

# PILATES Takes the Field



PILATES MASTER TRAINER LUANN BRUSA, OWNER OF THE TRUCORE STUDIOS OUTSIDE OF CHICAGO, ASSISTS THE BEARS' MARTELLUS BENNETT AS HE PERFORMS SHORT SPINE.

NFL player Martellus Bennett keeps himself game-ready with Pilates.

by Beth Johnson

Unlike most of his teammates, Chicago Bears tight end Martellus Bennett, 26, isn't carbo loading, lifting weights or going for a jog before home games. As often as he can, he's doing Pilates with Luann Brusa at TruCore Pilates in suburban Chicago.

At 6'7" and 265 pounds, Bennett isn't what immediately comes to mind when you think "Pilates student." And he admits, "flexibility isn't naturally easy for me." Though football traditionally places more emphasis on strength than "stretch," Bennett also knows this is a liability, because a collision sport like football takes a toll on the body—even when you're as big as he is. "I'm a tight end, which is a position on the offensive line that requires both blocking and running. I'm always getting hit, or hitting someone, in every single play," he explains.

The usual football training regimen—running, weights and more weights—isn't always enough to prepare you for 300-plus pounds of linebacker coming at you full speed. "So between getting slammed on the field by huge players and the type of training we do, our joints really get struck down," Bennett says. "There is also a lot of stress on the lower back. The truth is, anyone who is playing in the NFL is never playing at 100 percent once the season starts, because some part of your body is always hurting."

GAME AND FIELD PHOTOS BY BILL SMITH/COURTESY OF THE CHICAGO BEARS; PHOTOS OF MARTELLUS IN THE STUDIO BY SIGGI BENNETT



LOOK AT THAT STRETCH! BENNETT SNAGS THE BALL DURING THE BEARS' WINNING GAME AGAINST THE MINNESOTA VIKINGS ON SEPTEMBER 15.

Bennett, a Texas native who played for the Dallas Cowboys and the New York Giants before joining the Bears this season, had been looking for a way to compensate for the brutal pounding his body took every week, both on the field and in the training room. "About five years ago, when I was playing for the Cowboys, I really wanted to find a new way to better my body, and to become more flexible.

"First I tried yoga, but I have ADD, so holding positions for a long time—and all that chanting—just wasn't for me," he recalls. "One day, I noticed a Pilates studio—Cindy's Pilates—next door to a boxing gym in Irving, TX, where I worked out with some other teammates."

One day after a workout, his curiosity got the best of him and he decided to check out the studio, which is owned by Cindy Gegax, a STOTT PILATES®-trained teacher. "From watching some of the

students do their routines, I knew right then that it was something that could help me," he says. "I signed up for a lesson that day!"

From the start, he could tell that Pilates was exactly what his body needed. "From the first time that I did it, it just made sense to me," he says. He also liked that the routines varied every session, depending on what he

## HIS FAVORITE MOVE? LEG CIRCLES.

needed to work on at that moment—and what hurt. "At the time, my knee was bothering me, so Cindy gave me routines that catered to that. My hamstring also had a 'glitch,' so she helped me work that out. I really liked having a new routine each time that could be adjusted to my body's needs, and Pilates became a regular part of my workout."

When Bennett was signed by the Bears earlier this year, he found another Pilates teacher, Luann Brusa, owner of two

## KEEPING THE NFL LIMBER, ONE PLAYER AT A TIME

When pro athletes, including Darren Sproles of the New Orleans Saints and Gerald McCoy of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, want to train and improve their game for the next season, they head to Todd Durkin's Fitness Quest 10 in San Diego, CA. In addition to football-specific strength and cardio work, they also take advantage of Fitness Quest 10's Pilates program, which is taught by Melanie Rogers, Stephanie Scarbrough and Jessica Wagner.

"We're not here to duplicate the training these players do elsewhere," says Rogers. "But they can benefit from the overall flexibility, articulation of the spine and core strength Pilates can give them. When football players' muscles are flexible, they can react quickly to changes in direction and sudden blows, which decreases the likelihood of them being injured."

"All these guys were amazing athletes before they ever did Pilates," says Scarbrough, who completed her comprehensive training through The Sheppard Method. "But I've found that most athletes get a new respect for Pilates once they try it, because it's a different way of working for them—and it's not easy! They also have to learn to breathe properly, which is very hard to master for anyone."

The players come in one to three days a week during the off-season, and the routines are adjusted to their needs that day. "If they were just doing heavy lifting for two hours, we're not going to kill their legs," notes Rogers, who completed comprehensive training courses with Erica Essner and Kore Pilates. "We're going to try to lengthen them to aid in their recovery."

"In their other training, there's a lot of emphasis on strengthening their big, dynamic muscles," Scarbrough says. "In Pilates, we're helping strengthen the smaller stabilizing muscles that support the skeletal structure. When the stabilizing muscles do their job correctly, the larger, more dynamic muscles can perform to the best of their ability."

Rogers and Scarbrough discuss their work with Sproles and McCoy on the following pages.





IN JUST THE FIRST TWO GAMES OF THE SEASON, BENNETT SCORED A TOTAL OF THREE TOUCHDOWNS.

**“I CAN LIFT 500 POUNDS BUT IN A PILATES SESSION, THERE’S ALWAYS SOME DIFFERENT TYPE OF MOTION THAT’S HARD FOR ME TO DO.”**

that with my height it can be challenging...but I’m always up for a challenge!”

Pilates can also be humbling for a professional athlete. “Pilates has a way of finding your weakness and showing you what you need to be working on,” he points out. “I feel that a standard football workout uses the major, dynamic muscles, but not the smaller, supporting muscles that hold up the bigger ones. That’s where Pilates comes in for me.”

His favorite move? Leg Circles. “They work the muscles that aren’t being worked by the other training I was doing. They have really helped me improve my flexibility in my hips, which in turn, has helped me to be able to switch directions more quickly on the field. I’ve been working on that a lot this season, and you know what’s amazing? Thanks to Pilates, I’m better at that now than I’ve ever been.”

Bennett recently drafted a new “player” to Pilates—his wife Saggi. “I was going to the studio with some other players who are into Pilates and I asked my wife if she wanted to join us. Even on the first try, it was really impressive how easily it came to her—probably because she grew up doing a lot of dance and ballet. The guys with me started joking that she couldn’t come again, because she made them look bad!”

And therein lies the irony of Pilates. “I know players who lift hundreds of pounds, run fast and slam into other guys—but when they try Pilates the first time, they can’t believe how hard it is. That’s what is so interesting about it. You watch someone do it and it doesn’t necessarily seem like they’re doing as much work as they are.”

Now that he’s got his wife on board, he’s working to recruit other players. “I’ve got to get more football guys doing Pilates! With all the hits to the body the players receive, Pilates could really help them.” So far, the most



BRUSA ASSISTS BENNETT AS HE STRETCHES OUT HIS HAMSTRINGS AND HIP FLEXORS ON THE REFORMER.

ILLUSTRATION BY KRISTIN LIU



ON SEPTEMBER 8, IN HIS VERY FIRST GAME FOR THE CHICAGO BEARS, BENNETT MAKES A SPECTACULAR LEAPING CATCH FOR A TOUCHDOWN AGAINST THE CINCINNATI BENGALS.

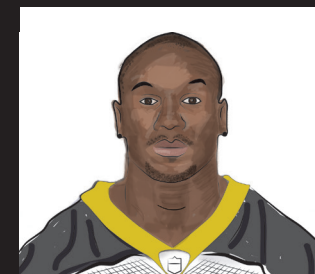
common response has been, “Isn’t Pilates just for girls?” he says. “But I tell them ‘you’re wrong, but if you think that, then why don’t you at least try it?’”

“The bottom line is that football is my job, and I want to do my job really well. Anything that can give me a competitive advantage on the field and help reduce injuries is a huge plus for me. It’s weird—I can lift 500 pounds, but in a Pilates session, there’s always some different type of motion that’s hard for me to do. That’s what is so great about it!”

And it’s paid off: In his first game for his new team, Bennett caught a touchdown pass against the Cincinnati Bengals so amazing, it was accorded the ultimate honor: It became an Internet GIF. **PS**

## DARREN SPROLES

**Running Back  
New Orleans Saints**



strengthen the ankle, and various kneeling and standing lunge stretches to stretch the hip flexors.”

**KEY MOVES:** “Single-Leg Circles with the feet in the straps—which are key in anyone’s program—plus Roll-Ups, Thigh Stretch and Standing Splits on the Reformer,” Rogers notes. “Using the Arc Barrel is great because it allows them to do things like Spine Stretch and Saw in a way that doesn’t put too much pressure on the lower back and helps lengthen the hamstrings a bit more easily.”

**WHAT BROUGHT HIM TO PILATES:** “Darren wanted to improve his speed,” says Rogers. “By emphasizing mobility and flexibility of the hip flexors and hip rotators, this translates to a faster and more agile running back and kick-off return specialist. We also put an emphasis on ankle mobility and foot strength to help his overall speed and athleticism. Besides a basic core Pilates program, we added Calf Raises on the Chair, which

## GERALD MCCOY

**Defensive Tackle  
Tampa Bay Buccaneers**



**WHAT BROUGHT HIM TO PILATES:** “Gerald started doing Pilates to counterbalance all the heavy lifting and explosive work he does in the weight room,” Scarbrough says. “As a 300-pound defensive lineman whose job is to move men as large as he is, he felt that Pilates could give him that extra edge in strength, flexibility and injury prevention.”

**KEY MOVES:** “Gerald is a lot of fun to train and he can do things that you would never imagine someone his size would be able to do,” Scarbrough says. “He can do a Rollover, which takes flexibility and a lot of strength; the first time he did it, I was so proud of him. He also does Side-Plank work, which takes a lot of core stability.”

“When he comes in, we try to do a lot of thoracic spine extension. The thoracic spine is the largest part of your back with the most vertebrae and it’s supposed to extend and rotate. When your thoracic spine gets locked up, you don’t usually have pain there, but your lower back and your neck start to overcompensate. So by doing rotational exercises with Gerald and other players, we can help them prevent many injuries. Just like with the other athletes, we do feet-in-straps Leg Circles to open up those hips, lots of flexibility work and shoulder-stabilizing exercises.”