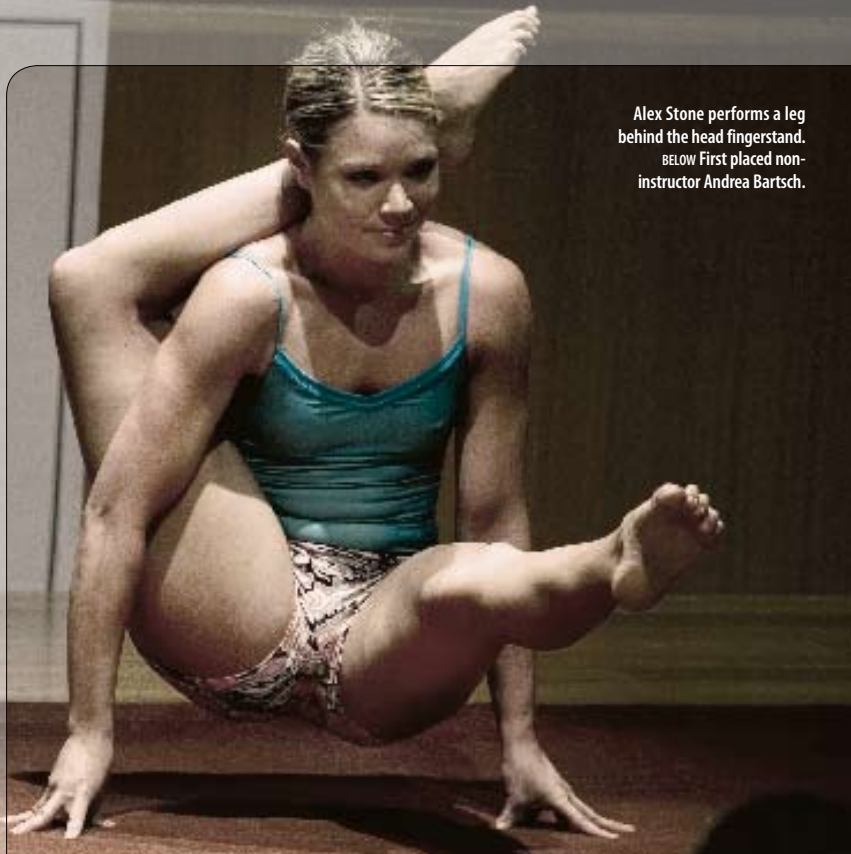
A floor bow is one of five compulsory postures needed to satisfy the competition's judges.



There are some unforgivable wobbles, and one competitor has pimples ... so he's out.



Winners Rowena Ooi (far left) and Andrea Bartsch laugh it all off.



Alex Stone performs a leg behind the head fingerstand. BELOW First placed non-instructor Andrea Bartsch.

tells me when we catch up after the competition. "The other men were quite nervous and didn't shine as much. Darren and Dave's postures were a little deeper and more flexible than the others.'" I wonder how they managed to tie after Dave's knee buckled in his first posture, but Robertson tells me it all comes down to the points. "Even though Dave buckled in standing head to knee, he still held it, and he actually got his head on his knee. So he lost points for the buckling, but he didn't lose a lot, because he did the final pose, he got his head on his knee even after he buckled."

The women's division is three times the size of the men's, and there are surprises in store. Some competitors lose their balance and fall out of postures. One does it three times in a row in the very first posture. Her loss of confidence is obvious, and followed by tears off stage. Crowd favourite Voyazis automatically loses five points after turning the wrong way in standing head to knee. "We need to be able to see the inside of the body," explains Robertson. "Phiona got up and stood on the wrong leg, so we couldn't see what was going on. You just can't afford to do that."

The feelgood music does the trick for Stone, who pulls off an impressive one-armed lotus in peacock and leg behind the head fingerstand, and finishes in second place.

But professional yogini Rowena Ooi blows her rivals out of the water to take an easy first place. Her standing bow pulling posture is technically flawless, and her optional postures, full camel and peacock in lotus (a deep back bend and an advanced balancing posture), show the judges both her strength and flexibility.

Ooi, 33, is on the Bikram teaching faculty, and has just returned from mentoring a retreat in Costa Rica. Speaking after the awards ceremony, she is high on a mixture of joy and disbelief. "I'm really stoked. I only decided to compete three days ago, so I haven't really trained. I've never watched a yoga competition – in fact, I was a bit anti the idea of competition in yoga, I didn't really get it. I wasn't expecting anything. But I wanted to have the experience and see what the deal was. Somebody said to me, 'Once you've decided to compete, you've upped your practice.' And I've noticed in class the last three days how much more focused I've been. I've been much more careful about how I'm getting into postures. The nerves under pressure add another element to it. I was a little bit nervous today."

First stop Australia, next stop the world. "The international competition is amazing," says Robertson. "You see stuff at the worlds you wouldn't see in Australia. Each country sends two male and two female competitors. I think there are going to be 18 countries this year."

"The Americans are generally better than the Australians," says Ma. "Their access to some of the Bikram greats and the length of time they have been practising add up to stronger practices. But they're not out of reach. With determination and hard work, we can be as good as them."

It's clear that yoga as a competitive sport is in its infancy. But if Choudhury has his way, it will be an Olympic sport (it's rumoured to be on the cards as a demonstration sport at the 2012 London Olympic Games).

"At the world competition in February, 2007 a bigwig from the International Olympic Committee was there for the whole weekend," says Robertson. "He said there was definitely scope for it to become an Olympic sport. But there are a lot of procedures to go through that can take years." We'll be watching. ■

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