

THE GOLFER

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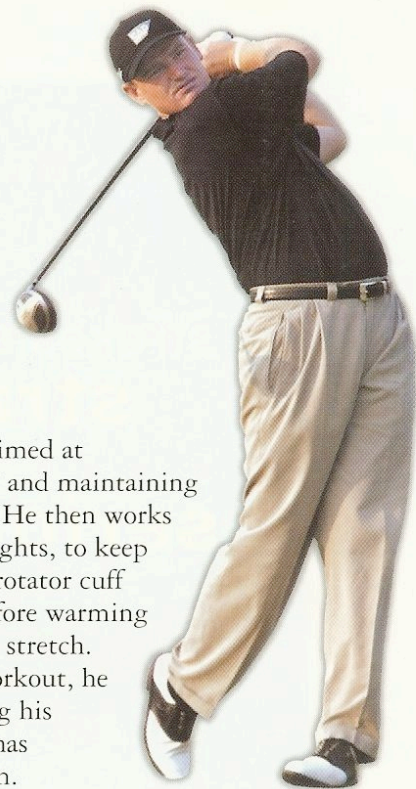
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THE ART OF GOLF DESIGN SUMMER GETAWAYS
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Core curriculum

A world class trainer
on the benefits of Pilates for golfers

by David Herman



Over the last two years, Pilates has become incredibly popular on the PGA Tour. Most people probably hear that word and think of those odd-looking machines at the gym. The machines are great, but many professional golfers are focusing on Pilates floor exercises as a major element of their fitness programs.

Today, everyone is talking about the “core,” the center of the body that houses the muscles that stabilize and protect the spine. For the golf swing, that area is incredibly important, and Pilates strengthens and lengthens those muscles. A typical regimen involves working the upper abs, lower abs and obliques. Because of the natural curvature of the spine, one exercise involves flattening the spine against the floor. In order to do that, you have to expel the air from your abdominals and hold the stomach in tight—imagine pulling the navel toward the spine. This exercise enables the golfer to activate the transverse abdominals and paraspinals. Both are deep-seated muscle groups that are tremendous sources of potential power. When you see someone with a six-pack, in contrast, those muscles are more for show than for utility.

I started doing Pilates about three years ago, when I was primarily working on yoga with the pros. Yoga is still popular and very valuable, but I think many people have an easier time connecting with Pilates—it doesn't really enter the spiritual realm, and it stretches through a wide range of motion instead of holding poses. But there are points in common between the two. Both practices are based on breath control and building stability. And both have enough variety to offer benefits to individuals with different body types and health concerns, because they help bring the body closer to balance.

Ernie Els knows exactly what he wants to extract from his workouts, and this is how he fits Pilates into his regimen. He starts with half an hour of cardio, spinning two-minute sprints on the bike with a minute of rest in between, focusing on strengthening the legs and feeling strong in his lungs. After he has warmed up, he moves on to 20

minutes of floor work, aimed at strengthening his “core” and maintaining a good range of motion. He then works on light upper body weights, to keep the muscles around the rotator cuff shielded from injury, before warming down with a ten minute stretch. At every point in the workout, he is conscious of protecting his back, and this regimen has worked very well for him.

In general, I think people are learning that there are exercises that are not good for golf—things like squats or heavy overhead lifting that put stress on the spine. Golfers now understand that certain muscles generate power in the swing. The obliques, for example, initiate the downswing, so it makes sense to do exercises that strengthen that movement. The pros I work with all come back after Pilates floor exercises and tell me they're hitting it longer, and they know this time it's not because of their equipment.

A good floor routine can offer great benefits to amateurs as well. Fifteen to 30 minutes three times per week is perfect. A video devoted to floor exercises helps develop a solid routine, and it's always good to occasionally add a new exercise for variety. I believe it's the single best thing an amateur golfer can do in the gym because it incorporates strengthening in all the important areas when done properly.

Finally, a lot of amateurs will limit their pre-round stretching to a few shoulder turns on the first tee. I would really recommend setting aside 10 or 15 minutes for floor exercises. It's so good in the morning before a round—it really gets the muscles firing. I won't go so far as to say that Pilates is the cure-all for golf fitness, but there's no question it's one of the best things to come along in years. ●

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

Ernie Els has incorporated Pilates into his workouts.