

Pilates for Runners

By Emily Dean, MS, PT

If you're reading this article, it's likely that you believe running is the ideal form of exercise. It's cardiovascular, it doesn't require lots of gear, it's portable, it's free, it's quick, it's easy, and it's fun! While these things are all true, it's important to remember that running alone, without any supplemental stretching and strengthening exercise, may set you up for muscle imbalances leading to injury further down the road. Additionally, adding complementary exercises to your running program can help improve your endurance and your pace.

So what can you do to help prevent possible imbalances and improve your running performance? Pilates based exercises are a great option. Pilates is a system of exercise that focuses on core strength, muscle balance, posture, flexibility, and breath control. Here are a few specific examples of how Pilates can help your running:

- 1.) **Flexibility:** Tight muscles commonly associated with the demands of running include hamstrings, hip flexors, and calves. Pilates exercises are designed to strengthen muscles as they lengthen. Various leg exercises take the muscles through their full range of motion and challenge them with both the concentric (shortening) and eccentric (lengthening) contractions that are necessary for efficient running.
- 2.) **Strength:** Running occurs primarily in one plane. When evaluated clinically, runners are often weaker when challenged with multiplanar movements. Pilates exercises strengthen in all planes of motion, thus working muscles that help stabilize the spine and pelvis while running. Focus on core strength also helps to dissipate the compressive loading of the spine that occurs with each step.
- 3.) **Endurance:** Pilates exercises focus on posture and breath control. Strengthening postural muscles can help prevent the flexed spine and rounded shoulders that increase with fatigue during longer runs. Improved upright posture in combination with deep diaphragmatic breathing helps to oxygenate the lungs more efficiently, leading to increased endurance.

Pilates exercises can be performed both on a mat and on various larger pieces of equipment found in Pilates studios and physical therapy clinics. The equipment is designed to enhance your workout with the addition of pulleys and springs for added resistance. Mat exercises can be performed with classes, with video instruction, or independently after working with a trainer or therapist to develop a program suitable for your needs. To assure you perform your exercises safely, you should consult a certified Pilates trainer or physical therapist before embarking on any Pilates exercise program. Classes at gyms may be larger than those in Pilates studios, making it difficult for instructors to watch all participants and make appropriate modifications.

Pilates exercises are a fun and effective way to augment your running program. Hundreds of exercises assure that you won't get bored and will continue to be challenged for a lifetime if you stick to it!

Emily Dean is a marathoner, physical therapist, and certified Pilates trainer who works at Jackson County Physical Therapy in Ashland. If you have any questions about Pilates or Pilates practitioners in the area, she would be happy to talk with you and can be reached at 482-6360.

