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GREATER TORONTO AREA January/February 2009 Issue 43

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Pilates for Golf Conditioning

Why more and more athletes are turning to mind-body fitness to improve their game.

By Kerrie Lee Brown

With the New Year right around the corner, golf enthusiasts are anxiously awaiting the warmer weather for their “season” to be in full swing. As a result, golfers are looking for pre-season conditioning options to build strength, increase energy and get in shape for their favorite sport.

“Golf demands a delicate balance of mental and physical skill,” explains President and CEO of STOTT PILATES® and avid golfer, Lindsay G. Merrithew. “Pilates enables you to focus on both through mind-body awareness by gaining insight into the inseparable connection between the physical and psychological components of athletic performance. Golfers can take their physical performance to a higher level by training their minds in addition to their bodies.”

In the last five years fitness has become a huge part of various athletes’ daily routine. From the NFL to the NHL, athletes of all levels are realizing the benefits of “alternative” methods of exercise to increase power, align the body, and work the ‘core’. Not to mention golf pros such as Tiger Woods and David Duval – two top-dollar stars who are known to incorporate Pilates into their regular training regimen. Elite athletes are still training daily, but the focus on conventional



weight training has been complemented with the need to work on balance, flexibility, core stability and mental focus.

"Pilates is great exercise for golfers," explains Michael Hunt, Golf Pro and Lead Master Instructor at the Jim McLean Golf School. "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."

What is Pilates?

Pilates helps athletes develop core strength, increases flexibility, assists in rehabilitation after injury and creates balance throughout the entire body. As a result, athletes can withstand rigorous training regimes and ultimately improve their golf drive or baseball pitch, prevent or recover from injury, and maintain an optimal weight for their activity of choice.

"It's a form of overall strength and conditioning used in the development of strong core muscles which also focuses on breathing, balance and range of motion," says Moira Merrithew, co-founder of STOTT PILATES. Interestingly, Pilates is more popular with women but has a higher participation rate among males when it comes to golf-specific training. Pilates is now being used by golfers — men and women — to help increase hip stability, strengthen the deep abdominal muscles and upper midback.

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

Benefits for Athletes

Overall, Pilates is a key component to athletic conditioning because it focuses on the deeper muscle groups, or "local" stabilizers. These are key in controlling joint movement and in sustaining the stability of the joints that can often be damaged through repetitive and high demand training. As well, the physical awareness that the athlete gains through a strong Pilates program can aid in their movement control enabling them to increase their level of performance.

"Pilates works on developing kinesthetic awareness of the body, or where it is in relationship to itself, and the world around it. 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," adds Merrithew. "Specific strengthening exercises will also help to balance the muscles around a joint and balance pairs of muscles that support the joints."

John Garey, owner of John Garey Pilates in Los Angeles and STOTT PILATES Master Instructor Trainer, trains men and women for athletic conditioning regularly. "I've heard from many athletes including golfers that when they take Pilates they start to think about their body and its function differently. In particular, they start thinking about their 'center' or the 'core'. Ultimately they find that they transfer all that they learn in the studio to the playing field — often subconsciously. We hear from clients all the time — whether they are cyclists, golfers, rugby players — that they find they have more power after taking Pilates," explains Garey.

"In general, athletes are good at what they do, and since Pilates is often a foreign activity for them, they are forced to think about what they are doing physically and mentally. It's not like a cyclist doing a Spinning class. Pilates makes athletes get back in touch with their basic training principles and therefore expands on what they already know. The benefits are amazing — increased power, strength and mobility."

Pilates for Prevention of Injury

In golf, players compete against gravity in a three-dimensional, unstable environment. In order to prevent injuries and improve swings, the exercises in a well-designed fitness program must directly enhance the golfers' ability to keep their center of gravity (upper body) aligned over their base of support (feet and legs). Machine-based fitness programs — which function by strengthening muscles in isolation — do not contribute significantly to improved athletic function. When you swing a club, the brain recruits groups of muscles, coordinating them in unique sequences like a conductor leading an orchestra. Integrated Pilates training parallels how the body functions when playing a sport.

Pilates is particularly effective for recovering from injury. According to Matt Nichol, Head Strength and Conditioning Coach for the Toronto Maple Leafs, Pilates teaches athletes



“From the NFL to the NHL, athletes of all levels are realizing the benefits of “alternative” methods of exercise to increase power, align the body, and work the ‘core’”

to be mindful in their movements—integrating their pelvis, trunk and shoulder girdle in a safe, challenging and progressive system. “Pilates can be a very effective supplement to an injury rehabilitation program as it provides athletes with a challenging workout without impact or excessive weight bearing,” says Nichol.

The exercises in a Pilates workout aid in developing core strength particularly in the trunk muscles. Additionally, because the exercises focus on deeper muscles, Pilates can assist with injury prevention. Because Pilates works on a controlled lengthening of the muscles, it can be beneficial in assisting overall flexibility in tighter regions (lower back, hamstrings, shoulders) and this can aid in creating a stronger game and a greater level of stamina on the course. Finally, the emphasis on breath as one of the principles can aid a golfer to focus on their game, relax through their swing and control precise movements such as those needed in putting.

Pilates for the Avid Golfer

For the most part, golf and Pilates share the same basic principles, requiring flexibility, rotation and core and gluteal strength. For golfers looking to stay healthy on the greens, Pilates is the ideal golfing partner. While the golf-pro may help correct swings and take strokes off a player’s game, the Pilates specialist can improve a golfer’s performance, stamina and stability. These changes can help clients drive the ball farther and avoid the sand-trap of fatigue and injury.

Hunt also believes Pilates helps in stretching your body. “Most golfers I deal with are inflexible. In fact, Moira Merrithew and I designed a specific program and set up golf-specific stretches, breathing and exercises for any level golfer. Hand-eye coordination and talent is great to have in golf, but the stronger and more flexible your body is – the better. That’s where Pilates comes into play, literally.”

Hunt tries to get his students involved in some type of exercise and stretching before hitting the green. “I think the two most popular forms of exercise for golfers right now are Yoga and Pilates. A golfer will see a huge improvement in their game through Pilates.” *For Pilates classes in the city, check out the STOTT PILATES® Studio located at Yonge and Eglinton, Canada Square. ✓*

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