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Posted 8/17/2003 11:15 PM Updated 8/17/2003 11:15 PM

Male athletes get no pain, big gains from Pilates

By Jill Lieber, USA TODAY

Celebrities Madonna, Julia Roberts and Sharon Stone have done it. So have golfer Tiger Woods, basketball star Jason Kidd, pitcher Curt Schilling and offensive lineman Ruben Brown. What they all have in common is Pilates, one of the fastest growing fitness activities in America, according to SGMA International, the trade association for sports equipment manufacturers.



Golfer Charles Nardiello works on a knee stretch, a Pilates exercise intended to improve his game.

By H. Darr Beiser, USA TODAY

Designed to increase flexibility and improve posture, balance and coordination, Pilates focuses on strengthening the body's core or midsection.

Once favored by rock divas, actresses and supermodels, the stretching and strengthening exercise method developed by Joseph Pilates (pih-LAH-teez) has become the latest training rage for male professional athletes.

"Since I've done Pilates, I'm much better looking and 4 feet taller," says Rich Beem, winner of the 2002 PGA Championship. "Seriously, I'm now so stretched out and have such great posture that I look and feel like a different person."

Developed in the early 1900s, Pilates consists of 500 exercises, all initiating from the muscles in the abdomen, lower back, hips or buttocks. The cost of a private Pilates session with a properly licensed instructor is comparable to or slightly more expensive than a personal training session.

For athletes, the benefits include more efficient movement as well

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as better endurance, speed and quickness.

No longer just for women

As mainstream as the Pilates method of developing core muscle groups has become, male professional athletes interested in adding it to their training programs still must get past the stigma that this is largely a women's exercise.

Kidd, the Nets superstar point guard, gave his wife, Joumana, a longtime Pilates devotee, a hard time when she told him it might help in his rehabilitation of a broken ankle a few years ago. After weeks of making fun of Pilates, Kidd finally tried it.

"I immediately discovered how tight I was," Kidd recalls. "After one session I was energized. From that point on I was convinced it was a great workout."

For Kidd, Pilates is all about finding the edge. He estimates 30% of his strength and flexibility training comes from Pilates. "Pilates has made me quicker, more explosive," he says.

Rich Dalatri, the Nets strength coach, has been instrumental in introducing the exercise method to the entire team.

"Pilates is rejuvenating, restorative, invigorating," he says, "maybe because it gets the blood flowing through every inch of the muscles. It's so internal. It puts you in tune with your body. It puts you in a different state."

The Nets have invested in Pilates equipment for their weight room. The players are so dependent that throughout the NBA playoffs in 2002, a leading Pilates company shipped special equipment to the team's hotel on road trips.

Patience pays off

Pilates' founding father always proclaimed, "In 10 sessions, you will feel the difference. In 20, you will see the difference. And in 30, you'll have a whole new body."

Schilling, the Arizona Diamondbacks star pitcher, agrees. "The first three weeks, I was really disappointed," says Schilling, who incorporated Pilates into his offseason training program last winter. "I wasn't sweating. I wasn't winded, which is what I associate with true exercise.

"Then in the fourth week I started to understand the Pilates terminology, the idea of working from your center. By the third month I was more powerful and flexible than ever before. And I'd lost 15 pounds."

Hannah Gallagher, Schilling's Pilates instructor, says, "He's a man. He's used to hard-core workouts, where you throw up afterward. Pilates is not that. It is an equal balance of stretch and strength."

After years of the no-pain, no-gain school of thought, male professional athletes say they appreciate the kinder, gentler, holistic aspect of Pilates.

For Buffalo Bills Pro Bowl offensive guard Ruben Brown, Pilates is all about preventing injury.

"I'm a big guy with a gut," the 6-0, 300-pound Brown says. "I was always battling back strain. Plus, I'm 30 years old now. I'm tired of lifting weights, taking the pounding."



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The last two offseasons Brown has done Pilates three times a week.

"My first session, it shook me up," Brown says. "It shook everything up. It still does.

"And man, those Pilates women are competitive. They want to see if they can get the big, strong football player to wimp out. I told myself, 'Hey, ladies, I can do that, too.' "

How has his body responded to Pilates?

"I came out of the season injury-free," he says. "I used to feel like crap after practice and games but not since Pilates.

"I learned how to breathe through my muscles. My posture is better. I can run more fluidly. And I increased my bench workouts."

'Profound impact' on Mediate

For PGA Tour pro Rocco Mediate, Pilates is all about strengthening his back — and prolonging his career. After major back surgery in 1994, Mediate says he wasn't the same. He couldn't bend over for long periods of time to practice his putting, and his back always went out after lengthy plane trips.

Enter Pilates in November 2001.

"After a week I was turned around," he says. "After two I felt like I'd never felt before."

Mediate has since sold his weights and has completely outfitted the workout room in his Ponte Vedra, Fla., home with several pieces of Pilates equipment. "Pilates never compromises your back," he says. "I've got more motion in my shoulders, midsection and legs. I can repeat my basic swing more often. Pilates is going to add five, six, seven ... years to my career."

Caroline Schmid, Mediate's Pilates instructor, says, "The golf swing is a little one-sided, which can create imbalance in the body. Pilates helps to balance out the body against the forces of the swing. It helps to create less torque in the spine because you learn to swing from your center and not from your limbs."

Mediate's wife, Linda, also has had success with Pilates. She has overcome injuries suffered in three car accidents as well as giving birth to three children: "I couldn't walk unless I put my hand on my back."

She gives Pilates credit for major improvements in her husband's game.

"He used to avoid putting, and now he's a putting machine," she says. "I want to hug Caroline because she has had such a profound impact on Rocco."

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