

Pilates for Extreme Athletes

Hear from Peak Pilates® Master Instructor Jamie Isaac on how Pilates changed his favorite sport and how he trains other extreme and action sports athletes.

15 years ago, I decided to move to Fuerteventura, a small volcanic Island off the coast of Africa. The goal was to surf as much as humanly possible while make a living coaching surfing, and training people in between! Living in the “Hawaii of the Atlantic” meant new spots, sharp reefs and bigger surf. The stakes were higher, which meant the need to be more prepared, more focused and more consistent in my movement.

When I discovered Pilates, my surfing life changed completely. I wiped out far less, so I could take off more confidently on bigger waves. I felt more focused, prepared and in control to adapt to the ever changing environment of the wave, the wind and the conditions. I paddled stronger and found an increased power in my turns, with a refined sense of rhythm and timing. And I was having a lot more fun too!

I began to train friends and fellow surfers, all of them looking for an edge to their performance or recovery from injury. Pilates training gave them the power to catch loads more waves, and in exchange, they let me have a few waves. Otherwise, I’ll just add extra reps and wear them down in order to snag a few extra waves for myself.

Getting a Real Job in Action Sports

Today, surfing – like other action sports – is a legitimate career choice. It will be introduced as an Olympic sport at Tokyo in 2020, much like its close relative snowboarding. Board riders from all walks of life are hunting down the winning edge over the competition alongside those folks, like me, whose goals are to participate in our sport for as long as our bodies will allow. They are looking for the best way to stay injury-free, move efficiently and dynamically, and recover quickly. Pilates can be just that thing!

So if you have an interest in taking Pilates to the extreme, or are someone who enjoys having these slightly unhinged and thrill hungry people hanging around your studio, then maybe starting an Extreme Pilates class could be a good idea.

Is it possible to take Pilates to the extreme, get creative and still maintain our classical integrity? In terms of getting creative within Pilates, I still believe strongly that the classical method is an incredible system and doesn't need changing. However, when we begin to study technical, multifaceted and rapidly evolving sports, there are areas where, in my opinion, traditional Pilates may not quite reach. Here, we have an opportunity to get creative and provide our students with the same great workout, but with an added relevance to their extreme pursuits.

Joe Pilates was a visionary and years ahead of his time, but there was no way that he could ever have envisioned the modern athleticism of action sports, where surfers complete rotational aerials, kite surfers charge huge hollow waves, or snowboarders drop out of helicopters into avalanche zones. Although, knowing the tough and athletic character he was, it's easy to imagine him strapped to a snowboard, carving up some fresh powder in his infamous tight white gym shorts. Sorry for the digression, but what I'm highlighting is that the demands of these sports are unique, and that's why I

believe that they benefit from a unique approach.

Flow Like Joe

With extreme athletes, I base my training around Romana's 4 Ss; stretch, strength, stability and stamina. Every single one of these elements can and should be seen in riding a wave or carving down a mountain at an elite level. I also like to add the elements of rhythm and timing to these 4Ss, as it is within these that fluidity is found.

Now don't panic if your idea of getting extreme is adding marsh mallows to your cocoa. You do not have to participate in these kinds of action sports to be able to train your athletes. The key is understanding what their sports demand of them and discovering the most prominent movement patterns.

Much like a Pilates workout, we begin to see shapes and patterns repeat themselves; the same torso rotations, leg movements and head placements. Sometimes, the athlete will be working with the force, and other times they will be working against it, with complex rhythms and timings throughout assisting the transition between the relationships to force.

Consider skiing or snowboarding and the different sensations and relationships to force that you would experience floating on top of soft powdered snow, as opposed to forcing an edge into a hard icy surface. Or think about surfing, dropping with gravity down the face of a wave. Strength and power will only get you so far. Without rhythm and timing, the end result will always look forced and awkward. And in the aesthetically judged domain of many action sports, awkward doesn't bring home medals.

Playing with the Rhythm

In a traditional classical workout, the rhythm and dynamic of each exercise is generally stated. But when it comes to

extreme athletes, here is where I like to let their sport dictate the rhythm. Playing with the rhythm and dynamic can relate the movement more directly to the athlete's goals. For example, when performing Knee Stretches on the reformer, the accent is on the 'in' movement. However, slowing the 'in' movement down and changing the accent to the 'out' may change the patterning to a push type jump action, rather than a controlled landing type expression.

Playing with rhythm can be applied to many exercises. For instance, we can alter the expression in a variety of ways with Squats in the standing arm springs series.

The key is to decide what element of the sport you are focusing on and how best to approach it. Where some of these sports can benefit from a variety of dynamics for the same exercise, I believe it's best to limit the focus of the exercise on a specific area, rather than to overcook it trying to tick all the boxes in one go.

Getting Creative

Of course, reaching these action athletes requires some creativity. In my experience, it's a mistake to try and do too much in one session. Every individual will come with a spectrum of areas and goals they'll be looking to work on, but the secret is not covering it all in one class. Instead, stick to one or two areas of focus. Develop these either with your extreme exercises peppered throughout the session or fine tune them within their individual needs.

Using towers and chairs is awesome for this, because there's a little more freedom with exercise order. However, that's not to say that a traditional reformer repertoire doesn't have plenty of space to breathe too.

You're a Peak Pilates® teacher, so you know you've got the skills to rock their workout. All we need now is to combine

these movements patterns with Peak instruction. Choose one focus; maybe it's controlling the head and arms during turns, or generating power in rotation, or transferring impact on landings. Now dig into our tool box and match exercises to the movement, play with the rhythm and see how that relates to what we've seen online. If we feel the movement needs something more, then that's where the creativity can start to flow.

Simply ask yourself what you are trying to achieve and go find the tool to make it happen. Can we change the direction of the load or the shape in space to relate to the sporting situation better? Can we make the choreography or movement pattern mirror the action more? As long as it's safe and performed with an attention to Pilates details then why not explore and have some fun?

Rules to Ride By

To help you integrate our creative adventures into our workouts, I like to stride into class with these rules in mind:

1. *If there's a Pilates exercise that does it, then use it!* There are over 500 original exercises, so chances are there's a good fit for your athlete's needs. For me as a teacher, this takes the pressure off. Joe's got my back, and although I do enjoy getting a little inventive at times, the majority of any session with me will consist of pretty standard Pilates stuff (a.k.a. exercises).
2. *It's a workout not entertainment!* Similarly to number one, your goal is to get them closer to their goals. So don't think that they'll get bored if you don't keep changing it up or coming up with new and novel exercises. Trust in the system and let the method work its magic. Rest assured knowing that the method really does work and even without a little creativity here and

there, Pilates will still make a huge difference.

3. *Keep your Pilates eye!* Many of your extreme clients are going to want to feel that they've worked out. But don't forget, they came to you for better performance. If they wanted to mindlessly muscle through a list of exercises without thought to form, precision or control, then they may have well just signed up for a cheap gym membership. They came to you for your detailed and intuitive Pilates eye. Enforce good form. As I mentioned, many of these sports are judged aesthetically, so in most cases, form and function are going to be one and the same. Pilates for the win, every time!
4. *Make firm foundations:* Even strong, powerful athletes need basics. When presented with a fit, energetic student, who throws themselves down a mountain just for fun, our initial reaction can easily be to skip the basics and head straight to the Cadillac for inverted exercises. Take a pause and remember their goals. Maybe those winning advantages can be found in something as subtle as focusing on breath, or in discovering how to disassociate leg movement from pelvic stability. You'd be surprised how many extreme athletes initially struggle to discover their powerhouse!
5. *Be balanced:* Almost every board rider will either ride with their left foot forward (regular) or their right foot forward (goofy). So be aware of the imbalances that this causes that will be reflected throughout their workout. I often find that our role as Pilates teachers isn't to necessarily make them stronger for their sport, but instead to unravel their imbalance from the damage that their sport has done.

As action sports grow in popularity, more athletes are already adding Pilates to their training regime to gain a winning edge. So when the next thrill-seeking, salt-crusted surfer strolls through your doors, ask them to kick off their sandals, remember our 'rules to ride by,' and prepare to take

their Pilates to the extreme!

What training tips do you have for action sports or high-performance athletes? Share them in the comments below or on the official [Peak Pilates®](#) Facebook page!

This article was contributed by Jamie Isaac, Peak Pilates Master Instructor and founder of Azulfit & Fluid Art Pilates Studio in Vista, California. You can read more about his Pilates journey [here](#).