

The competitors stood nervously on stage, awaiting the judges' decisions. As each name was called the crowd cheered, and the winner stepped forward to claim a prize, bowing his or her head to accept a medal.

"Wow, that was a miracle," said Kyoko Katsura, the winner in the women's division of the New York Regional Yoga Championship.

Yoga enthusiasts like to talk about the many benefits of their practice — good health, inner peace, killer abs — but seldom do they brag about the thrill of victory. Yoga as a competitive sport has been almost unknown in the US, largely because the practice is seen as a spiritual quest rather than an exclusively physical exercise like gymnastics.

But now Rajashree Choudhury and her husband, Bikram Choudhury, who created the style of yoga known as Bikram, are trying to build momentum for competitive yoga in the US. Rajashree Choudhury has set up two nonprofit organizations, the US Yoga Federation and the World Yoga Foundation, and she has been staging competitions for the last seven years. This fall and winter, regional championships are being held in several states, and the winners will advance to a national championship in Los Angeles in February.

The ultimate goal of the Choudhury, who emigrated from India to Los Angeles, is to have yoga qualify as an Olympic sport. "It's far away," Rajashree Choudhury said in an interview. "A lot of work needs to be done before we really get into it, but this is our dream."

One big obstacle may be the yoga community itself. To many people, the idea of competition goes against the philosophy of yoga, which emphasizes self-acceptance and inner growth. Although yoga does tend to attract people who are limber, the physical poses, or asanas, are only one aspect of the practice; others include chanting, meditation and reading Sanskrit.

"The initial reaction from most people is always the same thing: competition yoga? Those things don't belong in the same sentence," said John Philp, a filmmaker in New York who directed a documentary film, *Yoga, Inc.*, about the commercialization of Western yoga, and wrote a book with the same title.

Also in dispute is the extent to which the Choudhury could benefit if Bikram yoga — also known as "hot" yoga, because it is usually practiced in a room heated to 41° Celsius — were to become the accepted standard for competition yoga, which already takes place in India and more than a dozen other countries.

Choudhury says that promoting Bikram yoga is not her intention. She said she had made a determined effort to keep the brand separate from the competition — for example, by forming the two nonprofits

and encouraging event organizers to hold competitions in theaters and cultural centers rather than Bikram studios. She also noted that yoga competitions were not conducted in hot rooms.

"I don't want the Bikram name on it," she said. "I want something that is accessible to everyone."

Her husband has a US copyright on a sequence of 26 postures and two breathing exercises, and his efforts to use the legal system to protect his copyright have caused friction in the yoga community. Some people bristle at the notion that an ancient practice aimed at health and enlightenment can be governed by copyright and trademark laws.

Choudhury notes that her husband has not copyrighted individual postures, only a very particular sequence, which is not used in the competitions.

Although the events sponsored by one of Choudhury's nonprofits, the US Yoga Federation, are open to practitioners of all yoga forms, most people who enter practice the Bikram format, which is the basis of the five required poses in the competitions. The perception that Bikram yogis would have an advantage over students of other disciplines, like Ashtanga or Kundalini, has irked some yogis, Philp said.

But Jon Gans, a Bikram teacher who is a director of the US Yoga Federation, said that the required postures are traditional hatha yoga postures, and the extent to which they reflect the Bikram style is simply a result of organizers setting things up in the format they

knew best. "It would be silly for a bunch of us who are educated in Bikram yoga to set up a bunch of postures that an Ashtanga yogi would practice," he said. "We would need their participation."

Choudhury said she hoped to get the participation of yogis from other schools and was open to tweaking the required poses in accordance with other styles as the competitions evolve.

So far her efforts have met with resistance. Many yoga teachers do not like to see the physical aspect of yoga divorced from the spiritual or turned into a contest.

"It perpetuates the idea that yoga is for lithe-bodied contortionists," said Michael Alba, a yoga teacher in Boston.

Richard Rosen, director of the Piedmont Yoga Studio in Oakland, California, said that the Choudhury's Olympic quest was not taken seriously outside the Bikram community. "Most of the people I talk to think it's very silly," he said.

The Choudhury are trying to change that perception, but acknowledge that it won't happen soon. There is only one undesignated spot open for the 2020 Summer Olympic Games — the 2016 roster was locked down last month — and in order to be considered, an international yoga organization would have to be recognized by the International Olympic Committee by 2011, said Christophe Dubi, sports director for the IOC.

The IOC requires that a sport applying for Olympic consideration have active federations in 50 countries. Last year, only 15 countries were represented at the Sixth Annual International Yoga Asana Championship in Los Angeles, which was run by one of the Choudhury's organizations.



Kyoko Katsura is cheered as she is named the winner in the women's division of the New York Regional Yoga Championship in New York on Oct. 25. PHOTOS: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE



I don't really understand how you would compete to be the happiest, most balanced person.

— Julie Kleinman, vice president of programming for YogaWorks, a yoga studio chain based in Santa Monica, California

For now, Choudhury is focused on creating an infrastructure of regional contests with uniform rules and judging guidelines. At each competition, participants have three minutes to perform the five required postures as well as two other postures of their choosing, which do not have to be from the Bikram repertory. Contestants are judged on strength, flexibility, alignment, difficulty of the optional poses and overall execution.

"We are not trying to judge any kind of spirituality when they are out there," Choudhury said.

The New York Regional championship, which was hosted by yoga studios and two US Yoga Federation members, Bikram Yoga NYC and Bikram Yoga Lower East Side, was held in October on Manhattan's Upper West Side, with 34 contestants and Choudhury as one of three judges. Luke Strandquist, a Bikram instructor in New York City who placed third among the men, said he had no problem with the notion of competitive yoga, since the tournaments were limited to the physical aspects of yoga — no one was attempting to rank enlightenment or inner peace.

But Strandquist did note a contradiction. "As a teacher, it's the opposite of what I'm always telling my students: that you're here to practice your yoga, and it doesn't matter what anyone else is doing," he said.

Julie Kleinman, the vice president of programming for YogaWorks, a yoga studio chain based in Santa Monica, California, said she had mixed feelings about competitive yoga. While she said she likes the idea that Olympic-style events could spread awareness of the practice, she is wary of anything that encouraged yogis to compare themselves with one another. A tournament "seems fairly antithetical to what yoga is all about," Kleinman said, adding, "I don't really understand how you would compete to be the happiest, most balanced person."

Rosen of the Piedmont Studio said that yoga contests could spread the perception that people with the most flexible limbs were the best yogis. "Unfortunately, yoga has been conflated with asana, which is a huge misapprehension," he said. "If the people who are winning asana competitions are suddenly being seen as more yogic than others, that's a really bad comparison to make."

Gans of the US Yoga Federation said he understood that point of view but added that the best way to teach people about the many facets of yoga was to get them into the studio, something he thought championships could do.

"When I was a kid, I played tennis, and whenever I watched players on Wimbledon I'd want to get out there and play like them," Gans said. "It inspired me. I'm hoping the same kind of things will happen here."

For yogis, the competition heats up

Competitive yoga is becoming increasingly popular in the US, where there is a budding movement to make it an Olympic sport

BY SARA ECKEL
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

