

PILATES HELPS ATHLETES REACH FULL POTENTIAL

Complementary exercises give athletes a competitive edge.

BY MOIRA MERRITHEW

Pilates is no longer just for dancers. More and more athletes are turning to this method of exercise for rehabilitation and strength conditioning purposes. Athletes go through intense training for their sports, and they may be introduced to Pilates while on the mend from injury. Often they continue to use the basic principles and make Pilates a regular part of their training programs.

Pilates improves balance and alignment, core strength and flexibility; it assists with injury rehabilitation, and creates balance throughout the entire body. The benefits are endless.

Hockey players, football players and golfers are sold

From the NHL to the NFL and pro golf circuit, elite athletes are turning to Pilates to improve their games. Canadian women's hockey icon Cassie Campbell referred to its benefits in her CBC blog noting that many professional hockey players are "taking the Pilates plunge" to help prevent injuries specific to their sport.

STOTT PILATES® Master Instructor Trainer Sally Belanger has worked with athletes of all levels for more than a decade. She has seen the demand for quality professionals in the field increase dramatically, and over the last few

years she reports that general awareness of mind-body fitness has made its way into the realm of sport-specific conditioning.

From obscurity to popularity

"When I first started teaching Pilates, I was continually explaining to people what it was," says Belanger, who is based in Toronto and works with personal trainers, athletic trainers and physiotherapists whose clientele include NHL players, up-and-coming tennis pros and professional golfers. "Luckily, awareness of the method has grown to the point where that is no longer necessary."



» Programming

"Over the last five to 10 years, athletes of all levels have started to reap the benefits of alternative methods of exercise to increase power, align the body and work the core," explains Belanger. "As a result strength trainers are seeking the means to learn the basics of Pilates for their own training programs or they are calling upon certified instructors who work one-on-one with their athletes. Athletes are still training daily, but the focus on conventional weight training is being complemented with work on balance, flexibility, core stability and mental focus. That's where we come in."

Improved stability and strength improve performance

"Regardless of the sport, over time athletes will overuse certain muscles and find 'cheating patterns' or compensatory patterns to perform their particular specific skills and movements," says Belanger. "Pilates and core training focus on the stabilizing muscles. If a joint is stabilized properly and moves properly then the sport skill or movement pattern becomes more biomechanically efficient as the larger power-generating muscles can do what they are supposed to do."

When it comes to golf-specific training, Pilates helps increase hip stability, strengthen the deep abdominal muscles and upper midback – all essential to improving on the green.

"The increase in range of movement results in the potential for longer drives," says Belanger. "The benefits of Pilates training to the modern-day golf swing are so well documented that many national golf schools and coaches are implementing Pilates classes into their programs."

Michael Hunt, golf pro and lead master instructor at the Jim McLean Golf School in Doral, Florida, agrees.

"Pilates helps strengthen the core, which is instrumental in the golf game, and having a strong core allows you to set up to the ball correctly and efficiently without pain. When you have the correct address position, you have a better chance to swing correctly. When you're swinging, because Pilates emphasizes initiating from the core through the peripheral limbs,

power is generated from the ground up, which will lead to an increase in club head speed."

Body awareness a big benefit

Pilates focuses on the deeper muscle groups which are key to controlling joint movement and sustaining the stability of the joints that can often be damaged through repetitive and high-demand training. As well, a strong Pilates program creates physical awareness which can aid in movement control enabling athletes to increase their level of performance.

"Pilates works on developing a kinesthetic awareness of the body, or where it is in relationship to itself and the world around it," says Belanger. "It also focuses on good postural alignment which will help an individual perform a movement efficiently, thus reducing the amount of unnecessary strain on the muscles and joints. Specific strengthening exercises will also help to balance the muscles around a joint and balance pairs of muscles that support the joints."

Pilates also focuses on finding as much symmetry as possible in the athletic body, adds Belanger.

Balancing out the body

"Most sports focus on one side or movement in a specific plane of motion. Throwing and shooting sports will often have a dominant side while sports like running or triathlon focus



STOTT PILATES Master Instructor Trainer Sally Belanger

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mostly on movement in the sagittal plane. Core training and Pilates help to strengthen and find stability in all planes of motion as well as create an equal balance on both sides of the body."

Matt Nichol, a Toronto-based performance coach known for his innovative approach to training, nutrition and lifestyle and the former head strength and conditioning coach for the Toronto Maple Leafs, agrees that Pilates training is an excellent form of training for his professional clientele.

"Any athlete can benefit in some degree from supplementary Pilates training," says Nichol. "The majority of my clients are NHL hockey players, and this sport places huge demands on the spine and pelvis. Hockey players need to make sure they have superior levels of pelvis stability and endurance of the muscles that stabilize the core in order to ensure healthy performance. Pilates training is an excellent way to re-enforce this." FBC

Moira Merrithew is the executive director of education for Merrithew Health & Fitness". Together with the president and CEO, Lindsay G. Merrithew and a team of physical therapists, sports medicine and fitness professionals, they have spent over two decades refining the STOTT PILATES® method to ensure it's aligned with current scientific and biomechanical research. This clear and detailed approach forms the basis for STOTT PILATES® training and certification programs. For more information, visit www.merrithew.com.