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Pilates For Triathletes - by Hayley Sain (Pilates in Boulder)



Triathletes are notoriously searching for ways to improve their race splits. They buy the most aerodynamic bikes, run in the lightest shoes and swim in the fastest wetsuits. Yet there is always the lingering question, whether #1 world ranked Hunter Kemper or a weekend warrior on a Sunday group ride – “How can I get faster?”

If indulging in the latest technology, nutritional plans or spending more time swimming, biking or running is not improving your race, you can probably find that elusive competitive edge from a slightly less conventional source, Pilates. Many coaches and athletes are drawn to the Pilates system as it trains the body to operate at peak performance.

Pilates is not the latest exercise fad used by Hollywood celebrities. It is used by elite athletes of all sports to help them enhance athletic performance, improve technique and prevent injuries.

As a triathlete, you may have heard of Pilates, but you are not quite sure what it is or why it is so important. Pilates is a mind/body exercise method that is designed to give you strong and flexible muscles without adding bulk. It focuses on strengthening the core stabilizing muscles of the body, including the pelvic floor, deep abdominals, buttock muscles and the muscles that support the shoulder girdle and rotator cuff. At the same time, it works on increasing the flexibility of the larger, tighter, major muscle groups, which are in most instances overused, to create a more balanced body.

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The philosophy of Pilates is to retrain the body to use muscles more efficiently and save energy. Triathletes train many hours a week in the three disciplines. If they are not using the right muscles, an earlier onset of fatigue will cause their stroke or stride to suffer. Wes Hobson, a well-known former professional triathlete and now coach, says a number of pros use Pilates because of its core strengthening benefits. “To many triathletes, improving distance training and racing is all about core stabilization,” he says. Adding, “I always try and incorporate Pilates into my training plans. I do private sessions twice a week and I see enormous benefits to this type of training.”



Other Pilates fans on the pro circuit include top athletes Matt Reed, Chris Legh, Craig Alexander and Amanda Gillam, who all credit Pilates for helping them return to a more flexible state. Craig Alexander points out the enormous postural benefits of Pilates. “If you look at the top guys winning the race, they are the ones whose posture isn’t suffering by the end of the race.

They have enough strength in their core to support their bodies even in a complete state of fatigue.” Amanda Gillam recognizes how inflexible she is from the countless hours of training and how elongated she feels after a session. You don’t have to be a world ranked triathlete to incorporate Pilates into your training week. Whatever your pace per mile or per hundred in the pool, the benefits of Pilates remain unailing:

More power through core strength.

One of the most forgotten areas to strengthen for triathletes is their core. There are several layers of abdominal muscles, all of which are targeted by Pilates exercises. The superficial abdominal muscles are your rectus abdominus, your “six pack” muscles. Their primary role is to flex the spine rather than to stabilize it. The next layer is your oblique, which helps you rotate the spine and play more of a role in spinal stabilization. The most important layer is the deepest layer, the transverses abdominus, which are the only stomach muscles that attach to the spine and the pelvis. They wrap around your torso like a corset and work in conjunction with your pelvic floor muscles to provide stability to the pelvis and the spine. Pilates exercises focus on strengthening all of these layers together in order to give a more global strength through your core. Pro triathlete, Kelly Reed, recognizes how out of touch she is with these muscles 8 months into her first pregnancy, and looks forward to continuing Pilates to strengthen them again after she gives birth.

The buttock muscles are also very important in stabilizing the pelvis, particularly for running and cycling activities. There are also several different buttock muscles, which have different roles. The biggest buttock muscles are the gluteus maximus, which are the large powerful muscles that provide propulsion in running and cycling. The gluteus medius muscles work to stabilize the pelvis and the legs while running and cycling.

Using your body’s entire core generates the real power in your push off, pedal stroke or pull through the water. Much of your energy comes from this area. By transferring that core energy to your extremities, you’ll get more power out of your stroke or stride. Triathletes are generally strong through their larger muscle groups and quite weak through the smaller stabilizing muscles. Just doing sit-ups and squats won’t strengthen these muscles. The larger muscles will continue to take over and get stronger and the smaller muscles will continue to get weaker. Wes Hobson and Matt Reed were surprised

at their inability to fire muscles they thought were much stronger. They realized what an imbalance had been created in their bodies and what the potential was for inefficiency and injury.

Common triathlon technique problems that can be improved through Pilates are:

Cycling:

- Movement /rocking of pelvis on seat
- Knees rolling inwards/outwards
- Increased movement through the upper body
- Incorrect neck posture

Running:

- Feet/knees rolling in
- Hips dropping or twisting
- Increased movement in the lower back
- Shortened stride length

Swimming:

- Legs sinking
- Sagging in the low back
- Wiggling through hips and torso
- Shortened arm stroke

Increased flexibility, range of motion and injury prevention.

Flexibility training should be an integral part of every athlete's training program. Enhanced flexibility will reduce injuries and improve performance and technique. Most triathletes are guilty of not stretching. They will spend numerous hours training every week but somehow are not able to find a few minutes before or after a workout to stretch.

Tight muscles can have a huge detriment to your technique in all three disciplines. They are also a major cause of low back pain and injury in the joints. For example,

Tight quadriceps will:

- Decrease your distance per stride in running and decrease the extension at the hip
- Limit your range of motion in your freestyle kick making kicking difficult
- Increase the arch in your lower back which can lead to low back pain
- Increase the risk of knee pain with running and cycling

Tight hamstrings will:

- Cause your lower back to be more rounded on the bike which increases the risk of injury and decreases the power on the bike
- Decrease stride length in running
- Cause a higher chance of hamstring tears

Tight shoulders and chest muscles will:

- Cause rounded shoulders and poor posture
- Increase the risk of shoulder and neck pain
- Shorten your reach or stroke length

Tight calves can cause:

- Calf strains and Achilles tendon problems
- Shin splints and ankle sprains
- Eversion of the foot upon landing and poor push off

A consistent Pilates routine will ensure that proper stretching becomes an integral part of your training program. The core muscle groups will work synergistically together to make the spine more supple. The tight muscles will lengthen and promote healthy blood circulation and lubrication to your joints. This will not only improve range of motion, but will also better prepare your joints to manage the repetitive stresses your joints must handle during the countless hours of training.

Mr. Pilates' ideal vision of "Contrology," which is what he originally named his exercise routine, was to uniformly develop the body and to make the spine more pliable so individuals can breathe better so that the body is able to cleanse itself. He believed that every person is an athlete and we all have a right to be strong and healthy.

How to get started.



Pilates consists of a series of matwork exercises plus exercises performed on specialized equipment created by Joseph Pilates. All Pilates exercises should need to be performed with precise technique, with the emphasis being on correct posture and muscle activation. While Pilates is commonly performed in a large class format, triathletes will gain much more benefit from a triathlon specific Pilates program and one-on-one sessions with a highly trained Pilates instructor.

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