

Pilates for Winter Sports

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Whether you play – or you train others to play – pilates is a great way to get that athletic edge during the colder months.

Winter is right around the corner, and with the colder weather comes snowboarders, skiers, hockey players, and skating enthusiasts ready to strut their stuff. How do they build strength, increase energy, and get in shape for their favourite sport?

Pilates-based exercises help improve performance, reduce injury, and relieve stress. It also focuses on re-balancing your muscles around the joints, improving your alignment and flexibility.

“Pilates also assists in rehabilitation after injury and creates balance throughout the entire body,” says Moira Merrithew, co-founder of STOTT PILATES®. “As a result, athletes can withstand rigorous training regimes and ultimately improve their strength and endurance for skiing or hockey, and ultimately prevent or recover from injury while maintaining an optimal weight for their activity of choice.”

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. “Pilates is now being used by professional hockey players, Olympic athletes, and extreme sports fanatics because it helps increase joint stability and strengthens the deep core muscles which in turn prevents injuries and leads to improved athletic performance,” adds Moira.

Pilates and your regular workout

What most athletes don't realize, however, is that the most basic pilates exercises can be easily incorporated into their 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 into the warm-up activity.

The warm-up prepares the mind and body to act succinctly to create movement; as well as the heart muscles, skeletal muscles and joint structures to respond to greater stimulus. It lowers blood pressure, and improves blood flow which will increase cardiac output. More specifically, the warm up is both psychological as well as physiological. The higher the level of athletics or fitness, the more the warm up should be appropriately adapted to activate the energy systems that are required for that sport.

Mind-body connection

Pilates helps the neuromuscular system prepare the motor units to fire with speed, force and in the proper sequence for biomechanical efficient movement. Previous warm-up routines included stretching, but the risks and benefits of stretching are mixed and often not collaborative in the research.

“Most sports demand a delicate balance of mental and physical skill,” explains President and CEO of STOTT PILATES®, Lindsay G. Merrithew. “Pilates enables you to focus on both through mind-body awareness by gaining insight into the inseparable connection between the physical and psychological components of athletic performance. Athletes can take their physical performance to a higher level by training their minds in addition to their bodies.”

Pilates is a key component to athletic conditioning because it focuses on the deeper muscle groups, or ‘local’ stabilizers. This is key when controlling joint movement and in sustaining the stability of the joints that can often be damaged through repetitive and high demand training. As well, the physical awareness that the athlete gains through a strong pilates program can aid in their movement control, enabling them to increase their level of performance.

John Garey, owner of John Garey Pilates in Los Angeles and a STOTT PILATES® Master Instructor Trainer, says he's heard from many athletes that when they take pilates, they start to think about their body and its function differently. In particular, they think more about their centre or their core. “Athletes find that they transfer all that they learn in the studio to the rink or the slopes, often subconsciously,” he explains. “Pilates makes

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athletes get back in touch with their basic training principles and therefore expands on what they already know. The benefits are increased power, strength, and mobility.”

Increased flexibility and overall stamina

Because pilates works on a controlled lengthening of the muscles, it can be beneficial in assisting overall flexibility (lower back, hamstrings, and shoulders) and this can aid in creating a stronger game on the ice, and a greater level of stamina during the elements on the hills. Also, the emphasis on breath as

one of the principles can aid an athlete to focus during their game and control precise movements required for their sport.

Pilates is effective because it trains all three functional muscle systems. Trainers can encourage their 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.

The end result

When all muscular systems work in a timely and coordinated fashion, the athlete can achieve large gains in strength, skill, coordination, and biomechanical efficiency. Pilates focuses on improving stabilization of the lumbo-pelvic region, and the theory is that improved core stability gained through pilates training will carry over the sporting realm, reducing the risk of injury, and improving performance.

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