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Yoga instructor Cara Bradley leads the Penn women's soccer players at the Pottruck Health and Fitness Center in Philadelphia.

Embracing yoga

By Lini S. Kadaba
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School athletes getting in touch with their inner zen

PHILADELPHIA — The hard-muscled men of Haverford College's lacrosse team were primed for a fierce, preseason workout.

So they did a Happy Baby, lying on their backs, grabbing the soles of their feet, and rocking back and forth with glee.

For an hour, the 30 players stretched into Downward Facing Dog, Tree, Frog and a dozen other yoga positions. Not exactly push-ups or wind sprints.

"It's a little shot at the masculinity," joked Joel Censer, 22, a defenseman with tight hamstrings who struggled with a contortion or two. "But, nah, it's great."

Long a fixture in spas and health clubs, yoga is winning over campus jocks nationwide. A growing number of college teams have rolled out the yoga mats to augment training regimens and improve flexibility, strength and mental grit, coaches and instructors say.

Haverford took up the ancient Eastern discipline in 2006, and other teams that have adopted it include football at Villanova and Princeton universities, women's soccer at Penn State University, women's crew at Saint Joseph's University, and, since the fall, men's soccer at Swarthmore College.

Training with yoga appears to have little downside other than, perhaps, the time it can take away from traditional workouts. Researchers also point out that the most-touted benefit — better performance — has not undergone rigorous scientific study.

That hasn't slowed the flow of followers. While no one tracks the number of college teams that supplement training with stretches, deep breaths and meditation, a new Yoga Journal survey indicates nearly 16 million Americans pursue the discipline — 8 percent of them in the prime college age range of 18 to 24.

Yoga has had U.S. adherents since 1893 when Swami Vivekananda introduced in Chicago the hatha form, which stresses physical aspects. Some pro teams, including the Eagles, have used the poses in workouts. Kareem Abdul-Jabbar has been a fan since the '70s. Shaquille O'Neal, Kyle Korver, the Williams sisters and other sports stars also train with yoga.

College and high school teams have adopted the exercises more recently.

"That influence trickles down," said Yoga Journal senior editor Diane Anderson said.

In many cases, the activity is stripped of its traditional Hindu flavor. Some instructors avoid Sanskrit names for poses in favor of English or no names at all, and add movements from other exercise forms.

"If I started to use yoga-speak, they'd shut me out," said Cara Bradley, owner of Verge Power Yoga in Wayne, who

began training the women's soccer team at the University of Pennsylvania last month. "We don't 'om', or anything." She even gave the class a more sports-appealing name: Balanced Athlete.

At Haverford, instructor Claire Brandon, 22, who is majoring in art history and Romance languages at Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania, interjects the occasional chaturanga (a push-up). But instead of the typical New Age music, she uses rock and reggae. The yoga appeals to enough players — who organize the weekly sessions themselves — that they come on Sunday (the only day off from practice) and pay the cost out of pocket.

"It makes us a little more in tune with our bodies," said attackman Mike Distler, 21. "It definitely stretches us out more than we ever would during the week."

On this day, the men squatted (Frog) and then moved to the Happy Baby before meditating for a spell.

"I'm all yogified," goalie Jake Mendlinger, 22, said with a grin as he grabbed his stick. "I'm ready to play."

Whatever the style, the goals are similar: Improved flexibility. Better concentration. Fewer injuries.

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