

PILATES FOR ATHLETES

by Nora St. John, MS

Professional athletes of all kinds have discovered that adding Pilates to their training can improve performance, reduce injury, speed recovery and help their hardworking bodies stay balanced and healthy. For recreational athletes or simply athletic clients in general, Pilates can provide the same benefits professional athletes enjoy. A well-rounded program, particularly one offered in a fully equipped Pilates studio, can do wonders for athletic clients of almost any age, ability or sport.

Builds a Good Foundation

Foundation training denotes an exercise method that works to consciously improve movement quality in a safe, effective manner. It is distinct from the fix techniques used in rehabilitation and from fun activities performed with minimal conscious thought. As foundation training, Pilates helps clients improve their movement patterns by engaging the mind to change the body. Helping clients to feel their imbalances and teaching them how to improve them is a key element of Pilates and of mind-body training in general.

Improves Core Strength and Lumbo-Pelvic Stability

Pilates teachers often use lumbar stabilization exercises and concepts in their sessions, and many Pilates exercises incorporate lumbar or lumbo-pelvic stabilization. In athletic clients, greater stability in the lumbo-pelvic and hip regions can increase flexibility, generate power for throwing or rotational sports, and decrease lower-back pain and injury. The emphasis Pilates places on the core, or “powerhouse,” provides an environment for safely developing a base level of lumbo-pelvic stability. As athletic clients improve their skills, challenges such as standing exercises, plank-based exercises, free weights and unstable surfaces can be added to provide a higher level of difficulty.

Develops Sport Skills

Coaching in specific sport skills may be limited or nonexistent for recreational athletes. A good Pilates teacher with skills or experience in a client’s activity of choice can act as a coach to help the client develop particular skills and optimize movement patterns. For example, if a client who played baseball or softball in college decides to join a recreational league in his or her late 30s, a Pilates teacher can work on leg alignment, strength and balance for running and core support and can help to develop balance in rotation for throwing. A good teacher who understands the demands of an activity can analyze the strength, range of motion, coordination and movement patterns necessary for success and can use the flexibility of the Pilates environment to tailor exercises to the client’s sport. A Pilates expert can also address any physical limitations that may hamper the client’s chances of success.