



# Conditioning for Athletes

by Claire Hitchfield

Tips to fire up your performance

*“The will to win means nothing if you haven't the will to prepare.”*  
- Juma Ikangaa, 1989 NYC Marathon winner.

Complex, intricate, an amazing multi-*multi*-tasking organism, your body never stops serving you. Living is a lot of work for the body!

Serious athlete or weekend warrior, driving your body on while out of balance, poorly tuned, running on inferior fuel and constantly ignored, means even daily tasks may reinforce existing unsatisfactory alignment or habitually poor movement patterns, building stress and tension on many levels.

To get the most enjoyment out of your chosen sport your supplementary training plan is key. Remaining injury-free and performing to your best depends on several factors:

- ☀ **Base Movement Patterns**
- ☀ **Core Activation**
- ☀ **Stability with Adaptable Orientation**
- ☀ **Functional Strength and Flexibility**
- ☀ **Dynamic Balance**
- ☀ **Fitness and Endurance**

*Let's look at these ...*

### **Identify and Assess your Base Movement Patterns**

Honestly begin to observe how you're moving in your everyday life. Where are you restricted? What's your posture like? Any weak or atrophied muscles? Old injuries interrupting normal range of motion? All of these patterns go with you when you're cycling, running, surfing, playing golf, tennis, rugby .. whatever your sport. Depending on the extent and specific movements affected this can merely contribute to you experiencing more muscular tightness or soreness, or it could eventually lead to you giving up the sport altogether.



*Find a movement specialist* who will work with you to let go of areas where you unconsciously hold tension, to reconnect with healthy, natural, aligned movement patterns. Not only will your sport

benefit, so will your energy levels, stress levels, and everyday life! You'll know when you're moving in the right direction - your everyday base posture feels comfortable, open, natural and relaxed.

### **Improve your Core Activation**

Strong core muscles make all movement more efficient. Core muscles include abdominals, back, pelvic floor and hips. Many core muscles can't be seen because they're buried underneath other muscles. The transverse abdominis, for example, is hiding underneath your rectus abdominis (six-pack) and hugs the whole area below the belly-button. While the rectus abdominis is sitting on top looking good (oh well.), the transverse abdominis is working hard, keeping your posture upright and protecting many of your internal organs. The erector spinae muscles can't be seen either, they're behind you, supporting your back. The pelvic floor muscles (yes, men have pelvic floor muscles too) also assist with stabilising your spine.



All these muscles, and more, work together to keep your trunk stable while your limbs are active. Strong core muscles keep your back healthy. They hold your body upright, improve your balance and enable you to really put that *power* into your arm and leg movements. If core muscles are weak, your body doesn't work as effectively, and other muscles have to compensate. Injuries such as a pulled shoulder, a twisted knee, or your classic bad back could result. Strong core activation enables more youthful movement patterns. Power moves in active sports are greatly improved and your whole body functions more effectively. Add *two or three Pilates sessions to your weekly training regime*, you will quickly notice the *improvements!*

## Stability with Adaptable Orientation

So now you're stabilising with your core activation, how do you typically orient yourself to the world?

Described as 'spatial orientation', there are two aspects necessary for healthy, adaptable orientation:

1. You feel rooted because gravity's downward pull gives you the experience of your body's weight.
2. Your relationship to what is outside yourself, your spatial environment is the major contributor to your upright stance.

Your sense of space allows you to have goals and destinations outside yourself. Your weight makes your body rebound from the earth so that movement can continue. Your movement is the result of the application of both weight and space (the Yin and Yang of human movement).

Often one or other of these dominates. Ideal movement occurs when you transition smoothly. Your movement is most dynamic, efficient, and fluid when there is optimal distance between the feet and the crown of the head before you move. Developing your awareness of excessive or



recurring tension in each postural zone of your body (in broad terms: the feet-legs, the pelvic-sacral area, the shoulder-arm area) you are able to release these, utilise your new-found core, and develop new patterns of open stability and open orientation.

Develop your *inner focus*, one of the principles of Pilates to begin to *develop this awareness, now*. If you find yourself struggling, the *movement specialist* may help.

## Functional Strength and Flexibility

Strength and flexibility are not mutually exclusive. Generally you will find that you tend more towards one or the other. Develop your weaker area to improve symmetry and balance, and to reduce injury downtime. Elite athletes, such as Tiger Woods incorporate Pilates flexibility and strengthening exercises. As your body becomes familiar with the Pilates sequences, you can fluidly connect each exercise with the previous one to increase your endurance. Example:

1. Cyclists hip flexors and quadriceps need to be stretched to avoid lower back pain; similarly runners.
2. Runners also benefit from strengthening, stabilising, and stretching the muscles around the knees, ankles, hips, and hamstrings to achieve balanced muscular development and to remain as injury-free as possible.

*“What we hope ever to do with ease, we must learn first to do with diligence.”*

*- Samuel Johnson.*

## Dynamic Balance

Think of a powerful tennis player sprinting to the other end of the court and managing to execute a phenomenal return while leaning and reaching to the side. Excellent balance while in motion can be called *dynamic balance*. With the improved adaptability of your spatial orientation stacked onto efficient recruitment of your core, controlled strength exercises can now be added in to the mix. To achieve this dynamic balance develop strength along the length of the whole muscle. Example:

1. Golfers need balance and power to execute a steady swing.
2. Skiers need dynamic balance to remain upright.
3. Tennis players especially need dynamic, powerful balance to maintain a centre of gravity when changing direction.

Yoga and Pilates done in a form that introduces curvilinear movement, along with Tai Chi, and Gyrokinesis are some options to develop this skill. Adaptable coordination is as important to your fitness as strength and flexibility.

## Fitness and Endurance

Consider your sport and the movement patterns required. Supplementary exercise should:

- correct imbalances developed, improve base movement patterns
- accentuate the perceptual orientation you need to develop
- include strength-building and stretching
- vary repetitive, linear movements with activities that include rotation
- offer a path to increase exertion as your ability to sustain open posture grows
- increase your body awareness while moving
- develop overall endurance
- be enjoyable!

## Summing Up

Incorporate gravity, opposition, three-dimensional movement, expansion and contraction and most importantly breath, into your regime and enjoy the new version of the complex, intricate, amazing multi-*multi*-tasking organism, and improved athlete you are!

Responsive, balanced, poised, fluid, efficient and easy movement is the ultimate goal for your athlete's body. From this state your body easily and efficiently completes the myriad feats you ask, and remains injury-free and comfortable.

*Claire Hitchfield is a Pilates and yoga teacher at Now Breathe. Claire has had a torrid affair with exercise as an adult, extensively exploring mid-distance running, all forms of gym classes / weight-training, and boxing. Eventually Claire qualified as a Personal Trainer in 1996. Yoga was added into the equation and gradually took over as injuries and muscular imbalances became more problematic. Finally indoor netball and touch rugby dealt her knees a near-death experience. Yoga took over, followed more recently by Pilates. Imbalances, postural quirks, and stress levels sorted! Claire continues to attend workshops, training courses and independent studies to stay current with sports medicine developments, somatic therapies, and stress management techniques. Claire has a Diploma of Hypnosis incorporating NLP into classes.*

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