

# *Pilates for* **GOLFERS**

By Beth Downey

*"After three years of doing Pilates, without a doubt, I feel a difference with my golf swing. I clearly have more flexibility and greater range of motion, which adds distance. The biggest benefit is the strength I have gained in my core which translates to a healthier back!" states Jan Albert, who plays for the Philadelphia Cricket Club in Flourtown, and contributes her five recent straight wins to her Pilates regimen.*

Pilates is an exercise system focused on improving flexibility and strength for the entire body while at the same time enhancing balance and posture. Golfers gain core strengthening in the torso from the shoulders through the pelvis, which is intrinsic for hitting the ball farther and with greater accuracy. Pilates also trains the smaller, deeper muscles to work in conjunction with the bigger outer muscles resulting in a more efficient swing motion. A growing number of golf professionals are Pilates' devotees including Tiger Woods, Annika Sorenstam, David Duval, Betsy King and Rocco Mediate. Pilates training provides the essentials that golf requires: abdominal strength, torso rotation (or twisting), flexibility, muscular balance, coordination, good posture and concentration. All of this helps prevent injuries, providing for a longer golf career.

## STABILITY & IMPROVING BACK PAIN

Stability is a combination of core strength, balance and muscular endurance. Golf requires the spine to rotate repeatedly while striking a stationary golf ball. This repetitive movement puts excessive stress on the low back or lumbar spine and can limit a golfer's range of motion if the lower body is unstable. Pilates teaches how to stabilize and strengthen the pelvic area while moving the torso to swing the club. The major stabilizing muscles include the pelvic floor muscles (PFM), and the transverse abdominus (TA) or deepest abdominal layer. The stronger these core muscles become, the more balanced the golf swing and less compression of the lumbar spine.



In addition, Pilates places emphasis on creating uniform balance in the body. What this means is, Pilates lengthens muscles that are shortened and overworked while at the same time strengthens overstretched muscles to create better muscular balance. Golfers tend to be tight in their hip flexors, shoulder girdle area and low back. The upper back muscles tend to be overstretched in a rounded position standing over the ball. Pilates works to realign the muscular imbalances, creating a well-oiled machine built to withstand the impact of the golf swing over a four to five hour round.

## POSTURAL IMPROVEMENT

Picture the golfer's stance. Often, they are rounded forward at the shoulders, head lowered with the quad muscles supporting all this weight at the front of the body. If the golfer sets up to the tee with poor posture, this misalignment will be compensated for somewhere along the swing path. The better the posture, the better the accuracy and performance. Good postural alignment depends on a balance of muscles that run alongside the spine. If these muscles are kept in good dynamic alignment, rotation of the spine will be easier to achieve and more effective. This means that not only must these spinal muscles be strong and balanced, they must also move fluidly. Pilates' exercises focus on spinal articulation, the ability to move in several planes.



In a Pilate's session, exercises include spinal flexion, extension, lateral movement or side bending and rotation. Because the twisting motion is considered the most difficult of all the spinal movements, rotation is generally taught last. The more the spine articulates, the less compression of the spine and more mobile the spine becomes.

"Pilates has definitely improved my golf swing, my upper body can rotate far

greater than it had before. Plus my driving distance is now 40 yards farther," says avid golfer and Senior Amateur competitor Jerry Kling. Jerry came to Body Precision Pilates Studio in 2001 looking to reduce his back pain & improve his flexibility. Over the course of his program, Jerry believes Pilates has improved his posture and given him the increased range of motion throughout his body that produce better results on the golf course. Additionally, he no longer experiences the back pain he previously felt following a round of golf.

Along with postural impairment, many golfers are upper body dominant, using their arms to hit the ball rather than their core and legs. Imagine the distance a ball could travel if it were hit with the entire weight of the body rather than just the arms. The Pilates extension exercises specifically aim to release the tight muscles of the chest and increase the range of movement in the shoulder girdle (the rotator cuff), while strengthening the spinal extensors and deeper upper back muscles. The beauty of Pilates is that the method works on many muscle groups at once. Pilates works towards correct anatomical alignment which helps make the golf swing more functionally correct.

## FLEXIBILITY

If a golf swing is strong but lacking flexibility, the result is a restricted or "faulty" swing. A good swing needs good shoulder and mid-back rotation while maintaining lower body stability. The joints and muscles must be mobile enough to avoid poor swing compensations. Often these "poor swings" are caused not necessarily by faulty technique but by lack of flexibility. An inflexible golfer will also be more prone to injury. The strength and flexibility learned from practicing Pilates creates a fluid yet controlled source of energy for a technically sound golf swing.

Pilates strengthens the muscles eccentrically (lengthening while contracting) so that muscles are elongated, not shortened. Bulkier shorter muscles will limit the range of motion while longer leaner muscles allow for fluid, mobile patterning. This flexibility component becomes increasingly more important with age, particularly after fifty - the years when many golfers have

more time to play and work on their game. To enjoy many years of golf and the complex, twisting moves that go along with it, consider adding Pilates to your routine. Pilates and golf combine both physical and mental elements, making the combination a natural "whole body in one".

The Pilates Method is based on six major principles. The principles, described below, similarly apply to the fundamentals of a well-executed golf game.

### CONTROL

Joseph H. Pilates called his method "Contrology" because he believed one should be in control of every aspect of every movement. Control of the golf swing will bring accuracy and precision to your game.

### CONCENTRATION

Pilates exercises require concentration and focused movements. The mind/body exercises require attention to each movement, helping improve the muscle memory or the neuro-muscular pathways necessary to develop a correct movement pattern. Pilates trains golfers to keep focused and reduce mental lapses and fatigue.

### CENTERING

Pilates is based on moving from the inside out; activating the deeper, most intrinsic muscles first. The stronger the core muscles, the more efficient the movement. In golf, the more the movement is initiated from the core, the more technically sound is the swing.

### FLOWING MOVEMENT

Pilates exercises create graceful movements where flexibility and mobility are emphasized. The tempo and rhythm of the golf swing contribute to the timing of club head speed and power generated.

### PRECISION

Because the nature of Pilates exercises are focused, precise movements, fewer repetitions are needed to work the targeted muscles. He believed that one efficient movement far surpassed ten haphazard movements. As with golf, precision is far more important than inconsistent power in producing a good score.

### BREATHING

Pilates breathing is twofold: 1) It releases toxins from the body, reducing stress and invigorating the mind. 2) It creates access to the deep abdominal muscles to strengthen the core. In golf, improper breathing impairs muscle recruitment. Proper breathing turns on the core muscles bringing greater power with control. Plus, if the game is heading south, deep breathing acts as a great relaxation tool.



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