

MIND, BODY, AND CORE!

How winter athletes reach their potential during the colder months

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As Canadians, we are used to winters with blistering cold temperatures. Whether we're getting up at the wee hours of the morning to make an early practice at the rink, or taking the kids to school after a 20-minute ritual of suiting up and shoveling our car out of the driveway – no matter how you look at it, we brave the winter months with ease.

With the rise in popularity of mind-body exercise over the past few years, it's no wonder everyone from professional athletes to weekend warriors are making Pilates a regular part of their workouts. According to experts, the colder weather brings increased stress on the joints and tighter muscles, therefore training methods for prevention of injury have become commonplace in gyms across the country.

Why Pilates?

Pilates is a form of overall strength and conditioning used in the development of strong core muscles which also focuses on breathing, balance, and range of motion. Unlike other hardcore strength training regimens that focus more specifically on muscle mass, Pilates focuses on re-balancing your muscles around the joints, improving your alignment and flexibility.

Core strengthening is an integral component of any injury prevention, rehabilitation, or sports performance program. A strong core provides a dynamic link between the upper and lower body, alleviating excess stress on the peripheral joints. In athletes, core strength contributes to enhanced athletic performance by providing a solid foundation from which the upper and lower extremities can generate force for running, throwing, rowing, or jumping.

STOTT PILATES® exercise improves core strength and balances the muscles around the joints, improving the way your body functions, looks, and feels. The Five Basic Principles, in which this method is based, focus on breathing, pelvic placement, rib cage placement, scapular movement, and head and cervical spine placement.

“The focus on core conditioning is paramount for optimal results and performance,” explains Moira Merrithew, Executive Director of Education for STOTT PILATES®. “Pilates is used to increase joint stability and strengthen the deep core muscles which helps prevent injuries and leads to improved athletic performance.”

“It [Pilates] also assists in rehabilitation after injury and creates balance throughout the entire body. As a result, athletes can withstand rigorous training regimens and ultimately improve their strength and endurance for skiing or hockey, and prevent or recover from injury while maintaining an optimal weight for their activity of choice.”

Basic Training

What most athletes don't realize, however, is that most Pilates exercises can be easily incorporated into regular sport-conditioning regimens. For instance, on a light weight day, a recovery workout day, or prior to skill acquisition days, a Pilates workout is a great way to work on neuromuscular coordination and proper muscle-firing patterns. Another option is to add some Pilates exercises to your warm-up ritual.

“Although core training may be a bit of a catch phrase in the fitness industry, the true definition of the term is widely acknowledged in medical and rehabilitation communities as the basis for reconditioning the support musculature of the body,” explains Mr. Lindsay G. Merrithew, President and CEO, STOTT PILATES®. “The attention to the core, proper alignment, and good posture that Pilates offers through its numerous variations of movement, with or without specialized equipment, is a natural carryover for the athlete into regular living.”

Matwork® is the foundation of the exercise system. All the ba-

sic exercises are designed to target very specific muscle groups in very specific ways. In the STOTT PILATES® method, the Five Basic Principles are used to help ensure the movements are being done effectively. There are numerous basic exercises that can be performed and/or modified on mats found around the gym that can be helpful in addition to an already established workout program. Some popular Pilates exercises can put strain on the low back in clients with typical postural imbalances, so it's important that instructors are properly trained to teach more complex exercises.

Light equipment such as 1 lb, 2 lb, or 3 lb toning balls help close the kinetic chain, add proprioceptive awareness, and add challenge to exercises by increasing the load or de-stabilizing the base of support. Other small equipment such as Mini Stability Balls™, Fitness Circles®, and Flex-Bands® can also add variety to mat-based programming.

“Pilates focuses on active eccentric lengthening of muscles rather than prolonged static strengthening,” adds Moira. “This results in maintaining the integrity and strength of the joint while allowing it to move more freely in a greater range. Because Pilates works on a controlled lengthening of the muscles, it can be beneficial in assisting with overall flexibility and stamina. The emphasis on breath helps athletes focus better during the game and control precise movements required for their sport.”

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For Best Results

PJ O'Clair, STOTT PILATES® Master Instructor Trainer and owner of STOTT PILATES® Licensed Training Center Northeast Pilates, agrees that winter sports are extremely demanding on the body and require a tremendous amount of core strength and endurance. “The deep core stabilizers are challenged through all planes of motion – a strong and flexible core is extremely important and critical for all winter activities.”

Thus, Pilates is effective because it trains all three functional muscle systems. Trainers can encourage athletes to stabilize the joints effectively at low loads, and then progress to strengthening eccentrically which will control deceleration movements by using the global stabilizers and finally progressing to the larger global mobilizers, with the inherent joint stability already in place.

When all muscular systems work in a timely and coordinated fashion, athletes can achieve large gains in strength, skill, coordination, and biomechanical efficiency. Pilates focuses on improving stabilization of the lumbo-pelvic region, and therefore improved core stability improvement will carry over to the sporting realm, reducing the risk of injury and improving performance. <<

For more on core conditioning, Pilates equipment, and education, visit www.stottpilates.com.