

Training Camp Updates

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Getting to the core of why NFL players love Pilates

Charlotte Carroll

Aug 7, 2024

120

Dexter Lawrence’s ability to make an entrance on opposing offenses often grants the [New York Giants](#) defensive lineman the final say.

Just go back to when he effectively ended the Giants’ wild-card win over the [Minnesota Vikings](#) by hitting quarterback [Kirk Cousins](#) on New York’s final defensive play of the game. Feeling the pressure of an onrushing lineman, Cousins threw the ball well short of a first down. Lawrence’s seven pressures, four QB hits, three hurries and six tackles (one for loss) helped the Giants to their first playoff win since 2012. But it was one of Lawrence’s numerous midgame quips that pointed to what was aiding the monstrous season and upcoming payday for the now two-time Pro Bowler.

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“That Pilates be getting me right,” [shouted](#) Lawrence to teammate [Leonard Williams](#).

“For real?” Wiliams responded in high-pitched disbelief.

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Pilates....and trash talk.

Dexter Lawrence is a man of many talents 🤔

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Is the 6-foot-4, 340-pound All-Pro QB hunter seriously contorting his body in classes that evolved into a workout favored by New York City ballerinas?

“A lot of core work so that helps with my lower back,” Lawrence says. “Just flexibility and strengthening different areas.”

You may laugh, but [NFL](#) players of all shapes and sizes will do whatever it takes to be the best. The NFL has a long history of players using ballet and other forms of dance to differentiate their workouts from what goes on in the weight room and on the football field.

Pilates, which players have utilized for years now, is gaining devoted practitioners in part because of an explosion of social media video posts featuring their sweating and shaking workouts.

“I voluntarily go to go shake like a leaf and hold myself in these extremely challenging tough positions,” [Dolphins](#) linebacker [Jaelan Phillips](#) says. “It makes your body stronger but also makes your mind and soul and spirit stronger. I really leave Pilates with a glow.”



The Dolphins' Jaelan Phillips touts the mind-body connection of Pilates training. (Charlotte Carroll / The Athletic)

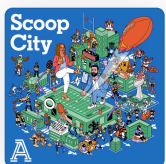
One of those glowing days comes during a June one-on-one session at Fuerza Pilates in Studio City, Calif. For mere seconds, Phillips lies on his back. Those clock ticks aren't a respite. Instead, they're the in-between for Phillips' next action.

Arms extended above his shoulders, Phillips grips one of the bars of the Cadillac — a trapeze table and to some a medieval torture-like bench overflowing with springs and straps hanging from a steel canopy. But for those in Pilates, it's just another piece of equipment that can offer teachers, like Fuerza's founder Nicky Lal, more variety.

As Phillips bends his knees into a tabletop position, Lal directs the 6-foot-5, 263-pounder to roll himself up and extend his legs out. Phillips then performs the task backward, slowly inching his lower back toward the table until his head briefly touches.

Again.

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“If you take that to the field, if you take that to really anything, (such as) anxiety, breathing can alleviate that,” Phillips says. “So Pilates is just like a microcosm of a lot of things that you can apply to real life that are beneficial for your health and wellness.”

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Phillips suffered a groin injury in his first NFL training camp and hip flexor injuries throughout his 2021 rookie season. But his confidence in Pilates has blossomed since he started incorporating it into his workout regimen. The Dolphins bring in Jackie Bachor, who offers in-house Pilates sessions on Tuesdays during the season (player off days). Looking for ways to optimize his performance, Phillips started going weekly and he estimates about 10 of his teammates participate as well.

“As a football player, we’re so used to being big and strong and dominating in what we do,” Phillips says. “So ... stepping out of your comfort zone to do something you’re not good at can be kind of daunting. And so doing Pilates the first time, it’s kind of embarrassing, right? You’re sitting there shaking, you’re trying to hold yourself.”

Phillips hasn’t dealt with hip flexor or groin issues since his rookie season, and he credits the deep core muscle work of Pilates for injury prevention. It has also given him a competitive edge — not only by productively utilizing his Tuesdays, but also by exposing his physical deficiencies.

“When you do something like Pilates, you can’t hide,” Phillips says.

But this offseason was different. Phillips suffered a torn Achilles tendon in late November. It’s the first lower-body injury that’s kept him out an extended period of time. After surgery, he couldn’t walk for three months. He calls rehab a “learning experience.”

Part of that process, before rejoining the Dolphins on the Physically Unable to Perform list to start training camp, included spending a month this summer in Los Angeles. He underwent physical therapy, chiropractic work, soft-tissue massage along with his usual workouts. He also incorporated Pilates for the first time during an offseason and connected with Lal through former UCLA teammates.

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On the June afternoon that Phillips walked into Lal’s studio, [Packers](#) defensive tackle [Kenny Clark](#) had just finished a session. Clark, entering his ninth NFL season, would sign his third Packers contract valued at \$64 million this summer. The three-time Pro Bowler has missed just one game over the past three seasons.

“You don’t really see a lot of men or bigger guys doing Pilates,” says Clark, who was initially skeptical of the exercise after being introduced by former [Titans](#) and [Raiders](#) linebacker [Jayon Brown](#). “It was one of those things, like ‘I ain’t going to do it.’

Clark has been working with Lal — who trains between 50-65 athlete clients, including [NBA](#) players — for three years. The Packers have had a reformer machine available to players for a number of years, and Lal works with Clark on his in-season off-days. There's a mix of virtual sessions and a packed schedule during offseasons as her new studio (with high ceilings and longer reformers for taller, broader bodies) fills with visiting clients. Each session is customized, and often starts with a series of questions: Did a player just get off a plane? What workout are they on? How are they feeling?



Longtime NFL linebacker Anthony Barr works with Pilates instructor Nicky Lal. (Charlotte Carroll / The Athletic)

The morning Phillips arrives, he's already completed physical therapy and conditioning, so their session is focused on active stretching. Phillips spends most of the class on the Cadillac apparatus, receiving hands-on instruction and frequent check-ins from Lal.

"I'm not trying to make my clients shake," Lal says. "I'm not trying to push them to a limit that they're going to break. My goal is to make them feel better and rejuvenated once they leave."

"I try to create a lot of different movements that they don't get in the gym and in their workouts with their teams."

As Phillips' class winds down, he's stretching out over a barrel — another piece of equipment — when the studio door opens and [Chicago Bears](#) center [Coleman Shelton](#) walks in.

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While Lal specializes in athlete clients, she's not the only instructor who's taken on professional football players.

One of the first players Kristen Wolf trained at her Chicago studio was former Bears and Jets running back Matt Forte. Wolf has since moved her Superior Pilates studio up to Lake Forest, Ill., just a quick drive from Bears headquarters. Word of mouth did the rest.

"When they do it, they're like, 'Oh my gosh, I need this,'" Wolf says.

Sessions are tailored to each person and she currently trains around 10 to 15 players, including current Bears like offensive lineman [Teven Jenkins](#), running back [Khalil Herbert](#), defensive back [Josh Blackwell](#) and defensive back [Elijah Hicks](#).

"Because they're athletes, they really get it, the importance of it and yet they have the best attitudes and discipline and sense of humor," Wolf says. "It's great for recovery, mobility, prevention, and obviously, the core. A lot of them think they have strong core muscles but in Pilates, it teaches you to work those muscles around your spine, so it strengthens their backs, and then it helps them to be stronger all over."

Players across the league, from [San Francisco 49ers](#) running back [Christian McCaffrey](#), who trains with Lal, to the Giants' stalwart left tackle [Andrew Thomas](#), have tried it. The 6-foot-5, 315-pound Thomas did Pilates for the first time this offseason. "A lot of times we get put in compromised positions just because of the nature of going backwards (as an offensive lineman)," he says. "So I think Pilates just helps with your flexibility and your core strength and it helps you sit down rushers and be athletic on the field."

Even Thomas' coach, Brian Daboll, has discovered the benefits. Daboll started this summer because of a conversation over dinner with a friend who owns a Pilates studio in Wyckoff, N.J. Twenty sessions later, Daboll says, "I'm more flexible. I am stronger and I just generally feel better."

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When it comes to the perception of Pilates and the evolution of its birth as an exercise for men created by Joseph Pilates, Wolf and Kansas City area instructor Kahley Schiller are excited to see it back to including men.

"It has that perception, that it's a girl thing or that it's (for) dancers," Schiller says. But players that she trains, like [Kansas City Chiefs](#) defensive tackle [Tershawn Wharton](#) and defensive ends [George Karlaftis](#) and [Charles Omenihu](#), are embracing it and changing perceptions, she says.



“I feel like ... people are starting to understand that it’s like a hard workout,” Phillips says. “It’s more normalized for NFL guys and guys in general to be doing it. But a lot of people would rather just lift and stretch than do Pilates. I try to put everyone on Pilates if I can.”

Five-time Pro Bowl guard [Trai Turner](#) is one of those people who listened. After trying Pilates with the Dolphins linebacker just the week prior, Turner is back for his third class, a private session with Lal. Since Turner is working his way back from a torn quad suffered last training camp and is new to the exercise, there’s careful attention to how his 6-foot-3, 320-pound body responds. In one sequence on the Cadillac, Turner started with both feet in straps but he took one foot out to ease the strain. But Lal said that will change over time as he acclimates to the movements. In these early sessions, it’s about making clients comfortable.



Trai Turner is new to Pilates, but he's quickly becoming a convert. (Charlotte Carroll / The Athletic)

Like those that have come before him, Turner expected a good stretching session, but: “It’s like, damn, I didn’t lift 1,000 pounds. I didn’t run a million sprints, but she put me on this table and made me hold this pose for three seconds, and I’m feeling it three days later.”

For the 31-year-old, the sessions have been a “good introduction back into (his) body being nimble and able to take the beating that comes with football.” It’s also something he wished he’d discovered earlier in his career.

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“I’m doing this to help aid me in football, but I’m also doing this to help aid me in life in general,” Turner says. “So that when I wake up in the morning, my knees don’t hurt. ’Cause now if my knees hurt, that messes with my physical. My physical bothering me in turn messes with my mental. Now my emotions are messed up. It can turn into a downward spiral.

“I’m just an advocate for myself, older guys and younger guys that even though we are taking care of the physical, make sure you take care of the mental. And this is part of taking care of the mental.”

The mental. The physical. Injury rehab. Core strengthening. There are lots of reasons players are drawn to Pilates ... and then keep coming back for more.

And sure enough, just before Turner heads out the door and strides into the Los Angeles sunshine, he schedules another session.

(Illustration: Dan Goldfarb / The Athletic. Photos: Charlotte Carroll / The Athletic)

What did you think of this story?



MEH



SOLID



AWESOME



Charlotte Carroll covers the New York Giants for The Athletic. She previously covered the University of Connecticut basketball and the WNBA's Connecticut Sun for The Athletic and wrote for Sports Illustrated. She interned at The Denver Post and Field & Stream magazine. Follow Charlotte on Twitter [@charlottecrrl](#)

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D

Dan W. · Wed


just finished my 219th Pilates class yesterday...I'm 56 and it's added 15-20 yards off the tee in my golf 🏌️ game...all my older buddies laugh about it and then they watch me hit it way past em!



301



5



J

John B. · Wed

@Dan W. They laugh and probably can't touch their toes. Good for you, brother.

D

David G.

· Wed

@Dan W. That's it, I'm going to check it out!

12

...

· Wed

@Dan W. Does it help getting up and down?

13

...

A

Anonymous U.

· Wed

It helps with *everything!*

25

...

X

Xavier C.

· Sat

@Dan W. SOLD!! I am 56, dealing with a neck and trapezius issue, and looking for an additional 10-20 yards myself.

2

...

Charlotte Carroll

· Wed

STAFF

Love reading all your comments on the benefits of Pilates for each one of you! This idea started off for me because I also take Pilates classes and love them so the idea of players like Dexter Lawrence and co. really embracing the exercise was just so interesting. Jaelan Phillips and I are very similar in that we "try to put everyone on Pilates." thanks for reading!

197

M

Mark "

· Wed

other than the reminder of the Vikings loss, this is a great article Charlotte.

I would the athletic would publish more articles on how professional athletes train and eat

181

4

...

D

Dan B.

· Wed

@Mark ". me too! I was a PN1 and a CPT, and even with an expertise in how to get in peak physical shape diet-wise, knowing exactly how the real pros do it in a way beyond "eats chicken and eggs and fruit" would be great. I would love an article on just, straight up, like, Justin Jefferson's entire week of meals and training.

26

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K

Kongmemphis

· Thu

A great comment. If more pro exercises, diet and lifestyle was available to us non-pros I think it would help people be more healthy.

5

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S

Stacia R.

· Fri

@Dan B. Lots of candy?

...

A

Aaron M.

· 1h 18m ago

@Dan B. Watch Wide Receiver on Netflix. Justin Jefferson eats lots of candy!

...

I have been taking Pilates classes for years. Now at 71, I realize how important it is for my body. It was the best decision I ever made to include in my work out schedule.

142...

S Steve H. · Wed

This 80+ year old has been doing pilates for three years. Along with 'face yoga', it's been game (and body) changer for me. Interestingly, my health insurer pays for my membership. People stare in amazement whenever my age is revealed.

1044...

B Barry C. · Wed

@Steve H. That's brilliant, Steve. Keep it up!

7...

T Thomas A. · Wed

@Steve H. Incredible, Steve!

6...

M Mark C. · Sat

@Steve H. What insurer do you have?!

2...

· Sat

@Steve H. Who is your insurer? That's fantastic.

...

N Nick S. · Wed

Great article. My wife teaches pilates and will absolutely love this!

101...

D David M. · Wed

Me too I am 74 and have been doing Pilates three days a week since my mid sixties. I am probably alive today because of this work. Three hours a week. Never a sweat but my whole body is worked and I always feel better

681...

D David M. · Wed

@David M. If interested reading up on Mr Pilates life history might give the uninitiated a reason to try . He invented Pilates to fix himself. The rest is history.

20...

J Jorasojr · Wed

Nice to see Pilates recognized for its tremendously beneficial effects on the male athlete. In my seventies now, and I've been at it twenty years. Wouldn't want to be without it.

56...

touch my toes for the first time in about 30 years.

52

3

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R

Reed W.

· Wed

@Andrew S. Love this comment.

I'm in very good physical shape from working out but really struggle with really tight hamstrings. Going to look into attending a class to see what I think.

5

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A

Andrew S.

· Wed

@Reed W. I

Getting to touch my toes did take time though! I highly recommend Pilates.

2

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T

Tdowling0620

· Sat

@Reed W. You'll love Pilates and so will your hamstrings. I am recovering from rotator cuff surgery and can get back on the reformer early in September. Can't wait!!!

1

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K

Kelsey E.

· Wed

I'm of the belief there are two kinds of people in the world....people who make fun of Pilates, and people who have tried Pilates!

47

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T

Theo W.

· Wed

3x a week for me here. Pilates has helped eradicate my chronic lower back pain almost entirely, and I can really feel the difference (literally!) in my core. Any guys worried it's not a 'manly' enough workout, don't worry - you'll be sweating and shaking from the get-go!

34

...

R

Robert G.

· Wed

Fourteen years ago at age 60 it was either surgery or Pilates to address back issues. My wife had been doing Pilates for years and "urged" me to try it. I started with three sessions a week at Excel Pilates in DC and now go weekly and also do additional weight and cardio training, which were enabled because my back became strong and pain free. The reference to Pilates fostering an overall feeling of mental and physical well being is spot on. As a senior, my physical mobility is a blessing earned on the reformer, Cadillac, barrel

30

...

M

Matt M.

· Wed

I was a college athlete and always shrugged off pilates as exercise for "regular people." A girlfriend conned me into eventually trying it and I cannot believe how challenging it is. Activates so many muscle groups you don't always get to (even if you're a hot shot know-it-all like me). Highly recommend trying it.

29

...

F

Frederick K.

· Wed

72 and started pilates last December. No more sciatica; literally a fountain of youth.

28

...

R

Ryan S. · Wed

My first exposure to Pilates was as a college senior. I took a one-credit course as a pilot group to see if it would be offered to the general student body. 15 minutes into the first class, I was sweating, shaking and breathing heavy. And I was in great shape at the time (4-5 days a week lifting weights, 2-3 days a week playing basketball, working 20+ hours a week at UPS).

Pilates hits all those little stabilizer muscles that other workouts miss and that's what makes it so effective.

A

Adam M. · Wed

I've been doing pilates for five years, and the practice has changed my life. I'm more flexible, my back isn't sore anymore (I sit at a desk for hours at a time during work). This article highlights equipment like the cadillac and reformer. But it's possible to have a really great and robust pilates practice with just a mat.

In any case, guys --- if you haven't tried it, you should. Especially in middle-age, it's transformative!

I

Im G. · Wed

I need to try it but it's intimidating. It looks really complicated and painful. How do you get started if you're a 30lbs overweight middle aged guy?

J

Jared S. · Wed

@Im G. A small step is better than no step!

P

Patrick B. · Wed

The instructors will be able to help! And just like anything, once you've done it the first time, it gets easier every time you do it again.

· Wed

@Im G. If you have access to Apple Fitness+ there are numerous classes that require nothing more than the floor space to lay down, although you'll probably want a mat. Highly recommend you start with a 10 minute class and go from there.

Expect to feel sore in places you didn't know existed for a few days, but that's a good thing! Everyone I know that tries it for the first time is stunned how it challenges them if they haven't done that sort of work before, regardless of their fitness level coming in, so don't worry about that too much. You'll pick it up quickly!

H

H Richard C. · Wed

@Im G. I am 70 pounds overweight. I have no problem doing it. I am 60 years old. I go to classes 3 or 4 a week. <https://www.clubpilates.com/> is great place to start

D

David M. · Wed

@Im G. One on one is best. No instructor is able to monitor a class and avoid injuries one on one is more expensive but safer and effective

F

Ford C. · Wed

ference. Just give it a shot.

10

...

J Jennyr261 · Wed

@Im G. I'm middle aged and overweight, was obese, but if the pilates instructor can't support you, then find another one.

I've got 5 great teachers and each of them do an exercise that they grade - easy, medium and hard. Start with the easiest option. I couldn't believe it when I started being able to do the hardest level of 'the hundred' and 'the teaser'.

Am great at 'swan dives' and 'saw' and 'rolling like a ball'; I have got better at 'jack knives' but struggle with 'rollups' (need to use weights to propel myself up), 'roll overs' and 'corkscrew' (just do the easy version of this and tell myself it's my rest time!)

Google '34 original pilates exercises' to see the exercises.

I've recently started going to reformer pilates classes. That's great but felt like I was going to do a 'Mr Bean' getting myself set up in the right spot on the machine - especially getting my feet in the loops - but the teacher helped when I asked.

Good luck.

5

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K Krystn M. · Wed

@Im G. I am a big woman and I go once a week to a HARD Pilates class. Do it. The size of your body does not matter, and you will be amazed at how your body shape and condition changes after just a few classes. I LOVE IT! At my studio you take four private classes to begin with and then can stay with private or go into a group reformer class. I love the reformer so much I would like to have on at home. Look for fatbodypilates on Insta for some serious inspo.

9

...

N Nick Q. · Thu

Just go to an intro class! It's intimidating but the workouts are all completely scalable to you and your body and you can go at your own pace. It'll take a couple classes to get comfortable but your confidence and results will start right away!

3

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P Pjcarlso1961 · Fri

@Im G. Please don't hesitate to try it! A good instructor will help you as a beginner. You will see a world of difference in your body! It is NOT painful....yes, it can be complicated but you go in baby steps. The "pain" is the aftereffects of the workout....just like any other workout.

1

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P Pjcarlso1961 · Fri

@David M. Regarding monitoring the class. If the class is kept to no more than 10, then yes, the instructor can monitor you. I know...I went to a Pilates studio (prior to COVID) for 20 years and there were no more than 10 and then it closed. The instructor was quite skilled at watching everyone. YES....private is better for sure.

...

P Pjcarlso1961 · Fri

@Jennyr261 Interesting that you are doing 'jack knives' and corkscrew. My former Pilates studio (closed due to Covid) stopped teaching the corkscrew and jack knives for safety reasons.

...

B Billiemeyer · 11h 6m ago

@Im G. Please treat yourself to a private lesson, or try duets with a friend. You'll have someone teaching you basic concepts and to your particular body (and mindset!)....My feeling as a teacher is that you should be having fun while learning these crazy new ways of moving.

BTW, I didn't start until I was 45, wish I had started sooner! I'm 72 now, and turning people on to Pilates still gives me joy!

...

A Al M. · Wed

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