

Pilates:

A Trainer's Secret Weapon

BY KEN ENDELMAN

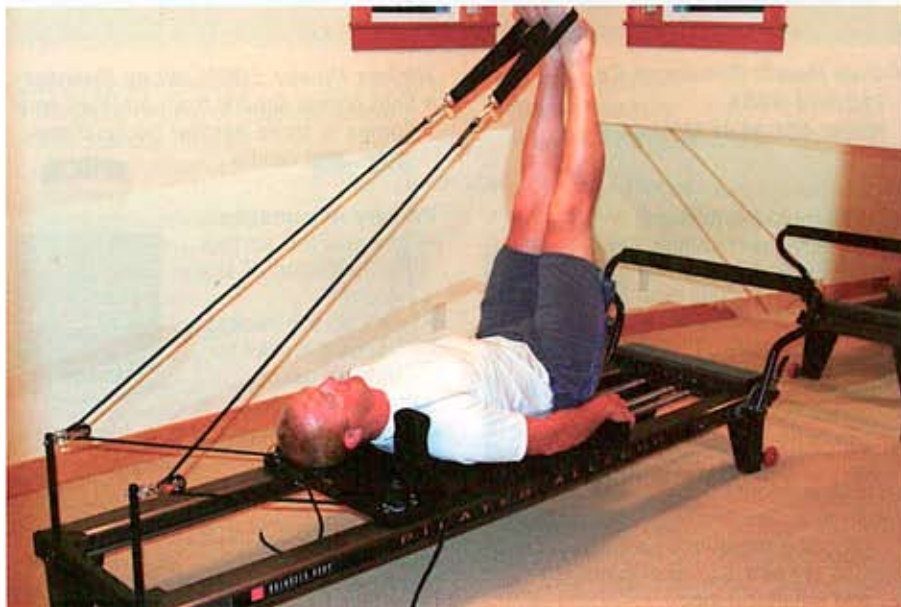
Developing an athlete's core - the deep abdominal muscles along with the muscles closest to the spine - makes athletes more agile, helps prevent injury and increases performance. Trainers and coaches are discovering a secret weapon for developing optimal core control and flexibility in their athletes - Pilates.

Pilates integrates the trunk, pelvis and shoulder girdle. It also emphasizes proper breathing, correct spinal and pelvic alignment, and complete concentration on smooth, flowing movement. Through Pilates, athletes become acutely aware of how their body feels, where it is in space, and how best to control its movement.

Tom McCook, owner of the Center of Balance Pilates studio in Palo Alto, CA, has trained many athletes, including Olympic swimming medalists Natalie Coughlin and Jenny Thompson. McCook says that Pilates helps athletes learn how to individually access each part of their body, and become familiar with functional mechanics. "Pilates helps a body move the way it's designed to move, from the center out. Athletes learn how to torque the body correctly, to avoid injury and increase performance."

Many professional sports teams are buying into that theory.

"The reformer is a perfect piece of equipment for the NBA," says Rich Dalatri, trainer for the New Jersey Nets. "We play up to five games a week. Fatigue and stress due to travel and the number of games can really mount up. It [the reformer] was a godsend, because it is much less stressful on the body than lifting weights, it's safer, and you work both eccentric and concentric contractions. It's a total body workout that increases flexibility, and from a



Tampa Bay Buccaneer Josh Bidwell on the Aleegro Performer

weight training standpoint there's not a program we can't do on it."

Pilates has become such an essential part of the Nets training program that the team takes a reformer on the road with them for all their away games.

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-Tom McCook, Center of Balance Pilates Studio

Performance-wise, it's hard to argue with the success New Jersey has had lately. After posting losing records from 1998 through 2000, the Nets have four straight playoff appearances, including two consecutive Eastern Conference championships.

Pilates has made its way to the gridiron, too.

"My training philosophy is to get the midline in shape and then make the circle a little larger and a little larger around the body," says Garrett Giemont, strength and conditioning coach for the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. "When you look at that philosophy and then at Pilates, a trainer can see that it is a great adjunct to what he or she is trying to accomplish from an overall conditioning standpoint."

One Buccaneer who has seen a difference is punter Josh Bidwell. Bidwell began doing Pilates mat exercises during the 2004 season and statistically had his best overall season. This year he began working on a reformer. "As a punter I put tremendous pressure on my hamstrings, my lower back and my glutes," says Bidwell. "I'm not the most flexible person but Pilates has definitely lengthened my muscles and increased my agility. I can really feel it in the way I move." Bidwell had also been bothered by periodic, painful flare-ups in his lower back. But since he started Pilates that trouble has disappeared. "It is completely gone," says Bidwell.

As costs of amateur and professional sports continue escalating, keeping an athlete on the field and off the injured list becomes paramount. Trainers who implement Pilates as a component to their conditioning programs will see increased results in flexibility, durability and strength.

Says Giemont: "When you take an athlete with a tremendous skill level and then give them the tools of length, strength and balance on a continual basis, it elevates their performance to an entirely new level."

Ken Endelman is Founder and CEO of Balanced Body Inc. To see an expanded version of this article, or for more educational materials on Pilates, please visit www.pilates.com/TrainingAthletes.