

# Doggone Zen: Bonding through yoga

## Doga lets owners, pets hit the mat together

By [Meg Jones](#) of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

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Mark Hoffman

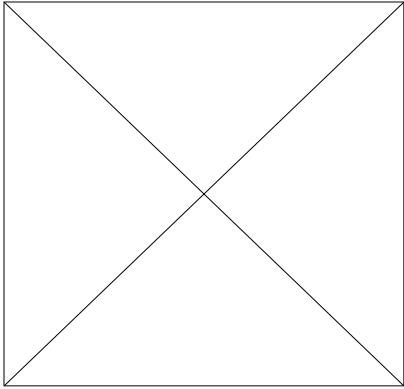
Yoga instructor Courtney Weis and her dog, Nut, lead a stretching exercise during a doga class last week at the Ruffin' It Resort.



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Video



**Madison** - The room was quiet as everyone sitting on yoga mats in the lotus position concentrated on their breathing, feeling their heart rates slow.

It was all very relaxing, very Zen. Until one of the participants barked.

Aside from the leashes, this yoga class looked like any other. Students seated or perched on mats in a circle faced instructor Courtney Weis as they performed the usual yoga positions: cobra, downward facing dog, bridge, chair, tree, triangle, warrior 1 and 2.

But while the humans projected calm, the canine students reacted in a variety of ways - some yawned, some slept, some licked owners' faces, some sniffed other dogs and a few looked perplexed, especially when they were lifted in the air like furry barbells.

On a rainy Sunday this month, the yoga class for dogs and their owners - called doga - attracted a Jack Russell/cairn terrier mix, a golden retriever/basset hound mix, a Samoyed, a one-eyed pug, a Lhasa apso/Shih Tzu mix, two golden retrievers, a German shepherd and one client of mixed origin.

Ruffin' It Resort in Madison, a hotel and day care center for dogs, began offering monthly doga classes in January for \$15. Owner Renee Brantner Shanesy didn't know what kind of response she would get, but now there's a waiting list to join the eight students/dogs per session. Doga classes are also scheduled for May 17 and June 2.

"It was just kind of a trial-and-error thing - let's see how it is in the Madison market. But it's been nuts," said Shanesy, who opened Ruffin' It Resort three years ago.

Shanesy knew Weis, the instructor, and they joked about offering a doga class. One class led to another, and that's how Weis ended up sitting on a mat petting her 6-year-old golden retriever Nut and encouraging students to massage their dogs to calm them down.

"Dogs take cues from us. If you're stressed out, they are," Weis told the class as the 45-minute session got under way. "Dogs live in the moment, which is what humans are striving for in yoga."

Most of the pet owners had never been to a yoga class before. Neither had the dogs.

While Weis demonstrated the various yoga positions the humans held the small dogs or used the big dogs for leverage and stability. A Lhasa apso/Shih Tzu named Dante wore a tiny T-shirt with the word *Namaste* - a traditional yoga greeting - on the front.

What quickly became apparent was the boat position, which is balancing on the hind end with legs and arms in the air, is easier for four-legged creatures accustomed to belly scratches. Both humans and dogs can easily do the downward facing dog position and the upward facing dog position because they were modeled on actual stretches performed by dogs.

Also apparent: Dogs can't stand on one leg and use their paws to hold another leg in the air like a tree, no matter how hard they try.

Before offering the first dog class, Shanesy and Weis researched some poses from the Internet and talked to other dog instructors, veterinarians and animal chiropractors. There are few instruction manuals or DVDs, and although dog classes are offered primarily on the East and West coasts, only a handful of spots in the Midwest provide dog instruction.

Warren Garstecki, a yoga instructor at the Himalayan Yoga Meditation Society in Milwaukee, has heard of dog, though he's never attended a class.

"If it attracts pet lovers to yoga, I suppose it could catch on. It will be interesting to see what happens with it," said Garstecki, who is also a meditation teacher at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. "Anything that encourages interest in yoga is good as long as it doesn't get silly."

Mostly it's a fun way for owners to bond with their pooches. Lisa Marino, a yoga instructor from Sussex, attended with her Samoyed, Zamboni, who can perform the downward facing dog pose when prompted by the command "Yoga!"

Marino noted that humans and dogs sometimes get different benefits out of yoga, such as the boat pose, which tightens abdominal muscles on humans. Dogs, however, don't much care about that.

"Dogs don't really have to strengthen their abs; they don't need a six-pack," Marino said.

Weis has seen all types of dogs in the dog classes, from tiny Chihuahuas and dachshunds to mastiffs and German shepherds. Though the dogs are always excited at first because they're in a room with a bunch of other dogs, it's remarkable how quickly they calm down, Weis said.

Count Chester among them. The 7-year-old Jack Russell/cairn terrier mix was anxious, sneezing wetly during the massage portion of the class, nervously looking from his owner, Jody Ekern of Waterloo to Weis, then back to Ekern, to Marino, back to Ekern, to Zamboni and back to Ekern, his butterscotch-colored head bobbing.

But soon, clutched in Ekern's arms, he silently took part in the yoga poses.

"Chester did great," Ekern said. "He was so excited when he came in. I was surprised at how much he calmed down."