

courting the core

Tennis players are a notoriously unsatisfied lot, constantly yearning for bigger serves, more powerful ground strokes and fleeter feet about the court. The big question—"How can I improve my game?"—echoes far and wide, whether you're world No. 1 Roger Federer or a weekend warrior at the public park.

But if indulging in the latest racquet and shoe technology or spending extra hours on the practice court still has your game stuck in neutral, some of the world's finest coaches and trainers say that you can find that elusive competitive edge from a slightly less traditional source—Pilates.

"I always attempt to integrate Pilates into my treatments," says Amber Donaldson, DPT, a trainer for the WTA Tour who travels the world with the likes of Lindsay Davenport, Venus and Serena Williams and many more of the top women players. "We try to give the athletes one or two exercises which will be most beneficial and have them incorporate them into their already full training schedule."

From the pro tour on down, tennis players are increasingly using Pilates to correct

BY MITCH RUSTAD

Top tennis players, like Martina Navratilova, Venus Williams and Roger Federer, have all used Pilates to get in top tourney form.



muscle imbalance, strengthen essential core and stabilizer muscles and prevent injury—not to mention increase the likelihood of winning those marathon three-set matches.

"The philosophy of Pilates is to retrain the body to work more efficiently and save energy," says Daniel Loigerot, co-author of *The Pilates Edge: An Athlete's Guide to Strength and Performance*. "Tennis players, at any level, play matches that often last for hours, so if you're not using the right muscles, you can get tired and your strokes will suffer."

Bill Norris, a veteran trainer of the ATP Tour, says a number of male pros use Pilates because of its core-strengthening benefits: "To many players, Pilates is all about core stability," says Norris, who's worked with Federer, Pete Sampras and Jimmy Connors, among others, over the years on the men's pro tour. Norris suggests using Pilates as a pre-match warm-up or non-competition day workout.

Well-known Pilates fans on the pro tours include top players like Davenport, Mark Philipoussis, the Williams sisters, Jennifer Capriati and Martina Navratilova (who credits Pilates with helping her body return to the flexibility she enjoyed in her late-'80s heyday),

Tennis players of all levels are falling in 'love' with Pilates

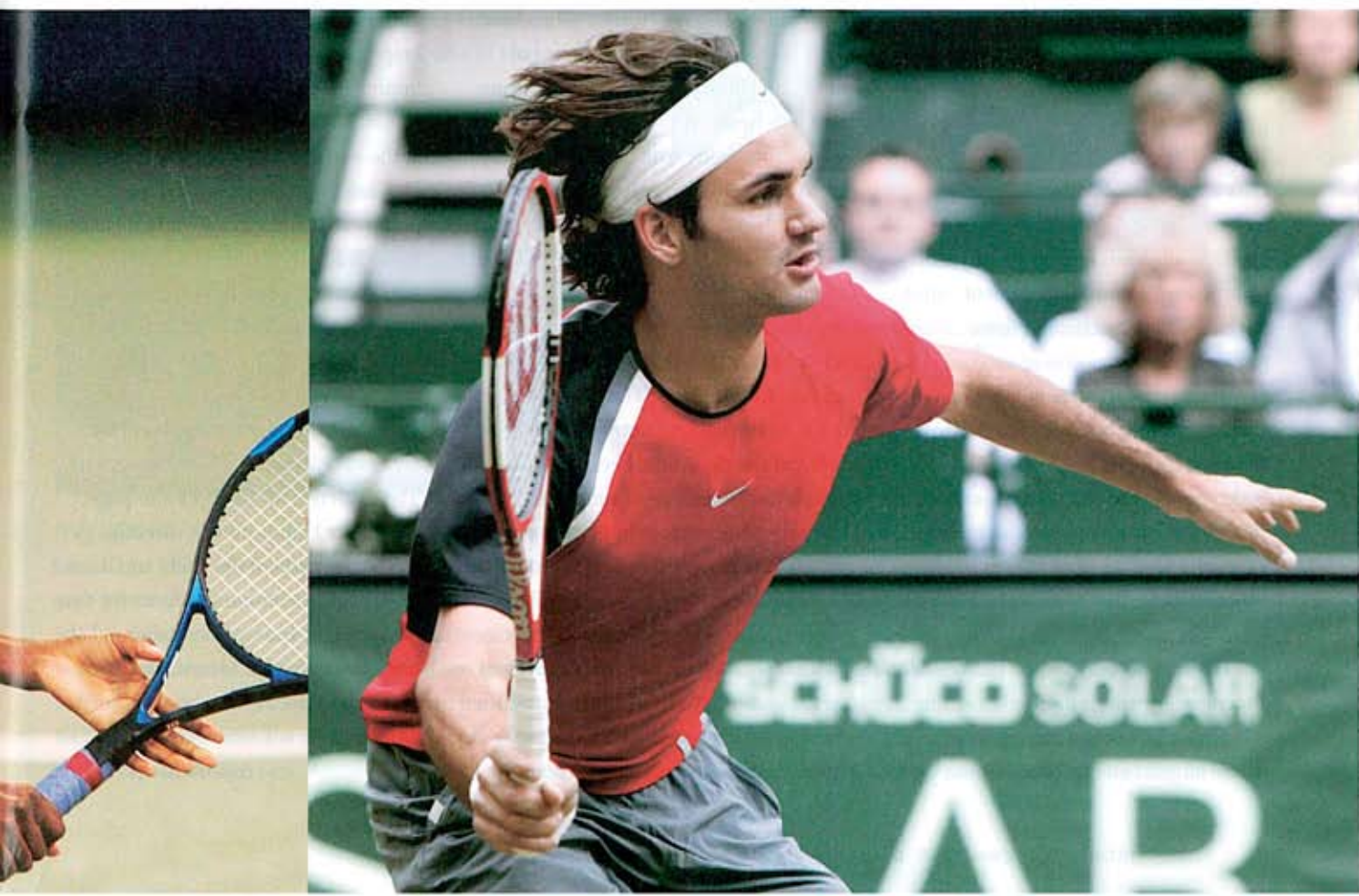


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—Daniel Loigerot

along with many other pro players.

But you don’t have to have a world ranking to incorporate Pilates into your tennis training routine and improve your game. What works for the stars can be just as effective for you.

big-time benefits

How exactly can Pilates add zip to your serve and sting to your topspin forehand? While each individual’s style of play, physique and temperament varies, the benefits of practicing Pilates remain consistent:

1. More Power: By strengthening your abs, lower back, buttocks and pelvic floor muscles—in other words, your body’s core—you can greatly enhance your game’s overall power, according to Loigerot, who has used Pilates training with all kinds of athletes, including tennis players.

“The real power [of your strokes] is generated by using your body’s entire core,” says Loigerot, “because that’s where all your energy comes from. Too

many tennis players tend to use just their arms and shoulders to muscle the ball. By transferring that core energy out to the limbs, you’ll get more power on your strokes.”

2. Enhanced Flexibility and Balance: Powerful strokes are about more than brute strength, of course (just ask all those wispy teenage girls winning big tournaments); big strokes also require exquisite timing

and balance, which can result from having a strong core.

“Tennis demands that you use these core muscles,” says Norris. “They hold your body upright, improve your balance and allow you to move your arms and legs freely. If the core muscles are weak, your body won’t work effectively, and other muscles have to pick up the slack.”

And in one-sided sports like golf and tennis, rebalancing the body is crucial, says Loigerot. Pilates encourages stretching and strengthening both sides of the body equally. “The idea is to build a physical symmetry between the left and the right side, because for tennis players, the range of motion in the shoulder joint is more important on one side than the other.”

3. Injury Prevention: Forget that shaky second serve or dicey forehand.

Nothing can take down your enjoyment of the game like a nagging injury, which is one of the top reasons for the pros’ interest in Pilates, says Donaldson. By

effectively utilizing their core muscles to generate power, pro players are able to “reduce the stress placed on the arm and leg muscles, which are often incorrectly called upon to be stabilizers,” resulting in a variety of strains and sprains, she says.

And what of that ubiquitous injury, tennis elbow? Pilates can be just the salve, according to Loigerot. “Tennis elbow is actually caused by lack of mobility in the shoulder joint,” he says. “By using specific exercises working from the center of the body and focusing on the core, you restore better balance, which frees up the joints for better efficiency and flexibility.”

4. Mind Games: The benefits of Pilates aren’t just physical. The practice can help fine-tune your concentration and improve your breathing, which are essential for playing your best, especially at the end of a tight third set. “You’re focusing on the muscles you need to perform the movement, and this hones the mind-body connection,” says Loigerot. “As a result, you don’t let your mind wander.”

getting started

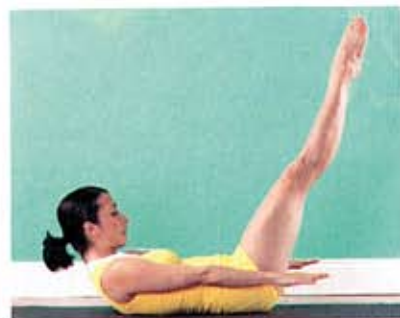
So how can you get started on your own tennis-friendly Pilates program? The exercises on the opposite page, and other Pilates moves, directly target the parts of the body you’ll want to strengthen far more effectively than basic weight training or traditional ab crunches can, says Moira Merrithew, executive director of education for Stott Pilates, a Toronto-based Pilates

continued on page 91

tennis training

Amber Donaldson, DPT, trainer for the WTA Tour, recommends the exercises shown here for tennis players who want to incorporate Pilates into their training programs. She also recommends **Swimming** to tone up the back and hip extensors and add power to your serve, and **Leg Circles**, which help loosen tennis players' tight hips. (For Leg Circle instructions, see page 28.) When teaching the pros, she stresses proper positioning with the feet relaxed, hips and shoulders aligned and core engaged, all while continuing to breathe. Perform these exercises as a pre-match warm-up or as part of your off-court training regimen.

The Hundred



ADVANTAGE:

Reinforces good breathing patterns and gets blood flowing to all the muscles

TECHNIQUE:

Lie on your back with knees drawn in toward the chest and hands by

your sides. Exhale and lift your head off the mat, extending your legs out at 45 degrees. Pump your arms rapidly up and down as you inhale for 5 counts. Continue pumping as you exhale for 5 counts. Keep pumping and breathing for a total of 100 counts.

Single Leg Stretch

ADVANTAGE:

Improves hip flexor strength and flexibility, which helps prevent hamstring and lower back strains



TECHNIQUE:

Lie on your back with your knees drawn in toward the chest. Place your left hand on your left ankle and your right hand on your left knee. Exhale and lift your head off the mat, extending your right leg out at 45 degrees. Inhale and switch leg and hand positions (left leg extends and right leg draws in toward the chest, right hand on right ankle and left hand on right knee). Exhale and switch again. Repeat, doing 8 sets.

Single Straight Leg Stretch

ADVANTAGE:

Improves hamstring strength and flexibility, which prevents hamstring and lower back strains



TECHNIQUE:

Lie on your back with legs pressed together and extended toward the ceiling. Hold the back of the left leg with both hands. Exhale and lift the head. Simultaneously, pull the left leg toward you and reach the right leg away. Pulse each leg twice. Inhale as you bring the legs together. Switch positions, pulsing the right leg toward you and the left leg away on an exhale. Repeat, doing 8 sets.

Sidekicks and Side-Lying Circles



ADVANTAGE:

Both moves strengthen the glutes, lateral hips, adductors and core, all of which improve the quickness and side-to-side mobility that's so important in tennis

TECHNIQUE:

Lie on your right side, lining up your back (from head and shoulders to hips) along the rear edge of your mat and angling your legs forward so your feet touch the front edge of the mat. Slightly rotate the legs out and lift your left leg to hip height. To do Sidekicks, exhale as you kick your left leg forward, foot flexed, pulsing twice at the top of the kick. Inhale and swing your left leg back, foot pointed. Repeat 8 times on each side, keeping your hips steady.

To do Side-Lying Circles, start in the same position and make brisk, small circles with your top leg, doing 8 in one direction and then 8 in the other. Repeat the sequence on the other side.



courting the core

continued from page 48


company that emphasizes sports performance.

"You need to start off by isolating muscles that stabilize the lower back, shoulders and knees," says Merrithew. "By developing the strength of the inner structure of all those little muscles that stabilize the joints, you'll eventually enjoy more global strength throughout your whole body."

If you're a beginner, this renewed strength and body awareness can also speed up the learning curve, says Merrithew, a recreational tennis player who took up the game about a year ago to add another element to her own fitness program.

"I'm learning much quicker," says Merrithew, who takes a tennis lesson once a week. "My whole body is more connected, so it's easier to take direction, and I can more easily rotate my upper body and take my racquet back, rather than just trying to muscle the ball. Without that body awareness, it can take a lot longer to get the basics down."

Of course, Pilates alone won't help anyone win more club matches or rise up the rankings: you still have to hit buckets of balls and continue more traditional off-court training to keep most of your shots falling within the white lines and reach your true potential, says Merrithew.

"Pilates will never replace the dynamic conditioning that tennis players also need, such as short sprints and quickness drills," says Merrithew, "but by adding core stability and strength to all your joints, you'll be a better player." 

An avid tennis player, Mitch Rustad has been a nationally ranked competitive player. He has written about health and fitness for Tennis, Men's Fitness and Shape magazines.