

Tai chi more work than it looks

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classroom, where one wall is lined with floor-to-ceiling mirrors and mobiles of origami birds sway gently while soothing Chinese music plays softly from a corner. He offers quiet suggestions to his charges and only the occasional creak of a knee or ankle joint interrupts the serenity.

"Slow it down, Bill," Hollinger cautions. "Mary, when your weight is all the way forward, is it all the way forward? Can you lift your back leg with ease?"

The students make adjustments, checking their positions in the mirrors.

Hollinger calls tai chi "moving meditation." The exercise improves students' balance, co-ordination and focus. Anyone can do it, at any age, and a younger, working-age crowd fills weeknight classes. Improved overall health vies with stress relief as the most important ben-

efit.

Bill Echard, 70, and his wife Gwenda, 67, have been taking tai chi for more than a year. They attend one class a week and try to practise every day at home. They do their foundation, or warm up, together, then separate to complete their sets.

Each set has 108 movements, many with charming, ancient-sounding names like "white stork cools wings," "left grasp birds tail" and "creeps low like snake." One set takes 15 to 20 minutes to complete and three sets make up an hour-long class.

"This kind of exercise gives a work out to just about every part of the body — you get flexibility, weight-bearing, and mild cardio. At the end of the set, my heart rate is where it would be after a rapid walk," Bill Echard says.

Grace Burden, a limber 64-year-old, laughs as she asks a photographer to make sure he doesn't publish a picture if she's the only one out of position.

"In your old age, sometimes you start staggering around, you're not as steady as you once were," she quips. "I find with the stretching and work on flexibility I walk more steadily. And it's a very gentle work out. You know you've worked out, but it's not like aerobics — you're not in pain and you haven't killed yourself."

One of the draws for Burden is the activity is not a competition.

"No one ever makes you feel like you're a dim bulb. Where you're at is always OK because you never actually arrive. There's always more to learn."

As I successfully complete my moves, though admittedly with precious little of the fluid grace I see around me, the shoulder spasm finally eases.

Hmmm.

Been There, Done That is a regular column where staff try to keep up with experts in a wide variety of recreational activities.

Volleyball making inroads slowly, but surely

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out and play without much knowledge and pick it up.

"But we are getting the word out to the schools where the kids are. We have to because we don't draw from a hockey house league type pool."

Volleyball is also challenged by the basketball mystique of the Toronto Raptors, with children dreaming of growing up to be Vince Carter. But with no visible pro league for volleyball, heroes to emulate are few. Go ahead — name a member of Canada's men's or women's national team.

"It's certainly a second-level sport because we don't have a pro league and the media exposure that comes from that," Wood says. "In Canada, (volleyball) is still a fairly new sport. We're just now getting into the generation of parents that has played the sport."

The sport has traditionally been a huge hit in York Region high schools. For the boys fall season now winding down, 65 teams are drilling spikes and making digs. At least that many are

expected for the girls season starting in December.

High schools seem a natural backdrop for talent, but it hasn't always been so, Wood says, noting past relationships between club and school team interests have been adversarial.

Club registrations increased when school sports all but shut down due to labour disputes in recent years.

"Now our philosophy is, the more opportunities to play, the better you become and the more you enjoy it," Wood says.

Ironically, it may be the success of beach volleyball that ultimately pushes the gymnasium game to mainstream. Make no mistake, the traditional indoor game welcomes the positive fallout, since any exposure is better than none.

"Certainly, beach volleyball has done its part to bring the sport into the picture. Volleyball has been whittling away to become more of a mainstream activity," Muir says.

Which means volleyball will one day soon have its day in the sun.

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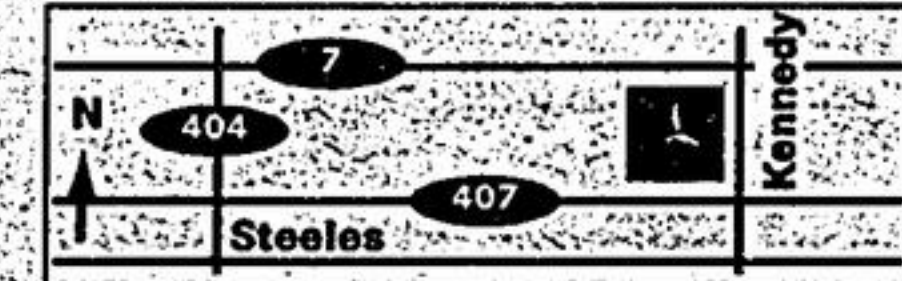
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