

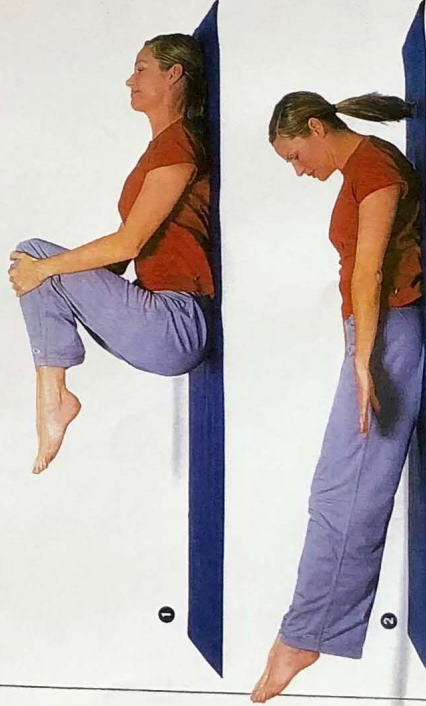
# Pilates, Anyone?

The core-training method is more popular than ever, and it's perfect for tennis players. By Michelle Katlian

ONE OF THE FIRST THINGS THAT WTA PHYSICAL therapist Michelle Gebrinan looks at when evaluating the pros during their annual physical exam is core stability. "While tennis players have notoriously strong abs and obliques, their deep abdominal muscles can be weak," says Gebrinan, coordinator for the WTA's therapeutic exercise program. "This can affect performance and increase the risk of injury."

Gebrinan doesn't just send players to the weight room. She teaches them basic exercises based on the Pilates method. Developed nearly 80 years ago by German nurse and athlete Joseph Pilates to help injured soldiers rehabilitate during World War I, the moves, performed either on spring-based machines (called reformers) or on an exercise mat, target the deep transverse abdominals as well as the more superficial rectus abdominus muscles and the lower-back stabilizing muscles. Pilates' theory was that a strong and stable core takes pressure off

**PILATES 101** Almost every Pilates move is centered around the body's "power-house" muscles—the abs, back, hips, and butt. "Throughout every exercise, think about lifting up and out of this area," says Pilates expert Brooke Siler. "Imagine stretching your upper body away from your hips, as if being cinched in a corset." At the same time, think about scooping your belly inward.



▶ **THE HUNDRED (warm-up)** Lie on your back and pull your knees toward your chest. Inhale deeply; exhale and sink chest and belly into mat (Fig. 1). Lift your head to look at your belly, moving from your upper back rather than your neck. Reach forward with both arms, feeling your shoulder blades sink into the mat. Straighten legs toward ceiling, squeezing butt and inner thighs together, then lower to about a 45-degree angle to the floor (Fig. 2). Keeping your belly scooped in, pump your arms straight up and down, as if slipping water, for 100 counts. Lower back to starting position, bringing knees to chest.

▶ **SINGLE-LEG STRETCH (strengthens abs, legs)** Sit on a mat with knees bent. Pull left leg toward chest with right hand on knee, left hand on ankle (Fig. 1). Roll back onto mat, keeping leg bent to chest. Extend right leg up and off the mat while keeping back flat on mat. Lift your chin toward

the limbs while improving power, flexibility, and alignment. Pilates fans among the pro ranks include Mark Philippoussis, Venus and Serena Williams, Jennifer Capriati, and the 46-year-old Martina Navratilova, who Gebrinan says is a leader in core stability on the women's tour.

The exercises have other performance advantages besides building strong abdominal and back muscles. They increase strength and flexibility at the same time so you'll improve power and range of motion. "Often tennis players have tight front-shoulder, neck, and chest muscles but a weaker upper back," Gebrinan says. "Pilates will help strengthen those weaker back muscles while stretching and lengthening the tighter front muscles to provide an ideal balance."

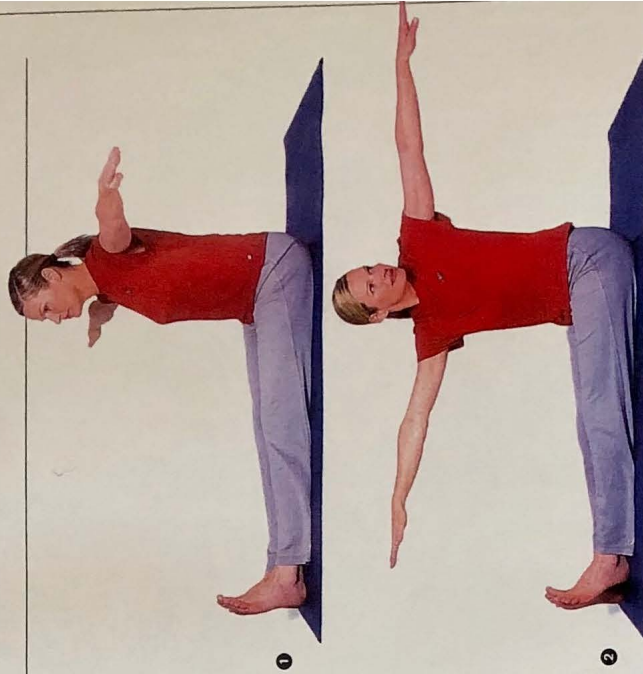
The moves can also help correct muscle imbalances and help with injury prevention. "Tennis can be a very one-sided sport," says Brooke Siler, owner of re: AB, a Pilates studio in New York City. "Pilates helps you work your body more

uniformly and even things out so you're less likely to become overdeveloped [on one side]," Gebrinan adds. "If you're trying to return a hard-hit serve and you don't have a stable base of support, you're at risk for injuring your hip or quad."

Ready to give Pilates a go? While private sessions can be pricey (one-on-one training at studios runs upwards of \$100), basic exercises like the ones Gebrinan recommends for the pros can be done without any equipment. You may notice a difference in your game in as few as 10 sessions, says Howard Sichel, owner of Power Pilates in New York City.

"One of the great things about Pilates is how quickly you can see changes like better control and more power," he says. "After a while, basic training cues like keeping your abs firm become almost second nature, and you'll feel them carrying over into your game." ■

Michelle Katlian wrote about stroke-specific exercises in our December 2002/January 2003 issue.



▶ **SPINE TWIST (stretches back muscles)** Sit tall on a mat and stretch your legs out flat in front of you with your feet together. Stretch your arms to sides as if reaching out to touch walls on both sides of the room (Fig. 1). Inhale and scoop navel toward spine, sitting up tall. Exhale and twist to left from waist, squeezing your buttocks together (Fig. 2). Inhale deeply as you twist back to the starting position. Repeat movement to the right; do three sets.

your chest, feeling yourself being anchored to floor (Fig. 2). Exhale and switch legs, bringing left hand to right knee, right hand to right ankle. Stretch left leg out from hip in line with the center of your body. Repeat five to 10 times and end by pulling both knees into chest.

\*The moves illustrated here, which are the best for tennis players, were adapted from *The Pilates Body* by Brooke Siler (Broadway Books, 2000). Also available by Siler is a new two-CD set called *The Pilates Body Kit*, which includes flash cards of poses (Palms Media, \$22.95).