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sleek, *centered,* strong

OPERATION: STRONG ABS always *started* strong. So many times, I'd unfurl my yoga mat, lay myself out on it, and feel a bolt of excitement over the prospect of having a firm core. I pictured having abdominal strength that eased me into arm balances and let me hold them for more than a few seconds.

The anticipation was enough to get me going on flutter kicks, crunches, or some other "ab-blasters." But the exercises always felt like blah gym-class floor work rather than flowing asana beauty, and I'd wake up the next morning with a tight neck or lower-back ache. Inevitably, I'd get bored or frustrated and stop several days in.

Then, more recently, after sticking my nose in anatomy books and discovering the nuances of functional movement, I realized strengthening my core didn't have to be repetitive or painful. The key to truly transforming my core was to focus on the most internal abdominal muscles with yoga moves, instead of the outer so-called six-pack muscles with

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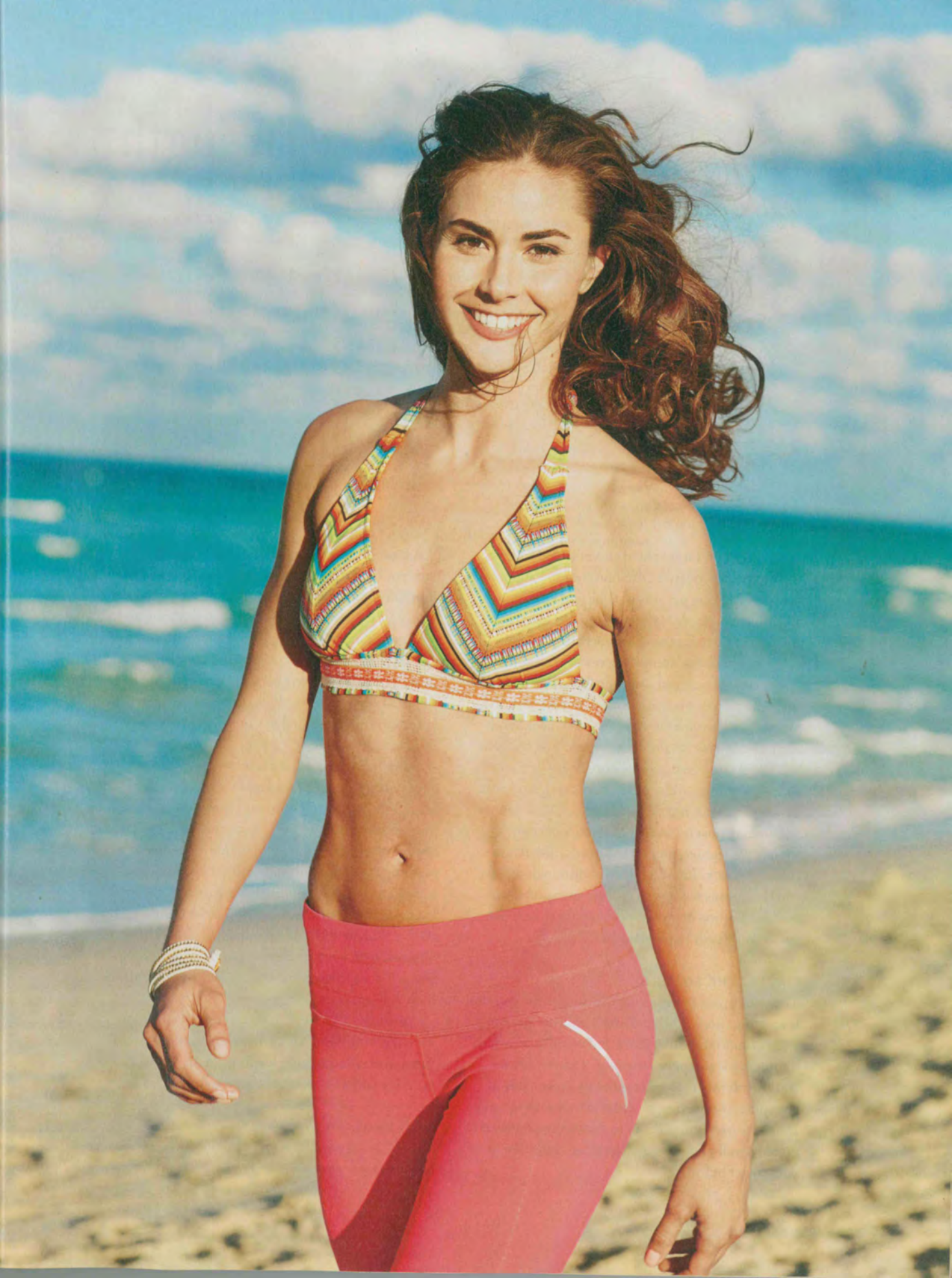
ab-blasters. And—bonus!—strengthening those deep muscles translates into a more toned stomach.

AB TRAINING, REINVENTED

Old-school crunches focus on the rectus abdominis, the surface abdominal muscles that run vertically along the abdomen and flex the front of the body. That type of exercise can sculpt a washboard stomach, but doesn't strengthen the core muscles needed to build a better practice. Also, the "crunch" action of drawing the legs and head toward each other can stress the neck flexors (which your head uses to move around) and the hip flexors, which connect your upper thigh and torso and help lift your legs.

BY STACEY ROSENBERG

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID MARTINEZ



7 poses for core strength >

Want to get into an arm balance or hold one even longer? Strong deep-abdominal muscles are the ticket. They also give you better posture and keep your torso toned. This creative vinyasa sequence builds your core from the inside out; each pose becomes easier as you master the one before it. And the more awareness you cultivate for how your torso and limbs work together to create the shapes, the easier it is to fire up your core.

THE WARM-UP Do 2 rounds of Sun Salutation A followed by 2 rounds of Sun Salutation B, to heat up your joints and your muscles. Weave in 3 Low Lunges on each leg to open the front of the hips. Take standing poses such as Virabhadrasana II (Warrior Pose II) and Prasarita Padottanasana I (Wide-Legged Standing Forward Bend) to open the inner legs and outer hips.

A better bet: target the transverse abdominis and multifidus, deeper core muscles that support the body for long periods of time and keep it lifted against gravity. When they are strong, this creates stability for the shoulders and hips and helps maintain the natural curves of your spine. As a result, sitting and standing feel more comfortable because your posture is better. A fit core also protects you from injury in poses like backbends (core strength helps prevent overarched lower back) and arm balances (the core keeps you lifted, so less weight drops into the shoulders). And core power gives your hip flexors a break: Weak inner-abdominal muscles make hip flexors overwork, so they get tighter, pull on the pelvis, and strain the lower back. Building deep abdominals will let you hold poses for longer and get into poses you couldn't before. You will feel buoyant in arm balances and steady in headstands.

FINDING THE SWEET SPOT

The tricky part of targeting the deep-core muscles is locating them. The transverse abdominis wraps itself around the torso like a corset and keeps your middle back and pelvis in place. The multifidus starts at the sacrum and snakes up either side of the spine, supporting it. You can't see either, unlike those six-pack muscles, so to find them you need to create a well-aligned spinal posture, and then draw your lower belly back.

A basic posture like Cat-Cow can help. Start with your hands on a mat under your shoulders and your knees slightly behind your hips. As you inhale, gently arch your back by lifting your tailbone and reaching your breastbone forward and up. Then exhale, tuck your pelvis, and round your back like a cat, letting your lower back flatten. Can you feel the transverse abdominis engage when you do this? It's an exaggerated version of drawing your belly back to access your deep core.

From there, come back to Cow Pose, with your pelvis tilting forward and your sitting bones spreading apart. Feel how your bottom front ribs poke down and your lower back arches. Draw your lower belly back toward your spine just enough to make your pelvis neutral. Finally, try to drag your knees toward your hands (they won't actually move), then slightly draw the front ribs and sternum toward the back body without rounding the upper back. The traction you feel above your naval and along the sides of your torso is the transverse abdominis and multifidus engaging.

That's the bull's-eye of your core. Keep aiming for it. As your core strengthens, so will your postures, and your posture, leading you to a powerful practice and a fitter, more toned midsection.

Stacey Rosenberg teaches yoga in San Francisco and beyond. She is known for her creative sequencing and clear instruction. For more information visit namastacey.com.

>>>> ARM-BALANCING SPLIT

Eka Pada Koundinyasana II

Repeat Knee-to-Arm Plank and Knee-to-Arm Chaturanga, and then play with the arm balance. From Knee-to-Arm Chaturanga, begin to lean your heart forward and straighten your right leg. Keep your core engaged as you maintain length through your back leg. With this dynamic engagement of the back leg and your willingness to lean forward, you will create the lightness that lifts the back leg with ease.

Try to stay for 5 breaths. When you're ready to come out, return to Three-Legged Down Dog. Then bring your right leg to the ground, and rest for a few breaths in Down Dog.

Repeat the arm-balance stages on the other side, starting with Three-Legged Down Dog with the left leg lifting. ✦

TIP Don't be afraid to lean forward: Physics helps the back leg lift.



>>>> SIDE-TO-SIDE DOLPHIN PLANK

From Dolphin Plank, walk both feet to the left, just outside your yoga mat. Press more firmly through your right forearm, lifting both sides of your pelvis evenly, and reach back through both thighs and heels. Lengthen through the crown of your head.

After 5 breaths, walk your feet to center, and bring your knees down and rest. Repeat the pose on the other side. Do each side two more times, holding for the same breath count. As with Dolphin, try to increase the number of breaths next time you do the sequence.



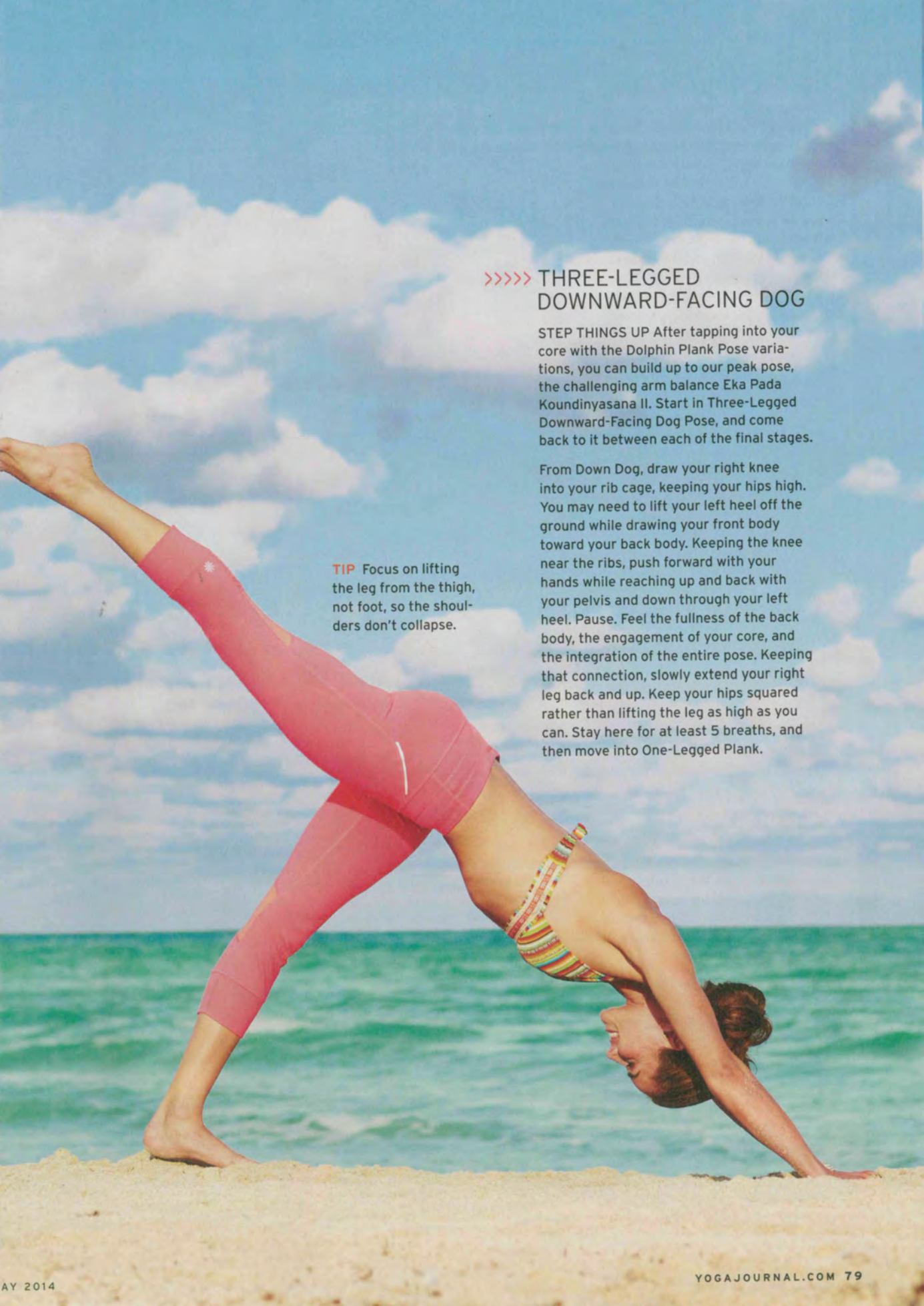
TIP If your wrists lift, press down through your thumbs. The more flush your wrists are with the mat, the more you engage the transverse abdominis.

>>>> DOLPHIN PLANK oblique variation

From Dolphin Plank, keeping both forearms on the floor, come to the little-toe side of your left foot, stacking your feet and legs in the middle of your mat in line with the space between your arms. Lean your weight evenly into both forearms, and reach through your feet while also lengthening through the crown of your head. Draw your low belly back and feel as though you are lifting the front of the pelvis up through the chest. Reach the back of your pelvis toward your heels. Hold for 5 breaths. Repeat two more times with the same count, and increase next time you do the sequence.

TIP Don't let your butt poke out! If that happens, you've lost deep-core engagement.





>>>> THREE-LEGGED DOWNWARD-FACING DOG

STEP THINGS UP After tapping into your core with the Dolphin Plank Pose variations, you can build up to our peak pose, the challenging arm balance Eka Pada Koundinyasana II. Start in Three-Legged Downward-Facing Dog Pose, and come back to it between each of the final stages.

From Down Dog, draw your right knee into your rib cage, keeping your hips high. You may need to lift your left heel off the ground while drawing your front body toward your back body. Keeping the knee near the ribs, push forward with your hands while reaching up and back with your pelvis and down through your left heel. Pause. Feel the fullness of the back body, the engagement of your core, and the integration of the entire pose. Keeping that connection, slowly extend your right leg back and up. Keep your hips squared rather than lifting the leg as high as you can. Stay here for at least 5 breaths, and then move into One-Legged Plank.

TIP Focus on lifting the leg from the thigh, not foot, so the shoulders don't collapse.

>>>> KNEE-TO-ARM PLANK

Come forward to Dolphin Plank; bring the right knee to the outer upper right arm, hugging the knee toward your midline. Pause, and re-create all the actions you have worked on in this sequence. Lift the front body toward the back body, as you press back through your left heel. Hug the arms toward one another, keeping them straight and strong, as you reach through your crown. Take 5 deep breaths. Maintain integrity in your torso as you slowly return to Three-Legged Down Dog.



TIP Don't use momentum to bring the knee to the arm. Instead, move slowly to ensure optimal muscle use.

>>>> KNEE-TO-ARM CHATURANGA

Repeat Knee-to-Arm Plank. Then bend your elbows and lower as in Chaturanga Dandasana (Four-Limbed Staff Pose). Maintain the lift and the length of your body for 5 slow breaths. Push back up to Knee-to-Arm Plank, and slowly return to Three-Legged Down Dog.

TIP Lower incrementally toward full Chaturanga arms each time you do the sequence, to build strength gradually.

