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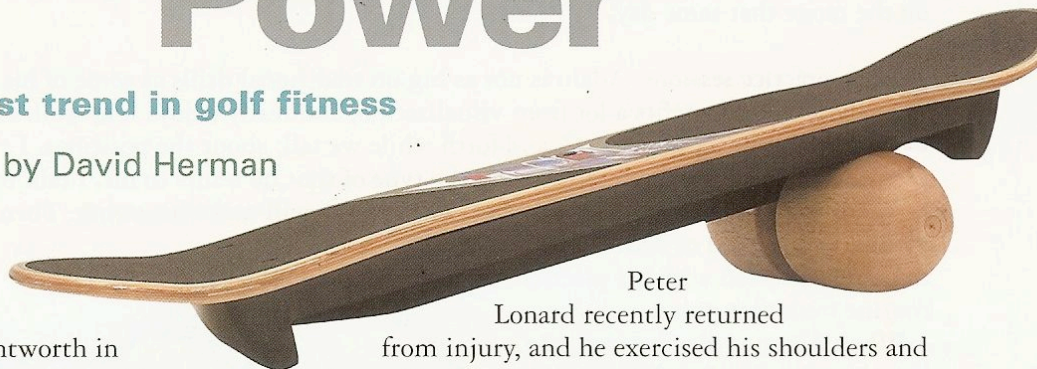
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Balance of Power

The latest trend in golf fitness

by David Herman



Before the HSBC World Match Play Championship at Wentworth in 2003, Ernie Els mentioned that his putting stroke had seemed a little off. On the practice green, one of his friends, a martial arts expert, noticed that his weight was too far back on the heels. He needed to shift his balance forward, to the balls of the feet. Els made the adjustment, and went on to win the event for a record tying fifth time.

Golf instructors often talk about the shifting of weight, but the fact is that most golfers don't truly know how to do it. Els needed to have great body awareness to make such a subtle change right before a big money event.

In the professional training environment, it is well understood that balance is an essential element of a solid regimen. This is part of the reason why yoga has become so popular among golfers. Maintaining balance throughout the golf swing is the goal of most pros, and an increasing number of them are incorporating aids like balance boards, Dynadisks and Pilates bricks into their workouts. I have even seen a few guys on the range hitting balls while on a balance board! That takes world class athleticism, but working on balance in concert with other basic exercises is a promising way for almost all of us to enhance our play.

Balance aids have their origins in physical therapy, and they are especially useful for athletes returning to play from injury. Anyone who has had an ankle, back, shoulder or knee injury knows how quickly the body begins to compensate—immediately favoring the healthy side—and it can be a challenge getting balance back to the swing. The technical term for this is *proprioception*, which is the ability to sense the changing orientation of the body while in motion. In layman's terms, it is body awareness. Standing on a balance board instantly creates that awareness—we get a sense of the body's center of gravity, as well as weaknesses that could be throwing it off balance.

Peter

Lonard recently returned from injury, and he exercised his shoulders and legs with different balance aids during his rehab. Even doing simple biceps curls on a balance board was helpful. Lonard did some of these balance exercises while he was watching TV in his living room, and he took his Pilates brick on the road with him, because it is so compact and he could do such a wide range of exercises on it.

Balance aids also create good postural habits. Many golfers tend to slouch forward at address, causing them to get short in the front along the chest line, and long in the back. As a result, the shoulder muscles, which are crucial for balance, don't hold the upper body in place during the rotations back and through. Maintaining the proper angles becomes exceedingly difficult, and that is when compensations begin to creep into the swing.

To use a balance aid effectively, we should assume a natural position similar to the ready position in tennis, but with the chest up. The center of gravity runs in a straight line from the ceiling through the head to a point directly between the feet. The knees are slightly bent, hips unlocked, eyes level. On the balance board, the center of gravity can slide back and forth and side to side. A good introduction to the board is trying a little light dumbbell work—basic things like side laterals, forward raises or biceps curls. Keep in mind that when beginning a new program, it is always wise to consult a trainer.

Most amateurs will probably be too embarrassed to take a balance board to the gym, because they do draw some funny looks, but it is definitely something that can be worked on at home, or as part of a golf fitness program. ●

David Herman serves as trainer and consultant to a number of world class athletes. He is also the co-author of *Ernie Els' Guide to Golf Fitness*. www.sportsandbody.com.