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Golfers catching on to benefits of yoga

By COLIN FLY The Associated Press
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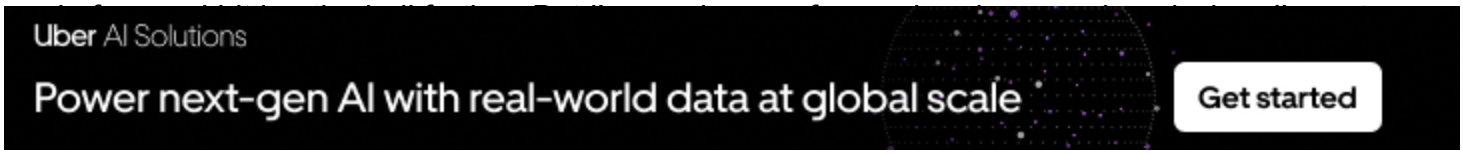
KOHLER, Wis. □ Barney Chepenik's legs wobbled as sweat dripped off his face in the early morning sun at Blackwolf Run. He looked hammered as he faced the course that hosted the 2004 Women's U.S. Open and is known for tight fairways and a devilish layout. And Chepenik hadn't even teed off yet. The 67-year-old and his wife, Claire, took a yoga lesson as part of their enrollment at the Kohler Golf Academy, and are among a growing number of golfers seeking to improve their games by turning to the system of exercises used to promote control of the body and mind. Katherine Roberts, founder of Yoga for Golfers based in Scottsdale, Ariz., and a regular contributor for The Golf Channel, has established programs around the country over the last decade. Instead of yoga drawing more women to golf, she said her programs have attracted more men seeking an edge in their golf games. "My intention was to bring yoga to a demographics of people that would not walk into a yoga class," Roberts said. "(I made) it sports performance-focused, so that we could draw people into the benefits of yoga through the guise of wanting to improve their golf game." The rush to find an edge has resulted in yoga being incorporated at many golf schools. Roberts said she's trained 60 teachers in seven countries through her program, and other golf schools □ like Kohler □ have their own yoga programs that aren't certified by Roberts. At Kohler, coordinator Todd Wagner said yoga is helping his students loosen up to execute freer, easier swings. "Typically, what we'd do in a lesson or in the golf school is we would actually videotape their swing right away and help them actually do the yoga poses that will help benefit their golf swing," Wagner said. The school also has more intensive yoga programs in its women's golf school, as well as its one-hour yoga-golf combination lessons. Rachael Haas teaches yoga at the academy as well as senior programs at the area's community center. She thinks golf and yoga are a perfect fit. "I actually see a huge connection with golf and yoga because in golf you have to be so focused, and the integration of core strength and flexibility and mental focus □ being able to be relaxed yet strong in your swing and cut out distractions because it's an individual sport," she said. Roberts said she saw those results 10 years ago when she cut her handicap by eight strokes while teaching traditional yoga at elite golf resorts. "My students were coming back to me and saying, 'Not only am I more flexible, I'm playing "



was going to explode and become more mainstream." And that's happened on both the pro and local levels. Eduardo Romero, who has 96 career professional victories including the Argentine PGA Championship eight times and the European Masters during his 27-year career, said he wouldn't have had nearly as much success without practicing a form of Indian yoga. It has also helped him overcome back problems, and he credits the practice with improving his concentration. "If I'm not doing yoga, who knows? Maybe I'm retired," said Romero, who has won more than $975,000 on the Champions Tour this year. "But I'm doing yoga and I'm still playing." And that's the goal of the weeklong course at the Kohler Golf Academy by the Chepeniks. The couple from Winter Park, Fla., has golfed together for 17 years and have three daughters-in-law that practice yoga. But the concept was something new to them, and they enjoyed practicing a few basic poses at Kohler. "Am I taller now?" Claire Chepenik said with a grin. Barney Chepenik was already hungry for lunch with two hours of instruction left. But he said he felt like the yoga would pay immediate dividends. "When I get out to play, it takes me a lot of time ... to warm up before I play, and finally four or five holes into it, I begin to get loose," he said. "I feel so much more limber, in terms of movements now." And that's Wagner's goal in helping improve the Chepeniks' golf game. He said it's impossible to teach the correct techniques if Barney Chepenik can't get in the right position. "We'll train him using yoga to free up his muscles, his hips and his core muscles and allow him to turn," Wagner said. "It will give him the freedom to actually go forward now because of his flexibility." Roberts believes golf pros will be incorporating yoga in their lessons within 10 years. "It's going to shift the traditional methodologies of teaching golf," she said. "Golf pros, to enhance what they're bringing to their students, are going to have to understand the student's body and how the body works. Grip is important ... but you have to be able to get the student into the position to do what you're asking them to do."