



ULTIMATE EXERCISE

WITH ITS ABILITY TO ENHANCE ENDURANCE, STRENGTH, BALANCE, FLEXIBILITY AND AGILITY, PILATES MAY BE THE IDEAL FITNESS PROGRAM FOR RUGBY PLAYERS.

BY JAYLYN BERGNER

Some world class rugby players can attest to the injury prevention and rehabilitation benefits of Pilates. "The exercises helped me fix a persistent lower back injury by dramatically increasing my lower abdominal strength," says Kees Meeuws of the All Blacks. "My all-around stability improved, as I learned to initiate from my abs. Now I can play without experiencing debilitating back pain. I think that all athletes can benefit from the increased core strength you get from Pilates—and it's also a lot of fun."

Kiwi powerhouse Xavier Rush, who captains the Cardiff Blues, started doing Pilates a few years back while suffering from a left shoulder rotator cuff impingement. "The exercises not only got my shoulder back to full strength," Rush relates, "but I have gained increased core strength, stability and flexibility which have been important in maintaining a high level of performance."

Comprised of over 500 multifaceted movements, Pilates focuses on the neuromuscular control of the spine, abdomen, hips, pelvis and their supporting muscles. Dubbed "controllogy" by founder Joseph Pilates in the 1920s, the exercise program concentrates on muscle contraction, breathing, and quality of movement, rather than on the number of reps. And since more than one muscle group is worked during each exercise, Pilates can increase flexibility and strength. (For some tips on how to perform various Pilates exercises, see the opposite page.)

Since rugby is an intense, physical sport that can lead to career-threatening injuries to the lumbar and spine, Pilates exercises can help fortify the spine and keep it limber, adding space between each vertebrae which enhances body control and posture. This also provides increased agility, allowing for the explosive movements needed to blast through a defense.

While weight lifting builds bulk in the muscles, Pilates stretches can help a rugby player develop longer and leaner muscles and

circulate nutrients to muscles and tendons, which helps reduce the possibility of sprained joints, hamstring injuries and groin pulls. Pilates stretches can also lubricate joints and increase the circulation of blood, alleviating aches and pains caused from tackling, rucking, and running.

Certain Pilates exercises can replace crunches, which focus on the abdominal muscles and rarely address the obliques, those important muscles in the rib area. Longer, more flexible muscles in those spots allow for the greater range of movement when running.

Like many sports, rugby is a game that requires split-second decision-making. Through practiced breathing techniques, Pilates can enhance concentration and confidence, while lowering anxiety in stressful situations. "It teaches you how to train your mind and build symmetry and coordination in the body," says Siri Dharma Galliano, one of the world's leading Pilates trainers.

Rugby players with busy schedules off the pitch might feel they don't have the time to add yet another training technique, but incorporating Pilates into a workout for just 10 minutes, three days a week will show results. As Joseph Pilates once said, "In 10 sessions, you will feel the difference. In 20, you will see the difference. And in 30, you will have a whole new body."

So how can you start? Find a Pilates studio and try a few sessions with a professional instructor (studio fees start at \$10 and can go up to \$200 a session) who can show you the proper movements and breathing techniques.

If you want to try Pilates on your own at home, look for some DVDs or books for beginners. They won't be able to offer the benefits of one-on-one instruction, but there are some fine Pilates programs that can be found in stores such as Best Buy or through the Internet at sites such as www.pilatespro.com.

Jaylyn Bergner is a writer based in Virginia Beach, VA, who was a DI college rugby player at West Chester.

With the fall rugby season just a couple of months away, players of all ages are gearing up to get in shape through stretching, running and use of weight machines. But while those training techniques certainly help get the body ready to play a tough sport, there's one exercise regimen that many experts believe offers a full spectrum of benefits—building strength and endurance, increasing flexibility, preventing (and rehabilitating) injuries, improving balance, coordination and agility, and enhancing mental clarity and reaction time: Pilates.

During the last several years, some of the world's elite teams—New Zealand All Blacks, South Africa Springboks, Fredericton (New Brunswick) Loyalists, Canterbury Bulldogs, Melbourne Storm, even the USA 7s, just to name a few—have incorporated this increasingly popular exercise program into their fitness workouts.

But Pilates can challenge even the most physically fit athlete. While training the Loyalists in his studio, Pilates trainer Garda Milne noticed the players were having difficulty with the exercises. "They were surprised at how hard it was to do and how they couldn't find certain muscles," Milne observed. "It's basically all about stabilizing the core muscles in the torso. When you have more control or awareness of your torso, you hit harder, you have better balance and stability, and you don't have as many injuries."

PHOTOS CHAD HOLMES

SIX PILATES EXERCISES FOR RUGGERS

HUNDRED: Strengthens the abs.



- 1) Lie on the ground, pulling your belly button into your spine and then up to your chest (it should feel like a corset is wrapped around your midsection).
- 2) Raise your legs in the air, keeping the small of your back on the ground, and turn the calves in toward each other, squeezing them together.
- 3) Exhale and contract your abs, lifting your shoulder blades off the floor.
- 4) Pump your arms up and down, breathing in for a count of five and out for a count of five, keeping your abs tight. *10 repetitions*

BRIDGE: Trains you to utilize your transverse muscles (the deepest abs) to protect your back when in an arched position. Hip flexors and hamstrings will become more flexible; quads and buttocks will become stronger.



- 1) Lie on your back, knees bent, and feet on the ground.
- 2) Exhale and raise your hips off of the ground into the air, contracting your abs and squeezing your buttock muscles.
- 3) Hold for 30 seconds to a minute,

depending on ability, and gradually increase time with continued practice.

THE BALL: Stretches and massages the spine, keeps the abs contracted and improves balance.



- 1) Sit, back flat, abs contracted to the spine for balance, and feet pulled in to your buttocks.
- 2) Rest back on your tailbone with your feet in the air and grab your ankles.
- 3) Inhale and roll back until your shoulder blades touch the ground

and then exhale and roll forward, keeping your feet off the ground. *Repeat sequence three to five times*

SINGLE-LEG STRETCH: Ab muscle workout that also stabilizes your hips and boosts coordination while stretching your legs and back.



- 1) Lie on your back, legs extended.
- 2) Contract your abs, exhale and raise your left leg off of the ground, pointing your toes (remember to bring it up only as high as you can, while keeping the small of your back on the ground).
- 3) Draw left leg into your chest and place left hand on the outside of the knee and right hand on the inside of calf.
- 4) Raise shoulders off the ground and pull your leg into you twice and then inhale, switch legs, and do the same move with the right leg.
- 5) Inhale as you change legs and exhale when the knee comes to your chest. *Repeat the sequence five to 10 times*

CRISSCROSS: Strengthens the obliques.



- 1) With fingers behind your head, lie on the ground, elbows open and not tucked in at your ears.
- 2) Contract your abs and lift your legs, keeping the small of your back on the ground.
- 3) Exhale and stretch your left leg across the room, pointing your toes, while bringing your right knee to your chest.
- 4) Simultaneously, rotate left elbow to right knee, getting as close to the floor as possible.
- 5) Inhale and change positions and exhale. *Repeat five to 10 times*

T-Stand: Increases the muscle strength in your arms, legs, shoulders, and abs, and improves balance.



- 1) Sit with your left leg extended and your right tucked into the groin area.
- 2) Stretch your left arm out to the side and place your right hand on the ground.
- 3) Inhale, contract abs, and lift hip into the air, bringing left arm up into the air, and come up onto right knee (advanced individuals can sweep out their right leg, and put all weight in the three points of hand and feet).
- 4) Remember to keep your arms in line with each other. *Hold for 30 seconds and switch sides.*