

Pilates and the Elite Athlete: Finding that Extra Competitive Edge

BY KEN ENDELMAN

It's that nth degree – a percentage point in increased power or a quarter second shaved off a qualifying time – that more often than not is the difference between victory and defeat, or between an excellent athlete and a truly elite one. But how to get that that little bit of extra strength or balance when training top-level athletes?

For Joerg Chabowski, ACSM, the secret to that competitive edge is Pilates. He has helped trained several world class athletes, including 2004 Olympic gold medalist boxer Andre Ward and U.S. junior champion figure skater Justin Dillon.

Chabowski's the founder of Pro-Function, a company specializing in Pilates and strength and conditioning coaching. He's also co-founder of the Working Body, a Pilates, personal training, massage and chiropractic studio, and Integrated Teacher Training, a Pilates certification and continuing-education program that features curriculum for instructors wanting to train top level athletes.

He's in good company. Many trainers of top-level athletes are turning toward Pilates. Originally a rehabilitation system devised by Joseph Pilates for WWI soldiers, it's a form of exercise that emphasizes the balanced development of the body through core strength, flexibility, and awareness, in order to support efficient movement. The core consists of the deep abdominal muscles along with the muscles closest to the spine. Control of the core is achieved by integrating the trunk, pelvis and shoulder girdle as a single unit.

For Chabowski there's no doubt that Pilates and core strength can give a top level athlete that extra surge or push to put them over the top:

"An excellent training tool..."

"Pilates as a method is an excellent training tool for athletes because it addresses the body as a whole instead of focusing in one area. It integrates the core and the dynamic muscles that are used to perform an activity. This helps athletes tap into their deeper layers of muscles and really maximize their performance."

When a trainer looks at an athlete – even top-tier athletes – they often find that strength can be lacking in the deep core muscles, despite being strong in the dynamic muscle areas such as biceps, triceps etc. "I find that athletes, more than any other type of person, have muscular imbalances. They are doing the same rigorous activity over and over again which leads to some muscles getting stronger while others weaken," says Chabowski. "Pilates, as a total body-conditioning tool, is great for correcting these imbalances. It brings everything together in the deep muscle layer, giving the body more stability so the outer or skeletal muscles can function better."

Chabowski also lauds the versatility of the Pilates method because the same exercises can be used for different outcomes depending on the sport and the athlete.

"I use the techniques with the mind-set of intent. What exactly am I trying to accomplish here? You can do a Pilates exercise – the hundred, for example – but what is your intent for that client? That's what your outcome is based on. For different clients you are going to have different outcomes even if it is the same exercise."

For the athletes he trains, Chabowski creates a tailored program designed to meet the best intention for each individual athlete. In that instance Pilates is the delivery method and the program he designs within the method's parameters will provide the desired outcome. The first component in creating that program is evaluating the athlete.

Assessing the Athlete

When clients come to Chabowski, the first thing he does is give them a very thorough assessment, looking at flexibility, muscle firing, core integration, and muscular imbalances, and more. He then discusses the results with the athlete in the context of the client's specific goals.

"Again it's all about the intent of what you are trying to accomplish. I can be looking at two shoulder imbalances, one on a cyclist and one on a boxer. Even though they may have a similar ailment, I'll have to address each very differently based on each athlete's sport and what their goals are.



Examining the Sport

The second component is to look at that athlete's particular sport in order to determine proper body mechanics, how the sport is structured in relation to that person's particular body movement, where it could cause injury, and possible trigger points that could lead to a potential injury.

"You assess the athlete, you discuss their goals, and then assess the sport. From that you can begin to design the program," says Chabowski.

Designing the Program

Stability

In most of his programs, Chabowski first and foremost concentrates on core stability.

"A stable body's the center of all efficient movement," says Chabowski. "Think of building a house, then think of the athlete as the house and a stable core as the foundation. With a weak core you going to end up with a beautiful looking house but it's going to be shaky. It's not going to have the substance it needs, and in the end you won't get the results you want."

Stability is also absolutely critical for athletes, to maximize power transfer within each movement. For example, Chabowski says, take a high-end racing bike. On a stable bike the power that is transferred from the pedal into the wheel, and then from the wheel onto the road, is very direct and very strong. It's done with maximum force without any loss of power because there is no wasted movement. It's the same with the body; if it's stable the power transfer for athletes will be much more efficient.

Strength and Balance

Next up in the program is increasing strength: "This is where the versatility of Pilates really shows its value as a training tool. When I work with athletes on strength or increasing power I might use the same Pilates

exercise as I did when we worked on stability. However, there's a different emphasis, and the exercise may be modified for the best results within this emphasis." Chabowski also makes sure to include various balance exercises as a complement to the strength and stability components of his programs.

Injury prevention

Based on the nature of the sport and the degree of muscular imbalances (a primary cause of injury) an athlete might have, Chabowski adds exercises to diminish those imbalances. In fact, because Pilates stresses flexibility and an even musculature, it's becoming a critical injury prevention tool for many teams in the NBA, NFL, MLB and NHL, as it helps an athlete stay on the field and out of the trainer's room.

Working with Ward

To illustrate how his Pilates and stability program worked for a particular athlete, Chabowski references his experience working with boxer Andre Ward before the 2004 Olympics.

"His trainer actually came in and took Pilates for himself first. He saw the benefits of core strength and stability and brought Andre in. He's a tremendous physical specimen with an already successful strength and power development program in place. My piece of the puzzle was working with Ward on core integration and stability," says Chabowski.

As an elite boxer Ward had good core stability but wanted more – that little extra edge that would allow him to be the best he could be. "By just having a tiny bit more stability you can generate more power in a punch using the same amount of strength. He just needed to increase his core stability by a little to maximize that performance."

Chabowski had Ward go back to the basics: "I basically had him pretend that that he didn't know anything about moving his body the right way. He was very patient in trying to re-learn how to get "into" his body in order to get even more out of it." The goal of the program was for Ward to attain muscular co-contraction of the pelvic floor, the transverses and multifidi, by integrating their movements as a single unit, thus providing Ward with optimal stability.

Incorporating work on the Reformer, Trapeze Table and mat, Chabowski had Ward start by doing small movements using basic Pilates exercises like bridging and pulling the navel down to the spine. The next step was working on exercises that focused on taking that "first engagement" of the core and transferring it out through the rest of the body.

The results speak for themselves. Ward won the gold medal in the light heavyweight division at the 2004 Olympics and is currently undefeated as a professional.

"Pilates flat out works," says Chabowski, "and not just for top-level athletes. Everyone from teens to grandparents will benefit from that type of foundational work, whether the goal is increasing strength and flexibility, alleviating back pain, or any of the other numerous health advantages Pilates offers."

Ken Endelman is the CEO and Founder of Balanced Body Inc.

Want to learn more about how to incorporate Pilates into your training regimen? Visit: www.pilates.com