

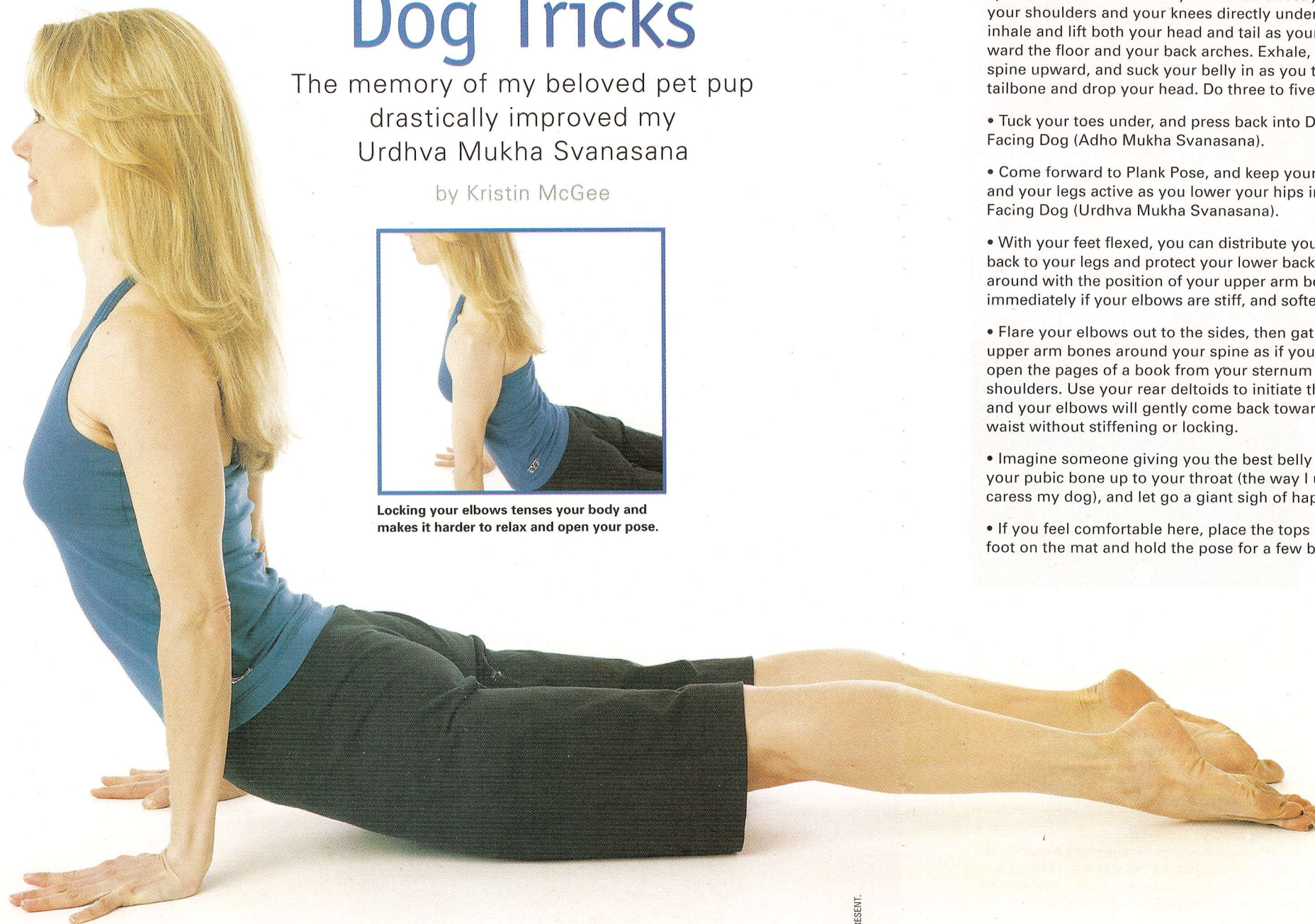
Dog Tricks

The memory of my beloved pet pup drastically improved my Urdhva Mukha Svanasana

by Kristin McGee



Locking your elbows tenses your body and makes it harder to relax and open your pose.



When I was six years old, my father took me to the animal shelter so I could pick out my very own dog. I instantly fell in love with the prettiest mutt, a sheltie/collie mix I named Lady. She stayed by my side until she passed, just before I turned 16.

The thing I remembered most about Lady, besides her warm smile, was the way she loved to be petted on her tummy. I would scratch from her low belly to her chest, right up to her chin. She would tilt her head back and take it all in. As I rubbed, her little paws would slide forward

on the floor as her chest melted between her front legs and her back arched more and more. Now that I think about it, she was actually doing Upward Facing Dog (Urdhva Mukha Svanasana).

A dog's influence

Recently, during my own practice, I held my Upward Facing Dog longer than usual. My lower back started to tense, and my chest felt tight. I thought about how relaxed Lady was when I stroked her belly and how her chest

Urdhva Mukha Svanasana

Warm-up: Start with Cat/Cow to open your back and spine. From all fours with your hands directly under your shoulders and your knees directly under your hips, inhale and lift both your head and tail as your ribs fall toward the floor and your back arches. Exhale, round your spine upward, and suck your belly in as you tuck your tailbone and drop your head. Do three to five times.

- Tuck your toes under, and press back into Downward Facing Dog (Adho Mukha Svanasana).
- Come forward to Plank Pose, and keep your feet flexed and your legs active as you lower your hips into Upward Facing Dog (Urdhva Mukha Svanasana).
- With your feet flexed, you can distribute your weight back to your legs and protect your lower back as you play around with the position of your upper arm bones. Notice immediately if your elbows are stiff, and soften them.
- Flare your elbows out to the sides, then gather your upper arm bones around your spine as if you're peeling open the pages of a book from your sternum out to your shoulders. Use your rear deltoids to initiate the action, and your elbows will gently come back toward your waist without stiffening or locking.
- Imagine someone giving you the best belly rub from your pubic bone up to your throat (the way I used to caress my dog), and let go a giant sigh of happiness.
- If you feel comfortable here, place the tops of each foot on the mat and hold the pose for a few breaths.

fell easily through her front legs. I suddenly realized my elbows were locked, my shoulders were stiff, and I was trying too hard to press my chest up, as opposed to melting my heart through.

In order to expand my chest, I needed to bend my elbows slightly and actually relax down a bit deeper before I could move my chest forward. I felt my underside running up from my belly to my chest to my throat (like I used to pet Lady), and I had more access to engage my abdominal muscles and my leg muscles to balance out the posture.

Using my abs and legs allowed me to bask in the glory of the back bend, and I no longer felt pain in my back or tightness in my chest. I could breathe deeply and feel the love spreading open from my heart. And I could stay here for as long as I wanted.

Pose Perks

- Stretches your chest, lungs, shoulders, and abdominal muscles
- Stimulates your abdominal organs
- Strengthens your spine, arms, and wrists
- Improves posture
- Relieves depression and fatigue

When you soften your elbows, your shoulders even out so both inner and outer edges form a straight line. On the other hand, jamming your elbows back or locking the joints creates a slant downward from the inner to the outer shoulder, making it harder to roll your upper arm bones back and spread through your collarbones. It also tenses your neck, so you look like a deer caught in the headlights. Or your tendency may be to hike your shoulders until your neck and shoulders look like one unit. Neither position is healthy for your shoulders, nor will they ever let you go deeper into the back bend.

Learning new tricks

The trick to softening your arms yet still be active is in the external rotation of your upper arms. Come into Upward Facing Dog, then bend your elbows, and open them out to the sides. Next, hug your shoulder blades around your thoracic spine, and let your elbows narrow back toward your waist. Now, re-lengthen through your arms while keeping some buoyancy in your elbow joints. All of a sudden, you'll feel your heart softening through your arms. This also allows you to use your legs and core more effectively instead of locking off the energy from the upper and lower halves of your body.

Instead of flying through Upward Facing Dog in your practice, take the time to notice your inner strength and joy as you soften and melt deeper into your heart center. Allow yourself to feel your chest rising and heart opening from the pure sense of gratitude and release the pose has to offer. 🐾

Kristin McGee has been teaching yoga and Pilates for the past 13 years. She is the star and host of MTV's yoga and Pilates series as well as her self-produced *Power Yoga* and *Bendgirl Yoga* DVDs. kristinmcgee.com

PHOTOGRAPHY BY VIDURA BARRIOS. WWW.VIDURA.NET. CLOTHES BY BE PRESENT.