

Florida yoga teacher named 'world's oldest'

PINELLAS PARK, Fla. (AP) — The yoga teacher in the front of the room lay on the floor, her hands resting on her upper thighs. She lifted her right leg high in the air, foot flexed. Then she grabbed her right foot in her right hand and brought her leg toward her face as she raised her upper body a few inches off the ground.

Students in class smiled in amazement as they watched the teacher's knee graze her nose.

It wasn't just the pose that was amazing — it was the teacher's age. Bernice Bates is 91 years old, and she's more flexible than people who are a third of her age.

"If you can't quite meet your knee, that's all right," Bates told her class, gently.

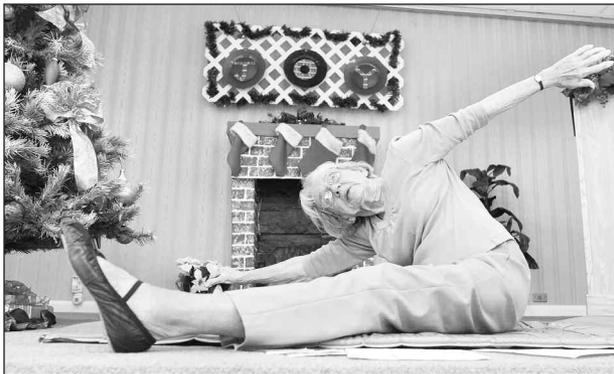
Guinness World Records recently awarded Bates the title of "Oldest Yoga Teacher." While there might be other, older yogis somewhere in the world, Bates completed the lengthy documentation process required by Guinness. She was nominated earlier this year by her daughter.

Bates first began practicing yoga 50 years ago, after she saw it on a television program. As a younger woman, she taught swimming in Ohio at a YWCA.

These days, the great-grandmother teaches once a week at the community center of her retirement village located on Florida's Gulf Coast.

Her students are usually a decade or two younger than she is.

Each class begins with a short discussion — on a recent day, Bates talked about the importance of flexing and caring for one's feet — and then Bates takes the class through a series of about a dozen vinyasas, or yoga poses. She uses a soft blue mat and wears black



AP photo

Ninety-one-year-old Bernice Bates teaches her weekly yoga class at the Mainlands Retirement Community Center in Pinellas Park, Fla.

ballet slippers while teaching.

She ends with a guided relaxation while playing New Age music on her portable cassette player.

Bates believes in gentle yoga: no sweaty, strenuous or competitive stretching in her classes.

"You may not do it perfect, but there's no perfect person," she said.

She talks about her students who have benefited from her teaching: two women in their 80s, a couple in their 90s, a handful in their 70s.

"They feel great," she said. "It makes your whole body whole again. It's good for anybody. It's good for chair sitters, it's good for pregnant women. Anybody."

Kathleen Techler, 86, has been taking Bates' class for five years. She can easily go into a plow pose — lying flat on her back, raising her legs all the way over her head and rolling back so her toes touched the floor.

"It loosens up my muscles," said Techler, who shrugs at the suggestion that she is flexible.

Gentle exercises like yoga and tai chi can be especially good for seniors because they build balance, which can help prevent falls, medical experts say.

"One of the main reasons why people become non-functional or even die is because of falls," said Dr. Fernando Branco, the medical director for the Rossmore Comprehensive

Rehabilitation Center and Brucker Biofeedback Center in Miami. "Those things can be catastrophic when you're 85. When you're 85 and you go into bed for several weeks or months because of a slow healing fracture, you're taking a lot of risks."

Branco said that more folks should follow in Bates' yogic footsteps.

Yoga also has other benefits, he said.

In a study published by the National Institutes of Health in 2005, yoga was found to improve hip extension and increase stride length in a group of senior

citizens who participated in the research.

"In general the idea that just because you are older you have less of a range of motion, that is really not correct," he said.

Bates credits yoga for her good health — she doesn't take medication or have any health problems — and says it gives her the ability to enjoy the things she loves: flower gardening and worshipping at her Methodist church. She also lifts weights, walks, swims and does tai chi.

Now widowed, she enjoys talking about the

Tampa Bay Rays and how the team's third baseman, Evan Longoria, practices yoga.

She starts stretching the moment she wakes up, with a series of poses to get her blood flowing.

"It gives you a good outlook. It involves your mind," she said. "Your mind, your body and your spirit. They all work together and they're all coordinated. Whereas when you're on a treadmill, that's all you're doing, and you're tired when you're done. We build energy in our body, we don't take it out."

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