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Yoga Guru, Studios Reach Accord Over Copyright

A coalition of providers had challenged Bikram Choudhury's trademark of a version of the discipline, which is thousands of years old.

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An Indian yoga guru who became a multi-millionaire popularizing "hot yoga" in America has reached a settlement with a coalition of yoga studios who challenged the copyright to his version of the discipline -- an art form that is thousands of years old.

Bikram Choudhury, who trademarked his name and copyrighted his techniques, had been sending "cease and desist" letters ordering studios to stop teaching the same form of yoga that his private school has used to train more than 2,000 yoga instructors who have opened more than 1,200 **Bikram** studios in the United States.

Some of the studios formed a cooperative and sued Choudhury, claiming yoga could not be copyrighted.

The settlement was confidential, but three people involved in the case, speaking on condition of anonymity, confirmed that Choudhury had agreed not to sue the 50 members of the San Francisco-based yoga cooperative for copyright violations. And cooperative members agreed not to advertise the trademarked name "**Bikram**" without authorization by Choudhury.

The settlement avoids a June 20 trial that might have settled the legal question of whether Choudhury's copyrighted package of 26 poses and two breathing exercises, performed in a certain sequence in 105-degree heat, could be legally protected in federal court.

"Yoga, the word itself, means unity. So our lawsuit was of the intention of creating unity," said Sandy McCauley, co-owner of Yoga Loka, which has three studios in California.

McCauley and dozens of other instructors who formed the cooperative received threatening letters from Choudhury's attorneys demanding they immediately stop "distributing, selling or otherwise exploiting" his copyrighted work.

"We were very frightened that we were going to lose our business. We are very happy with this settlement," she said.

The cooperative had asked U.S. District Judge Phyllis Hamilton, who later approved the settlement, to void Choudhury's 2003 copyright.

Choudhury countered that yoga studios cease using his "**Bikram**" trademarked name unless they were affiliated with the Los Angeles-based **Bikram's** Yoga College of India.

Choudhury's attorney, Susan Hollander, did not return calls for comment on Friday. Choudhury's headquarters in Los Angeles declined comment.

Choudhury, who lives in Beverly Hills and collects Bentleys and Rolls Royces, was a national yoga champion in India who has been teaching his unique Western style of yoga since the 1970s. Hot yoga has seen a surge in popularity in recent years.