

Dancing with gravity

HOW ROLFING HELPS BALANCE YOUR BODY'S STRUCTURE

WRITTEN BY NANCY WOZNY

What do Olympic skater Michelle Kwan, NBA champ Charles Barkley and yours truly have in common? We have all tried Roling. The word "Roling" may ring a bell as that intense massage practice from the 1960s that made a brief appearance in the 1969 movie, *Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice*. The name may be unusual, yet the practice of Roling, or "structural integration," has been gaining ground, especially since Dr. Mehmet Oz brought Roling to Oprah on national television.

Oprah, once again, I'm ahead of you by a decade or so, as are legions of people who camped out at Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California, to learn this startlingly effective form of

body work originated by the legendary Dr. Ida P. Rolf.

Because Roling involves being in the same room with your Rolfer in your underwear or bathing suit, it's good to have a meet and greet, which is exactly what Michael McIver, a senior Houston Rolfer, suggested when I first expressed interest in getting Rolfed. McIver offers a free consultation to anyone who wants to meet him first, and I highly suggest this preliminary session to get oriented not only to McIver but to the process itself. McIver has been practicing Roling for 34 years; he knows what he's doing.

Rolf, a biochemist by training, was the first to discover the immense plasticity of connective tissue or collagen,

which includes fascia, ligaments and tendons. This tissue can get bunched up from poor posture and overuse and lose its elasticity. The good news is that

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it also can respond to touch and have its pliability restored. So what does this mean for your posture and general health? Quite a bit, says McIver. "In a nutshell, Roling is about balancing

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the body in the gravitational field,” he says. “To an imbalanced structure, gravity is a distorting, compressing and compacting influence. To a balanced structure, gravity becomes a reinforcing and supporting field.”

Rolf discovered that it’s not enough to work only with the part of the body that is giving us trouble. “The body is one interconnected system,” says McIver, who received Roling from Rolf at the historic Esalen Institute during the 1970s. After the very first session, he noticed an enormous change in his breathing and posture. He actually looked different. After continued sessions, the

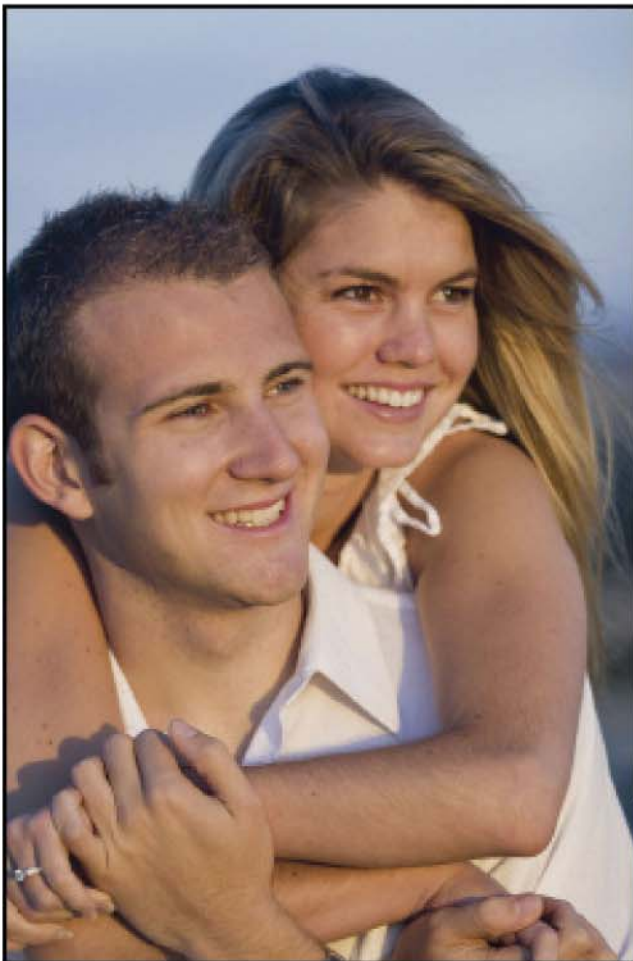
changes became even more dramatic. “I felt like I was running with someone else’s legs,” he remembers. “My legs were swinging easily from my

work. His experience was so profound that he decided to become a Rolfer, and he has been doing the work ever since.

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hips like never before.” McIver also noticed a huge emotional release, which is an added benefit to the

Roling is best experienced in 10 discrete sessions. Although they target different areas, each session



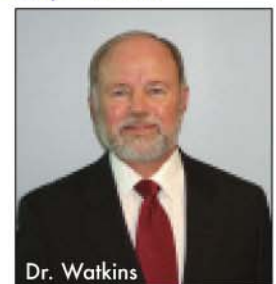
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also contains integrating movements and can be tailored to your special needs. About 10 years ago, I splurged for the whole 10 sessions just to learn what all the hoopla was about. After the first session, I felt tired and ravenously hungry. McIver notes that people feel all kinds of things, from exhaustion to extreme boosts of energy. By session three, my love handles were significantly reduced, and my sides looked even in the mirror. By the sixth session, I noticed a marked improvement in my flexibility, especially in troubling tight zones like my hip joints and hamstrings. By the 10th session, I

looked like the poster girl for good posture (and still do). Over the years, I have returned for structural tune-ups, as many of McIver's clients do.

Just recently, I returned to McIver for a little lower back lengthening. Too much sitting wreaks havoc on the collagen. It was simply time for me to get my fascia stretched out. And that's exactly what it feels like. Imagine plastic wrap all bunched up. That's what happens to us. Years of slumping add up to some mighty tight collagen fibers keeping us in that shape. No amount of yoga or exercise moves collagen tissue like

Rolfing. After just two sessions, I was back feeling tall, light and uncrunched.

If you have heard of Rolfing, you may have heard it was excruciatingly painful; you heard wrong. Although you may experience considerable pressure in a Rolfing session, pain is rarely part of the equation. A trained Rolfer knows how to listen to what your body is saying in terms of pressure to find what's right for you. They just hang out in your trouble spots until you are ready to go deeper. As your collagen eases up, the pressure will seem lighter. The amount of pressure you feel may be



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more related to the limitations in your tissue itself. Particularly tight places are simply going to feel tighter, and you may develop some resistance. There is also the possibility of pleasure as well. Feeling your body get longer feels darn good.

Most people report feeling taller, lighter and generally more at ease in their bodies.

There may be people out there with little or no training who say they are doing deep tissue work who perpetuate the myth that Roling is

about some kind of cathartic pain release. So look before you leap. A certified Rolfer undergoes several years of intensive training. Your Rolfer should have a shingle from the Rolf Institute of Structural Integration. If they have been trained by the other lineage of Dr. Rolf and call themselves a Structural Integrator, their certificate will be from the Guild for Structural Integration.

So what should you expect in a typical Roling session? Each session has a plan and is organized in the best possible way for your education. You will lie either on your side or your front, nicely draped and made to feel as cozy as possible. Because friction is an important element in the quality of touch, massage oil is not used. McIver is very clear about the differences between traditional

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massage and Roling. "Massage is about detoxification and relaxation," he says. "We are actually affecting your structure." The touch is clear and firm; the idea is to establish a level of compression that best serves your education. Lessons last between one hour to an hour and a half and conclude with a gentle sacral elongation that feels heavenly. Expect to pay



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Some 1,500 Rolfers practice worldwide, several right here in Houston.

Most people end up at McIver's doorstep as the last stop after a long road of failed treatment from other modalities. He names three types of people who most often come to Rolfling: those with poor posture, those with the usual aches that just won't budge and people like myself who are deeply invested in health and well-being. McIver has treated

gravity as a sharp pain in the back, another as constant fatigue. Yet all these signals may be pointing to a single problem so prominent in their own structure that has been ignored; they are off-balance; they are at war with gravity." ■

RESOURCES

The Rolf Institute
www.rolf.org

Int. Association of Structural Integrators
www.theiasi.org

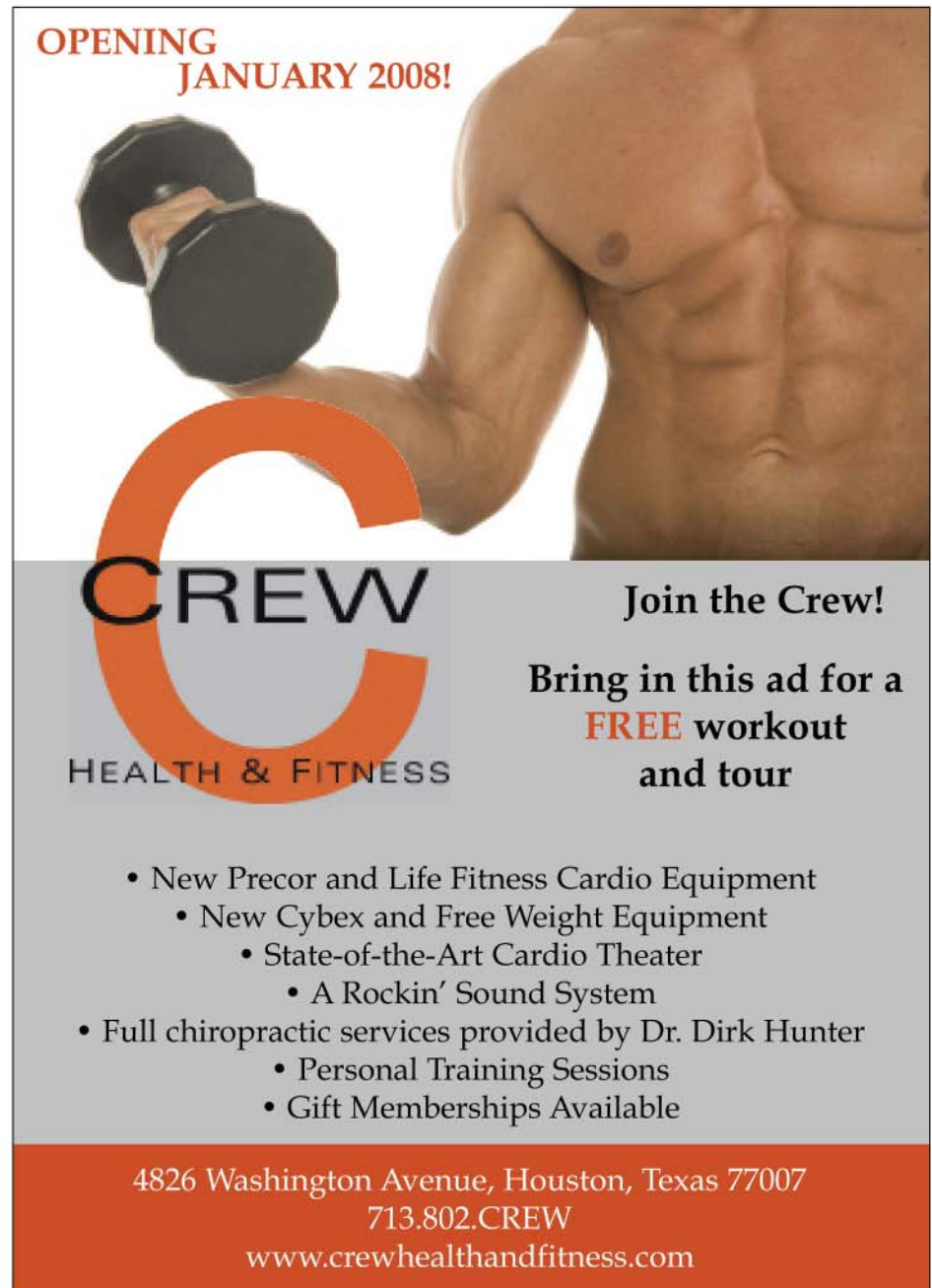
Michael McIver
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individuals with a wide variety of complaints, from whiplash to more chronic disorders.

When is Rolfling not recommended? People undergoing cancer treatment or healing from a broken bone will want to wait to seek treatment. For chronic pain that does not go away, it's always best to consult your doctor first. After a few decades of Rolfling, McIver is pretty sure when it can and can't help. "I would never say that everyone needs to be Rolled," he says, "although I can't imagine most individuals not getting great benefit."

So it's up to us to decide whether gravity is friend or foe. Rolf summed up the situation: "One individual may experience his losing fight with



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