INTRODUCTION. Why do we need to train our balance?

Last winter, a blast of cold weather moved across the United States. In Portland, OR where I live, it brought the life of the entire city to a stop first due to heavy snow and wind and then because of ice. I have never experienced anything like it – every surface outside my house was so slick and slippery that I couldn't safely make it to a sidewalk from my front door. As I stood there on the frozen pavement, weighing the pros and cons of going for a walk, I was reminded of how essential our sense of balance is and how treacherous it is when we lose it.

Many body systems — including our muscles, bones, joints, eyes, inner ear, nerves, heart, and blood vessels — must work properly for us to have normal balance. When any of these systems aren't functioning well, we can experience balance problems. Aging, of course, impacts each one of those systems, so as we get older, we need to pay even more attention to maintaining our balance. One of the recent studies showed that balance begins to deteriorate at around 50 years old, even without additional physiological issues. The CDC estimates that one out of three older people (65+) falls each year, but less than half tell their doctor. Falling once doubles your chances of falling again. Falling can lead to serious injury, but even if you are lucky and don't get hurt, it certainly affects your self-confidence.

Obviously, we want to prevent falls, but we can accomplish many other things by learning how to balance. We train our balance to:

- Avoid falls and injuries
- Increase strength and stability
- Improve overall structural integration (different parts of the body working together for a common goal)
- Improve neuromuscular connection (communication between the muscles and the brain)
- Develop mental stability
- Improve our ability to focus
- Bring about a sense of accomplishment
- Boost our self-confidence

The question is, how do we train our balance if it is such a complex process involving many bodily systems? This will be our topic of discussion in this course. There is a lot of ground to cover, so let's jump right into it.