

PILATES – HOW YOU CAN BE A STRONGER, FASTER ATHLETE

Whether you are training for your first sprint triathlon or are a seasoned Ironman racer, you are undoubtedly committing more than a few hours each week to swimming, biking, and running. Though training ten to twenty hours per week may be the norm for most triathletes, many spend little or no time strengthening their core muscles and stretching after workouts. As a result, many triathletes are vulnerable to injury and chronic pain due to the repetitive and strenuous movements of the muscles and joints. Not only do injuries impede an athlete's ability to train and compete at optimal levels, injuries often require an athlete to take lengthy breaks from training and competition. Pilates is one method of exercise that combines a unique blend of stretching through movement with core strengthening exercises. When done regularly, Pilates will strengthen the body's core musculature and may reduce the risk of injury and muscle pain an athlete may endure during training and competition.

What is Pilates?

Pilates is a system of movement and exercise which focuses on developing maximum muscle strength while increasing flexibility. This system of exercise strengthens, lengthens, and realigns the body's muscles in order to improve one's endurance, control, gracefulness, and power. The concept is simple. By lengthening tight muscles, correcting muscular imbalances, and improving range of motion, these exercises can be very effective in preventing injury and ultimately enhancing athletic performance.

How Can Pilates Help Your Athletic Performance?

Pilates can train your body to function at peak performance levels while reducing your chance of injuries. This method of exercise helps to strengthen your body's core muscles which include your transversus abdominus (your deep abdominal muscles), your oblique abdominus, your lower back muscles, and your buttock muscles. By strengthening these small stabilizing muscles, you can start to correct any imbalances you may have in your larger muscles groups. What this means for you is more balanced power in your larger muscle groups which translates into more strength and speed when you train and race.

In addition, a consistent Pilates routine will ensure that proper stretching becomes an integral part of your training program. Muscular tightness of your large muscles groups can result in lower back pain and joint injuries. The method of stretching used in Pilates will help to lengthen tight muscles and will promote healthy blood circulation and lubrication to your joints. This will not only improve your range of motion, but will also better prepare your joints to manage the repetitive stress your joints must handle during countless hours of swimming, biking, and running.

How to Get Started

1) One-on-one Instruction

If you are aware that you have specific muscle and/ or joint injuries or imbalances, the best way to get started is to work with a certified Pilates instructor. A good instructor will introduce you to the Pilates exercises and he or she will be able to identify the safest and most effective way for you to train your core muscles and overall joint stability. Referrals from people you know and trust are often the best way to find a qualified Pilates instructor; or simply look around your local area.

2) Mat Class

A Mat Class, also called a Matworks class, is a one hour class guided by a Pilates instructor aimed towards strengthening your core muscles. The exercises are presented in a structured format incorporating the most basic of exercises and building into the more complicated and challenging Pilates exercises. Mat classes are a fantastic introduction to Pilates, especially for an athlete looking to add a formalized core strengthening and a safe stretching routine to his or her training program. Again,

referrals to local Pilates studios and instructors are a great way to start; however, most local gyms now offer regular Pilates matworks classes as part of their class schedule.

3) Videos, DVD's, and Books

Once you are familiar with the Pilates format and exercises, you may choose to exercise on your own outside of a formal class setting. This also gives you the added benefit of choosing how to best incorporate the benefits of Pilates exercises into your triathlon training. Instead of having to commit to an hour class or training session, you could simply add ten minutes of Pilates exercises to your regular strength training program or finish an easy training day with a short Pilates series. My favorite book is [The Pilates Body](#) by Brooke Siler. In addition, Power Pilates is an organization that produces excellent videos and DVD's to guide you through the different levels of Pilates.

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