

SPORTS

GOLF JOURNAL by John Paul Newport

Pilates for Putters

The fitness regimen is catching on with pro golfers; taking on the posture problem

I FIRST HEARD about Pilates 15 years ago from my then-girlfriend, who danced professionally in New York City. In the ballet world, it seems, everyone does Pilates. The technique focuses on building strength in the core abdominal and lower-back muscles, so that all movement will initiate from that area. The result is better balance, posture, flexibility and stamina.

My dancer friend assured me that Pilates would be great for golf, too, but I took a pass. For one thing, there weren't many places for civilians to pursue Pilates back then. But lately Pilates has become all the rage, and two years ago, when my gym began offering work-

shops, I took a deep breath and signed up. Not only was I the only male in the class, but all the women around me seemed to have had prior careers as circus contortionists. When the instructor directed us to point our toes at the wall behind us, I took her metaphorically but the others did not. Nevertheless, I persevered and have continued to do Pilates frequently, because it really has helped my golf.

Ever so slightly, Pilates seems to be catching on among professional golfers. Rich Beem, known more for his Buds than his abs, did a lot of Pilates leading up to his win at the 2002 PGA Championship. Rocco Mediate does Pilates to preserve his back, and Camilo Villegas, the studly young Colombian esteemed by PGA Tour groupies for his tight shirts



It's All in the Core: Pilates practitioner Camilo Villegas.

and britches, is also a known Pilatean. One limitation for Tour pros is that in its purest form, Pilates ideally makes use of large, spring-loaded studio machines that don't travel easily.

But according to Sean Cochran, Phil Mickelson's personal trainer, the Pilates technique (initiating movement from the core) is increasingly being incorporated into the mat and weight-lifting exercise regimens used by elite players—even by Mr. Mickelson. (Mr. Cochran assured me his client is working hard to return to the Tour in 2007 in "top golf shape.")

Sarah Christensen, an instructor in Fairhaven, Md., has developed a curriculum, called Hole in One Pilates, specifically applying Pilates principles to the biomechanics of the golf swing. Ms. Christensen, who introduced the famed and manly golf instructor Butch Harmon to Pilates, says most of her male clients needed work on rotation and posture and gave me a demonstration of how important they are to the golf swing. She had me sit while holding a club across my chest and then rotate in both directions. When I sat as tall as possible, I could turn about 10 degrees further than when I sat with a

slight slump. "Pilates will help develop the muscles that can keep your spine angle constant while turning around it," she says. "That's big."

The other major limitation for most of the men she sees — her clients in addition to Mr. Harmon include high-powered executive types, a well-known sports agent and a member of Congress — is lack of rotation.

But I'm not holding my breath for a mass conversion to Pilates by recreational players. For one thing, instruction tends to be expensive. The movements are subtle and, at least initially, need to be taught one-on-one or in very small groups. For another thing, it requires a long-term time commitment, and most of us just plain don't want to exercise that much.

I was struck, though, when I talked to several prominent golf-fitness experts about Pilates, by how enthusiastic they were about the central benefits of Pilates — and how easily they think everyday players could get major benefits in as little as 10 minutes a day. The only thing required is a change in the old-fashioned macho gym mentality.

Take the kind of stamina Pilates develops. "Bench-pressing 100 pounds 10 times will develop strength, but not the type that has any correspondence whatsoever

to how far you hit a golf ball," says Randy Myers, who has worked with scores of PGA and LPGA players and is now director of fitness at the Sea Island Resort in Georgia. On the other hand, bench-pressing 20 pounds 50 times (the same amount of total weight) will develop the type of muscular stamina that helps late in a round.

Dave Phillips, the co-founder of the Titleist Performance Institute in Oceanside, Calif., notes that the best golfers have strong, stable lower bodies and flexible, mobile upper bodies. Their swings progress from the lower body to the trunk, the shoulders and lastly the arms. To duplicate that sequence, amateurs usually need the most work on their glutemous muscles and their cores. Lacking strength and flexibility in those areas, they compensate by using their arms, which is a primary cause of slicing.

"People struggle really hard at golf and don't get better because they don't address the physical side," Mr. Phillips said. "Their bodies just can't do what a good swing requires them to do."

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Among the most popular courses are those that play host to Hawaii's annual Aloha Season events, a series of televised professional golf tournaments held at top venues throughout the state from mid-November through mid-January.

The Aloha Season begins on Kauai during Thanksgiving week, with the PGA Grand Slam of Golf. Staged at Poipu Bay Golf Course (adjacent to the beachfront Grand Hyatt Kauai Resort & Spa), this exciting event brings together the winners of the PGA TOUR's four annual majors to the Garden Isle for a high-stakes, mano-a-mano, \$1.25 million match-up.

This year, on Nov. 21-22, Tiger Woods (winner of the British Open and PGA Championship) will defend his 2005 win. Fellow competitors are Geoff Ogilvy (U.S. Open), Mike Weir (who took the slot abandoned by Phil Mickelson, who had earned it with his Masters' win) and Jim Furyk (who qualified on points rather than a major victory because Woods won two majors).

Come January, the PGA TOUR opens its 2007 season on Maui, with the Mercedes-Benz Championship at Kapalua (Jan. 1-7). Contested over the resort's sweeping Plantation Course, this elite field consists only of tournament

winners from the previous PGA TOUR season. Stuart Appleby won this esteemed event for the third time in a row in 2006, becoming the first player to win the same PGA TOUR event three times running since Gene Littler in the 1950s.

The Aloha Season continues on Oahu the very next week, with David Toms defending the Sony Open (Jan. 8-14) at Waialae Country Club's oceanfront location near Waikiki. Galleries turn out in big numbers to view this first, full-field event of the PGA TOUR season, and also to watch rising LPGA star Michelle Wie play in the Sony Open. 2007 will mark the fourth year in a row that she has participated.

The Champions Tour also kicks off its season in Hawaii with three consecutive events: the Wendy's Champions Skins Game (Jan. 13-14) at Wailea Resort on Maui, the MasterCard Championship (Jan. 15-21) at Hualalai Resort on the Big Island, and the Turtle Bay Championship (Jan. 22-28) at Turtle Bay on the North Shore of Oahu.

Wailea's Gold Course is where the Wendy's Champions Skins Game is contested.



The spectacular 3rd hole at the Mauna Kea Golf Course

The Shores at Waikoloa or the newer Waikoloa Colony Villas, both through ResortQuest. In either case, these two- or three-bedroom villas become home away from home, with kitchen and laundry facilities and easy access to nearby restaurants, shops and attractions.

Another delightful destination along the Kohala Coast is Mauna Lani Resort, where two courses are built right into the black and brown lava beds, with several holes playing next to the splashing Pacific. Both the Mauna Lani Bay Hotel and the Fairmont Mauna Lani offer excellent accommodations, fine dining and heavenly spas.

The granddaddy of all golf resorts in Hawaii is Mauna Kea Resort, which is also located along the enchanted Kohala Coast. At Mauna Kea, two luxury hotels are flanked by two stunning golf courses and fronted by long stretches of white

sand beach. Mauna Kea Golf Course is one of the "must-play" courses in Hawaii, a Robert Trent Jones Sr. classic design that features the par-three third hole over a Pacific inlet that ranks among the most beautiful golf holes in the world.

The Champions Tour concludes the Aloha Season swing on Oahu's North Shore at the Turtle Bay Championship (Jan. 22-28), where last year Loren Roberts won for the second straight week, holing a nine-foot eagle putt on the final hole for an even-par 72 and a two-stroke victory over former Hawaii resident Scott Simpson.

From the verdant green mountains of Kauai to the Big Island's otherworldly lava fields, from Maui's well-groomed courses overlooking the Pacific to the bevy of course choices on Oahu not far from Honolulu and Waikiki, Hawaii presents the opportunity to play year-round golf on some of the most memorable courses in the world... all there for the asking.

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In 2006, Ray Floyd and Dana Quigley defeated the popular team of Jack Nicklaus and Tom Watson on this scenic course overlooking the Pacific. The event will retain the two-man team format in 2007, with Floyd and Quigley returning to defend their crown.

Wailea Resort has a total of 36 holes of golf. In addition to the tournament Gold Course are the Emerald and the Blue courses. While perhaps a little more open and high-handicap friendly than the Gold, both the Emerald and Blue courses boast stellar views and five-star grooming.

Loren Roberts was the big winner in 2006 when the Champions Tour showed up on the Kohala Coast of the Big Island to contest the MasterCard Championship at Hualalai Resort. Played over a remarkable Jack Nicklaus-designed course that meanders through vast fields of black lava before emerging for its finishing holes at the blue Pacific, Roberts carded a course record 61 on the final day to overcome a 3-shot lead held by Don Pooley at the start of the day.

The professionals enjoy their time on the Big Island so much that they often bring along their wives and families to enjoy the sunshine, spas, water sports and aloha spirit.

At Waikoloa Resort, just a few miles up the coast from Hualalai, travelers not only enjoy two great Big Island golf courses—the Kings' and Beach courses—but are able to book fully-furnished luxury villas at either

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