

PILATES MATWORK FOR ATHLETES

Incorporating effective Pilates techniques into your client's regular gym routine can be most effective – even without using large equipment. Here's how.

By Kerrie Lee Brown



Pilates-based exercises help improve performance, reduce injury, and relieve stress.

Unlike other hardcore strength training regimens that focus more specifically on muscle mass, Pilates focuses on toning your muscles, thereby improving your balance and alignment.

Pilates also 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 even with the basics of Mat exercises. Pilates is 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.

Many athletic trainers and coaches have realized these benefits for their athletes – but are often opposed to incorporating full-fledge Pilates programs at their facility. However, the truth is that even the most basic Pilates exercises can be easily incorporated into regular sport conditioning regimens without the need for large, expensive Pilates equipment.

BENEFITS FOR ATHLETES

- Self awareness – Knowing how your body feels and responds to its need to move.
- Breathing – Improved lung capacity and control of breathing. Also great for asthmatics and those who want to manage stressful situations.
- Improved focus – Greater focus mentally and physically will allow for optimal athletic performance.
- Deep strength, not superficial – Working muscles deep in your body feels completely different to any gym work you do.
- Improves other athletic skills – Improves balance and coordination for running, golf, cycling etc. by releasing tightness.
- Improves overall health – Fresh oxygenated blood supply to the prostate stops this area being stagnant and improves the health of all tissues.

TIME TO HIT THE MAT

There is a large misconception that Pilates involves very intricate moves that only dancers would be able to execute, or requires large equipment that is bulky, hard to obtain, and expensive. But it's important to know that Pilates can just as easily be incorporated into regular athletic training programs by using a few basic props (such as the Flex-Band®, Toning Balls, Stability Balls and Mats) that can be found around the gym or fitness facility.

Pilates can also be done as one-on-one sessions or in a group exercise environment which makes for more options for the trainer and facility as a whole. To allow for adequate individual attention, classes are best limited to a maximum of 12 participants. Modifications of exercises can also be used for certain clients who may prefer to work up to higher levels over time.



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Keeping in mind that some popular Pilates exercises can put strain on the lower back of people with typical postural imbalances – there are numerous basic exercises that can be performed and/or modified on the Mat that can be helpful in addition to an already established athletic program.

Light Pilates equipment or props such as 1 lb, 2 lb or 3 lb Toning Balls can help close the kinetic chain, add proprioceptive awareness, and add challenge to exercises by increasing the load or de-stabilizing the base of support.

PILATES VS. WEIGHT TRAINING

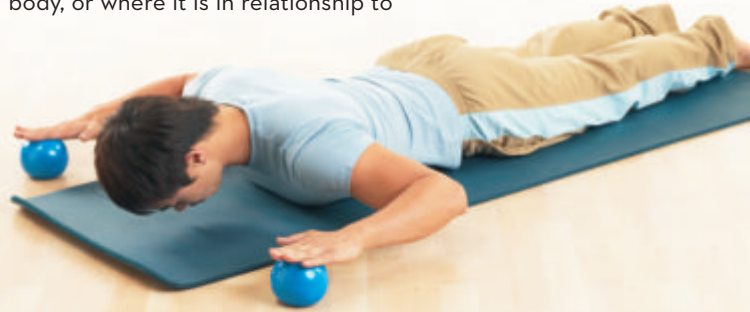
Instructors get asked all the time what the difference is between Pilates and weight training and the answer is that you strengthen and stretch various muscles during Pilates exercises. Moreover, Pilates helps with coordination and increased stability, as well as lengthens muscles that are short, and strengthens muscles that

need to be strengthened.

The bottom line is Pilates typically incorporates more muscles utilized in one exercise in comparison to a weight training machine. Further, Pilates compliments weight training because it enhances functional movement and performance due to the coordinated exercises and concentration on the core muscles.

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



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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.

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

The exercises in a Pilates workout aid in developing core strength. 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 (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.

Injuries such as torn ligaments or the breakdown of joint structures such as menisci - often happen in athletics or strength training from either extrinsic factors - such as a collision, or a

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sudden pivot, or from intrinsic factors – repetitive strain injuries, or overtraining. The athlete will often compensate with muscles and movements that will cause more injury as the proper sequencing of the neuro-muscular system is compromised.

It is extremely important for trainers who are incorporating Pilates exercises into their regimens to take these concepts into consideration at all times as not to put the athlete in jeopardy. Always consider what the clients' goals are for the program – mobility or stability for their sport; as well as the inverse relationship at the joints if mobility is increased, stability is decreased and vice versa; hypermobility and mechanical stability for weight bearing; and their level of athletic functioning.

TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE PILATES EXERCISES ON THE MAT

1. Breathing. Make sure you are breathing through each movement. As with any exercise, holding your breath may result in detrimental effects. Breathing well will ensure proper oxygenation of the muscles and facilitation of adequate muscular contractions.
2. Ensure correct alignment. No matter what part of the body is working, it is imperative that the entire body maintains the best alignment possible. If body segments are not lined up, it can result in less than desirable results and possibly increased tension.

3. Eye focus. Keeping your eyes focused in the right direction will ensure that the head and neck are in proper alignment. This will could have a dramatic effect on neck and shoulder tension and could also help alleviate neural issues in the whole upper quadrant.

4. Less is more. Sometimes, slow controlled movements are harder to perform and more beneficial in the long run. Performing exercises deliberately will allow greater focus and ensure that each of them is being performed correctly. Done this way, fewer repetitions are necessary.

SUMMARY

Athletes require many different levels of training. They must work gross motor patterns and fine motor patterns. They need to challenge their energy systems both aerobically and anaerobically. In a similar fashion the athlete or individual involved in a strength training program must challenge and strengthen their body segmentally and globally.

Pilates focuses on improving stabilization of the lumbo-pelvic region. The theory is that improved core stability gained through Pilates training will carry over to the sporting realm, reducing the risk of injury and improving performance. Pilates can be used effectively during different parts of the training schedule – the key: understanding what the movements entail and the role they can play in the pursuit of athletic excellence. By incorporating Matwork into your athlete's training regimen you will realize that even the simplest movements can have profound effects. **OSF**

For more info on Pilates matwork, training for instructors, or Pilates for athletic conditioning, visit www.stotpilates.com



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