

Improve your flexibility with the pilates-inspired exercises used by champion swimmer

EAMON SULLIVAN

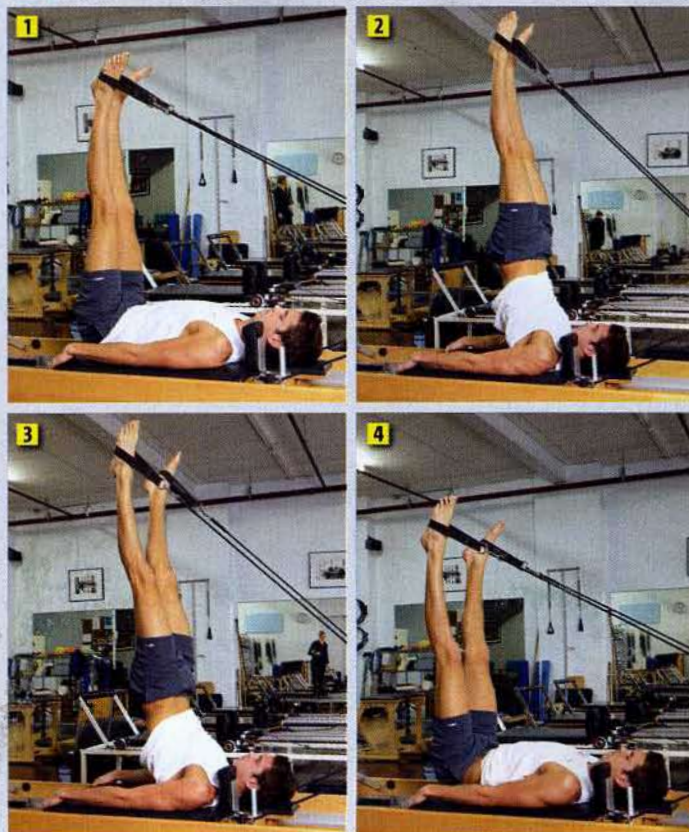
In a sport such as swimming, flexibility is crucial. The slightest change in form or angles in the body can be the difference between winning and losing, so strength through the core and flexibility through the muscles and joints is essential. Just ask Australia's fastest swimmer, Eamon Sullivan. The Olympian and world record holder includes pilates-style exercises as part of his training regime to help him with his preparations.

Flexibility work isn't just for elite athletes, though. These exercises help improve the strength of the often-neglected smaller muscle groups that support the bigger muscle groups,

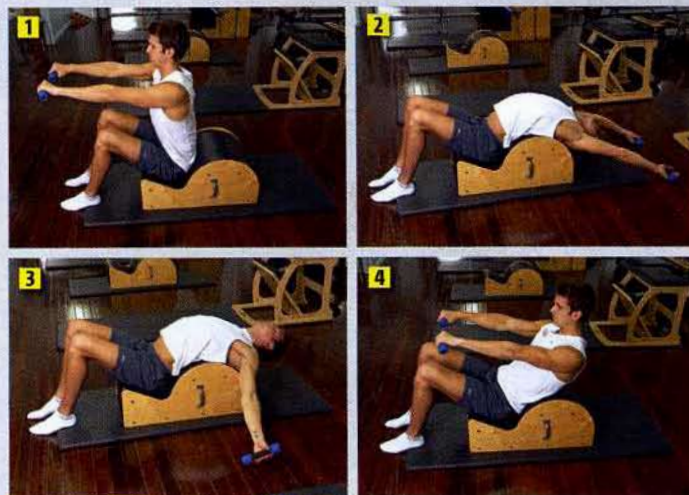


thus improving your overall strength. With the help of Pilates International director Sally Anderson, Eamon shows us some of the exercises he does out of the water to help improve his form in it.

The Work-out



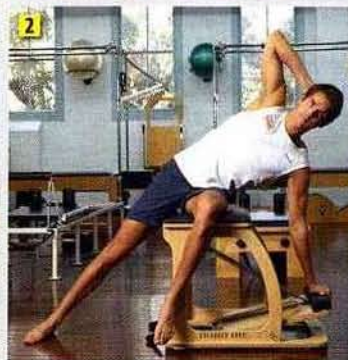
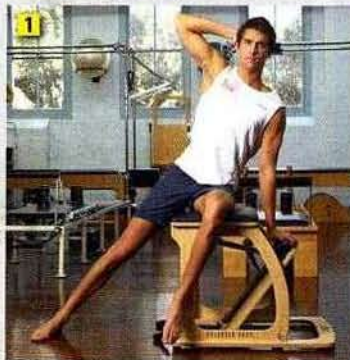
LONG SPINE ON THE REFORMER (1) Lie on your back on the reformer with legs in straps and pointing up to the ceiling, arms by your side and head down. (2) Exhale as you roll up on the shoulders, keeping head and arms in original position. (3) Inhale at the top as you open the legs slightly and hold. (4) With legs still apart, exhale to control the roll back down to the start position. Inhale as you bring legs back together. Abdominals and hamstrings work together to control the pelvis, while the upper body creates a stable base. "The reformer takes away gravity but adds resistance that you control so it's great for beginners and rehab work, like Eamon after his hip surgery," Anderson says.



SPINE CORRECTOR OVERHEAD (1) Sit in a spine corrector with knees bent and torso upright, arms forward. The barrel helps with the spine shape and guides with the extension. The use of weights are optional. (2) Exhale to curl body back over the arc of the barrel and stretch arms out overhead. (3) Bring arms around to the side while inhaling. (4) Exhale to curl back off arc with arms outstretched in front. Return to start position. Abdominals control the movement throughout, and arms follow. "There's a full rotation through the shoulders here, which makes this an important exercise for swimmers like Eamon," Anderson explains.

SPINE CORRECTOR LEG SERIES

(1) Lie with shoulders on the floor and hips on top of the barrel arc, hands holding sides of barrel, and legs extended towards the ceiling. Ankle weights optional. From here there are variations you can do with your legs, but Eamon does the "scissor" (2), where legs are opened and closed in line with the shoulders. Switch between leg positions while they're upright. Great for hip, pelvis, and lower limbs. Variations include openings (open and close legs to the side), helicopters (open legs like in "scissors" then rotate legs through hip joints), little frogs (bend and press legs away over the barrel step), circles (lower legs and circle back around to start) and hip stretch (relax one leg over barrel and step, other leg bent).



PILATES CHAIR SIDE REACH

(1) Sit on a pilates chair side-on, with top leg extended and corresponding hand behind head, the opposite hand is on the pedal. (2) Inhale to lengthen spine as you press pedal into a sideways bend. Keep the spine lengthened and abdominals engaged, while using the lateral torso muscles to create the movement. "This is really good for Eamon - because he trains so hard it helps get the lengthening out around the hip area," Anderson says.



HANGING BACK With feet in the "fluffies" and while holding on to the Cadillac frame (1), exhale as you pull the body up to create a long position (2). From here inhale as you arch your back, keeping legs straight (3). Exhale to curl back and return to start position. Great for upper-body work, integrating the whole body and abdominal control. "We're always trying to find ways to work angles and flexibility through the shoulders, because while we're trying to stay flat in the water, we need to be flexible enough to propel ourselves forward," Sullivan says.

THE HUNDRED (1) Lie flat on the ground with arms and legs outstretched. (2) Use the abdominal muscles to lift chest and legs into the "hundred" position. Hold this position and beat arms up and down for 100 beats: breathe in over five beats, then out over five beats and repeat 10 times for a total of 100. "Holding the position through the abdominals improves strength in this area, while the beats create a challenge to that stability," Anderson says.

Rep Counts

"Repetitions are kept at those that will be undertaken with positive muscle patterning - once fatigue or compensation looks likely (straining in other areas), repetitions are completed," Anderson says. "As a guide, repetitions are commonly between three and 10 reps of any exercise."

Big Doesn't Mean Better

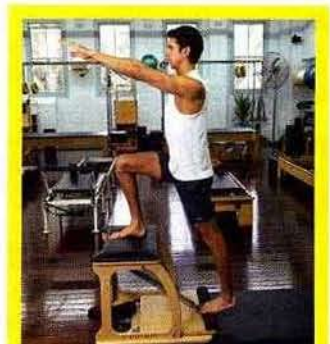
"I was in the gym with a good mate of mine once who's huge and big into his gym," Sullivan recalls. "We were doing push-ups but he was just punching them out, whereas I was doing a fuller range and going right to the bottom. When he tried doing them my way he could only do 10." Lesson here: improving your flexibility helps the smaller muscles strengthen, which means they can support the bigger ones and help to improve your ability to do a greater range of movement. "You're using the smaller and finer muscles this way," Sullivan says.

Looking Good

As well as the physical benefits of pilates-inspired exercises, there's a good-looking element to it as well. "It's just really worthwhile doing these types of exercises, because it's all about keeping your body in good condition," Sullivan says.

Noticing Change

"If I feel a small degree of tightness in my flexibility I notice it in the water, so when you do know something's wrong you go back and try and stretch it out," Sullivan says. "That's why swimmers train so much, so we know our bodies."



Pilates is widely available, but if you want to go where Eamon goes, head to Pilates International in Sydney. Go to www.pilatesint.com for more information.