



* Blake Griffin's warrior pose blends yoga moves with grip training.

REHAB

THE

BIG

“WARRIOR” RETURNS

◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇

A BUSTED KNEECAP ENDED HIS ROOKIE SEASON BEFORE IT BEGAN. NOW LOS ANGELES CLIPPER STUD-IN-THE-MAKING **BLAKE GRIFFIN** IS BACK—THANKS TO A RIGOROUS REGIMEN THAT INCLUDES “DOWN DOGS” AND “WARRIOR TWOS,” STAPLES OF A HOOPS-CENTRIC YOGA WORKOUT THAT IS GAINING POPULARITY IN THE NBA.

◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇

By NATE MILLADO
Photography by PATRIK GIARDINO

F

LASHBACK TO OCT. 23, 2009: THE Los Angeles Clippers' final preseason game prior to the 2009-10 season. During one fast break, rookie Blake Griffin demonstrated just why L.A.'s other team drafted the powerful 6'10" power forward out of Oklahoma with the No. 1 overall pick in the draft. After blocking a shot by Hilton Armstrong of the New Orleans Hornets, Griffin raced up the court at the Staples Center, caught a shovel pass, and launched himself toward the rim from just inside the free-throw line. Then, in a thundering instant, he slammed a single-handed, rafter-rattling dunk. The crowd erupted. Finally, long-suffering Clippers fans, who had endured 24 losing seasons in 26 years, had reason to rejoice.

Cue the bursting bubble.

Griffin landed, and the Clippers' catharsis crashed with him. He grabbed his left knee, wincing. "I came out of the game and sat on the bench for a while, hoping it wasn't anything serious," Griffin recalls. "Then my knee swelled up over the next couple of days and gradually got worse. That's when I knew something was wrong." The diagnosis was a broken kneecap requiring season-ending surgery.

Today, "frustrating" and "disappointing" are words you'd expect Griffin, still just 21, to use when describing his first months as a pro. But "positive"? "I learned a lot the past year, the importance of being patient and finding the positive in every situation," he said, during the summer. "My mind-set was to not just sit around, but to also get better and try out some new things."

Those new things included new methods of getting stronger. One of them was yoga.

Kent Katich is the Clippers' full-time yoga coach. Yes, full time. Yoga has emerged in recent years as a training staple among elite athletes in almost every sport. But that a pro team has a full-time yoga instructor is a true testament to its growth. Katich is also widely known as the NBA Yoga Guru, and he says he's worked with more than 25% of all active NBA players. When Katich, a former college basketball player himself (at the University of South Dakota), first started teaching yoga more than 15 years ago, the practice was still considered a "joke or freak show or strictly for women," Katich says. "In the beginning, it was a sales job, getting players on board. Now, all the agents are sending me their draft picks, and players are voluntarily coming in and saying, 'I want to get in on this program.'"

Among Katich's NBA clients are Dallas Mavericks All-Star forward Dirk Nowitzki, Minnesota Timberwolves center Kevin Love, and former Indiana Pacers legend Reggie Miller. "Baron Davis, who's been in Africa and China the past two months, just texted me at six this morning and said, 'Let's get it going again. I really need you,'" Katich says. His Los Angeles studio—aptly named The Yoga Court—boasts 18-foot ceilings, more than enough room for seven-footers with pterodactyl-like wingspans to get into such positions as half-moons, reverse triangles, and downward-facing dogs. He uses basketballs in place of yoga blocks and blares Tupac and Jay-Z during hourlong sessions instead of the typical chants. But it's his use of hoops-centric poses that's made him popular among players. Extending one's arms toward the ceiling while in chair pose elongates the rebounding muscles. Downward-facing dog, or "down dog" as Katich calls

it, strengthens the shoulders and extends the range of motion for shooting. "They're able to go, 'Oh, warrior two does look like a defensive position,'" Katich says. "It makes sense; it's applicable."

For the already-muscular Griffin, yoga has not only aided his rehabilitation, but he's also more flexible than he's ever been. It has kept him sane as well. "It's a great low-impact workout," he says. "It allows me to have greater range of motion when I'm doing my exercises, which in turn makes me stronger and helps me build more muscle. It speeds up recovery. It has kept everything around my knee—my calves, quads, hamstrings, ankles, all that—more flexible. And it has helped keep my mind off not being able to play, so it has

been a stress reliever at the same time."

Griffin's doctors finally cleared him to resume all basketball activities at the end of June. By late July, he looked as if he hadn't missed a step. "He looks phenomenal," Katich says. "He spends most of the time on the floor diving for loose balls."

In the weight room this past summer, Griffin's regimen included squats, lunges, calf raises, and weighted sled pulls. "He gets in at an ungodly hour, lifts all morning, gets lunch, and comes back," Katich says. "It finally got to the point where the coaches had to ask him to go home. He's obviously eager and hungry because he missed all that time."

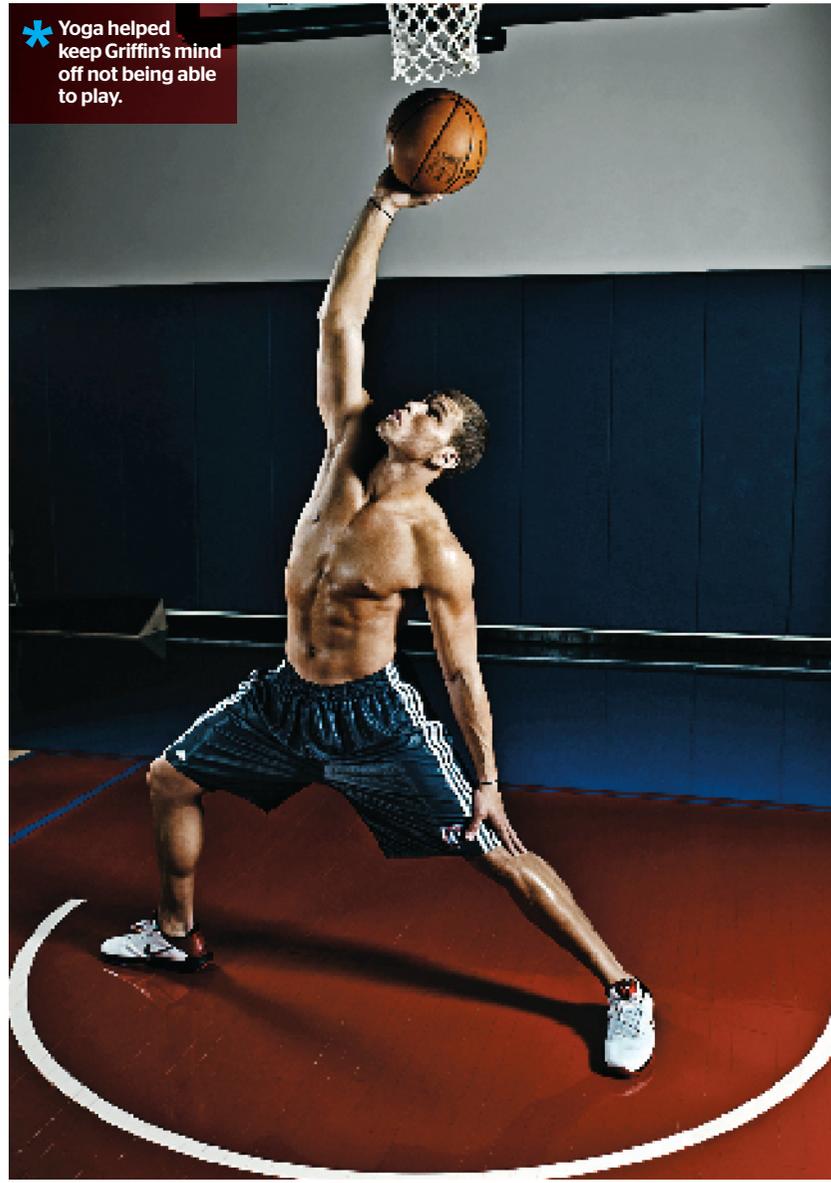
Even with the 2010-11 season—his true rookie season—nearing, Griffin still

continued his three yoga sessions a week. "I've heard a lot of guys in the league say that flexibility is the key to career longevity," Griffin said. A career that just may yet give Clippers fans reason to rejoice again. **MF**

GIVEAWAY!

You don't need to be an NBA All-Star to train with Kent Katich, the league's premier yoga instructor. Just pop in Go Fit's *Yogaletics*, a new DVD featuring Kent's signature "athlete-oriented" approach to yoga. For a chance to win a copy—along with all the mats, straps, and blocks you need to get you started, go to mensfitness.com/yogaletics

* Yoga helped keep Griffin's mind off not being able to play.



> Strike a Pose

Build **strength and flexibility** with these basketball-centric yoga moves



> HALF-MOON

HOW: Hang forward with your left hand on the floor (or on a basketball) about 12 inches ahead of your right foot. Lift your left leg parallel to the floor, keeping your hips even. Twist to the right, reaching your right arm to the sky. Face the floor until you are ready to look up. Hold for two minutes.

WHY: Develops your concentration, stretches the hamstrings, opens the hips, and strengthens the back muscles

* Griffin working with Kent Katich.



> DOWN DOG

HOW: Keeping your feet hip-width apart, bend down and place your hands shoulder-width apart. Step your feet away from your hands to form an upside-down V. Lengthen through the shoulders. Hold for at least one minute. Repeat five times.

WHY: Helps stretch the hamstrings, back, and shoulder muscles, while also building upper-body strength.

> EXTENDED SIDE ANGLE

HOW: With your feet wide apart, turn your left foot out 90 degrees. Bend the left knee until it's over the ankle. Place your left hand on the floor and extend your right arm overhead. Rotate your chest out. Hold for one minute. Repeat on the opposite side.

WHY: Opens up your hips, helping to work the adductor and abductor muscles while also working your core and stretching the lower and upper back.

GROOMING BY CAPRICE GRAY USING SMASHBOX COSMETICS; BLAKE'S SHOES BY NIKE