

Irvington student-athletes embrace yoga and meditation with open arms, clear heads

[Mike Zacchio](#) Updated 3:07 p.m. ET Sept. 21, 2017

Members of the Irvington High School boys soccer team, along with almost all other sports teams at the school, are incorporating yoga and meditation into their training, and reaping the benefits of "quieting the mind". Seth Harrison/Lohud

IRVINGTON - As the Irvington girls basketball team geared up for a playoff run in March, Bulldogs head coach Gina Maher implemented something new to the team's pregame repertoire: Yoga and meditation.

It seemed to work. The run led to its third consecutive Section 1 championship, and seventh in eight years.

"I really believed it helped," said Maher, who has accumulated more wins than any other Section 1 basketball coach. "Everybody is on the same playing field. Nobody has to make more shots, nobody has to run faster. Everybody just has to get into their feelings. It's a unity and a togetherness, and it's not a competition."

How it came to pass that a traditional sport like basketball become one with more holistic forms of fitness can be traced to a district mother and yoga teacher.

Jennifer Monness, a yoga teacher with more than two decades of experience, wrote a detailed proposal to Irvington athletic director Artie McCormack over the holiday break asking to incorporate yoga and meditation into the Bulldogs' athletic programs.



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Yoga and meditation teacher Jennifer Monness leads members of the Irvington High School varsity soccer team in a yoga and meditation workshop before practice Sept.13, 2017. Monness runs the Meditation Lab and is working with virtually all of Irvington's athletic teams. She leads athletes through meditation and yoga sessions several times throughout their sports seasons. *(Photo: Seth Harrison/The Journal News)*

Monness' idea stemmed from wanting to provide student-athletes with frantic schedules an outlet to clear their minds and relieve stress. McCormack loved the idea, but wanted to find a more manageable way of presenting it to the teams.

When he allowed Monness to reach out to coaches, Maher was the first person she approached. Having the blessing of the school's most well-known coach would go a long way in getting more teams on board.

“She took a leap,” Monness, a mother of six children who have attended or are currently enrolled in the Irvington school district.

With student-athletes’ schedules already packed with classes, practices,

games and homework, Monness believed the best way to draw them into the program was by bringing it to them. What started as an experiment with one team and one sport has become a success, with the majority of Irvington's varsity and junior varsity sports programs partaking in the classes.

The Irvington Education Foundation, a group of parents and community leaders, awarded Monness the initial grant in November to implement the program. The IEF awarded Monness a second grant to trial the practice at the middle school level, and a third in June to run the program in Irvington physical education classes.

High school athletes and yoga classes have been synonymous for years. From Virginia to Indiana, coaches have been working the discipline into training routines to gain strength and flexibility. And meditation has been emerging as a new tool in the professional athlete's approach to fitness and success.

The trend has now reached the Lower Hudson Valley.

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The New Rochelle football team, for instance, has already dabbled in yoga, but Irvington is raising the bar with its embrace of the spiritual practice.

“It’s pretty amazing to see how receptive not only the players are, but the coaches are,” Monness said. “We’re trying to find a way not to carve into practice time — it could be before, it could be after — so that no one feels like, ‘Gosh, if I do this, then I’ll have to cut my agenda short,’ but how it just is another piece of the training.”

Irvington holds yoga and meditation classes on campus, where teams make appointments with Monness so that student-athletes can build classes into their schedules. Players say having their entire team participating, rather

than doing it individually, has deflected skepticism.

“I think after a couple of minutes, you can tell that it was worth the time,” said Irvington senior Brianna Havraniak, a varsity soccer and lacrosse player. “I think it’s just as valuable as practice time.”

McCormack and Maher said having the boys sports openly welcome the program has been instrumental in its widespread success. If football and soccer players were resistant, the experiment might have flopped.

“It breaks the boundaries, pretty much,” McCormack said.

“Then that just opens up another conversation of, ‘Why? Why aren’t they?’” he said. “But it never even crossed my mind here that it would happen that way.”



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Brandon Avelino, co-captain of the Irvington High School varsity soccer team, meditates as he and other members of the team take part in a yoga and meditation workshop before practice Sept. 13, 2017. (Photo: Seth Harrison/The Journal)

Irvington senior Brandon Avelino, a standout on the boys soccer team, said the male population took to the alternative training from the beginning.

“It really brought peace to them,” he said. “It wasn’t one of those, ‘Oh, it’s just for girls,’ and all that. It’s not an eye-opener, pretty much. We’re all in it.”

Irvington experimented with yoga and meditation in its physical education curriculum “a little bit” last year, McCormack said, but will be bringing it back to the high school in January — right around the time students are prepping for exams.

“It teaches you how to clear your mind,” said Maher, who has even participated in sessions with the team. “It helps with basketball, it helps with the studying, it helps with life — it helps with everything.”

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