

# Simple, Compact, Effective: The Pilates Chair

BY DANIEL WILSON

Pilates continues to grow exponentially as a form of exercise. The latest Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association (SGMA) report indicates that the number of North Americans who participate in Pilates has grown from 1.7 million in 2000 to 10.3 million people in 2005 – a tremendous increase of over 500 percent.

The exercise is also flourishing in areas outside of general fitness. Its principles of core stabilization has made it a popular staple for physical therapy and rehabilitation. By extension it has now caught on with fitness trainers and strength coaches looking for ways to improve their athletes' performance and keep them injury free.

In the past, most fitness trainers implemented a Pilates mat or Reformer regimen as an adjunct to their conditioning program. More recently, a new and compact piece of equipment is catching on with many fitness trainers and coaches – the Pilates Chair.

## A challenging strength workout, yet great for injury prevention

The traditional Pilates Chair is considered to be the most challenging piece of Pilates equipment in terms of increasing strength in the legs and shoulders while still building core stability. Users sit, lie, or stand, and push the footbar with their hands or feet. Springs attached from the footbar to the chair add varying degrees of resistance. Exercises can focus on core strength, leg strength, shoulder girdle stability, mobility and strength, plus functional movements such as standing, climbing, pushing and lifting.



The traditional Pilates Chair – this one's called a Combo Chair – increases an athlete's strength while reducing the chance of injury.

Whether training an outfielder to maximize arm strength without straining the rest of his body, or working with a forward who needs to cut up and down the soccer field, many trainers feel that the Pilates Chair can be very effective. As an example, most of the arm power an outfielder generates

comes not just from isolated arm strength, but from a combination of the arm, torso, and legs. Exercises on the Pilates Chair address the combination of core and arm strength, to improve functional strength and functional movement.

Mark Mayer is the head athletic trainer for the University of Nebraska Cornhusker football team. Mayer first became familiar with Pilates while working as an athletic trainer with the NFL's Oakland Raiders. "With the Raiders we had a couple of Reformers that we used with some of our players as part of their off-season conditioning," says Mayer. "I liked the effectiveness of the exercise and equipment. It made our guys more flexible and agile. Last year I came across an article on the Pilates Chair. Looking at it in the magazine I started visualize all the things I could do. It seems to be an optimum piece of equipment for treating injuries like athletic pubalgia, for any lower pelvic floor strengthening needs, or for upper body strengthening for those coming off shoulder surgeries. So we bought one and it did exactly what I thought it would."

When Mayer was hired by Nebraska this summer he brought a Chair with him. "When I first brought it in, some of the players were a little skeptical – many had never done Pilates or core strengthening exercises before," he says. Mayer explained that it would help them learn to efficiently transmit energy through their core and out through their extremities, helping them to stabilize different forces applied in a game or at practice.

"Whether it is a lateral, front or rotational movement, I told them to look at core strength as not just one dimensional, but from a 360-degree standpoint," says Mayer. "Exercises on the Chair helped them understand that concept and see the benefits of strengthening their core muscles – especially those with chronic pelvic and spinal stabilization imbalances or weaknesses."

## Perfect for facilities with limited space

Athletic trainers like Mayer also praise the Pilates Chair for its space-saving capabilities. On average, Pilates Chairs stand just over two feet tall with a physical footprint of approximately five square feet. This is key for athletic trainers with limited room. In a 20 x 20 facility, 10 chairs can fit with room to spare. Many chairs are also equipped with wheels for easy portability and storage. It is a great alternative for athletic trainers who want to utilize equipment-based Pilates but may not have the room for larger pieces of Pilates equipment like Reformers or Trapeze Tables. "For its compact size, it is extremely effective. And it's so versatile – we can implement Pilates exercises or create our own pelvic/spinal stabilization exercises and functional movement protocols," says Mayer.

## The traditional Chair gets a makeover

As effective as the traditional Pilates Chair has been, some limitations prevent it from providing a true full-body Pilates workout possible with other Pilates equipment. Nora St. John, co-owner of Turning Point Pilates Studios in Walnut Creek, Calif., has

worked with several athletes using the Chair. She also serves as the Program Director of Balanced Body University, the educational and training arm of the Pilates equipment manufacturer Balanced Body. "The traditional Pilates Chair is one component of the complete Pilates system, but there are limitations in terms of providing a complete workout," says St. John. "On the traditional Pilates Chair you can push the pedal with the arms or the legs, but you can't do much pulling. And there aren't as many abdominal and hip mobility exercises available, which are key to fine tuning an athlete's musculature."



Newer Pilates Chairs – like this EXO Chair – now have attachments for resistance bands, allowing users to get a complete Pilates workout within a small footprint.

The evolution of the traditional Pilates Chair took a huge leap this year when some manufacturers redesigned the Chair to give it capabilities previously possible only with larger pieces of equipment. Balanced Body introduced its version, the EXO Chair, last fall. St. John, who was part of the EXO Chair's development team, explains the difference between the EXO and traditional Chairs:

"Unlike the traditional Pilates Chair, this new chair has attachments for resistance bands, letting users create a workout that touches every muscle group from every angle. Now you can do many of the exercises on the EXO that you could do on a Reformer or Cadillac," says St. John. "This includes Pilates exercises like roll downs, feet in straps, short box abdominals, and rowing, none of which are possible on a traditional chair. Now you get not only a strength-building apparatus, but a true Pilates regimen that will improve balance, flexibility, and agility – all paramount to improving athletic performance and decreasing injury. As an athletic training tool, the Pilates Chair has really developed into a complete package."

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