

During the summer months, I am often asked how to maintain core stability without sacrificing the love of outdoor activities. Indeed not many want to remain indoors while the beauty of Jackson's weather allows many opportunities for outdoor activities. However, come autumn a large percentage of participants who resume regular training fall short of a strong or maintained core for the next outdoor sport activity. Pillar core strength usually takes a back seat to hiking, paddling, biking or simply a walk.

As a brief reminder, Dr. Ben Kibler and colleagues at the Lexington Clinic Sports Medicine Center in Lexington, Kentucky offers this definition of the core. "Core stability is defined as the ability to control the position and motion of the trunk over the pelvis to allow optimum production, transfer and control of force and motion to the terminal segment in integrated athletic activities".

Stuart McGill, a professor of spine biomechanics at the University of Waterloo and considered one of the leading consultant on spine mechanics in the world, has given a different approach regarding the core and core training.

"Evidence and common practice are not always consistent in the training community. For example, some believe that repeated spine flexion [ab crunches] is a good method to train the flexors, also known as the rectus abdominis and the abdominal wall [abs]. Interestingly, these muscles are rarely used in this way because they are more often used to brace while stopping motion. Thus, they more often act as stabilizers than flexors. Furthermore, repeated bending of the spinal discs is a potent injury mechanism. Another example is misdirected practice commonly occurs when [participants] pull in their abdominals [suck in your abs in] to 'activate their transverse abdominis' [deep muscle below belly button] to enhance stability. This does not target the major stabilizers of the spine because studies that measure stability show that the most important stabilizers are task specific."

"The core, more often than not, functions to prevent motion rather than initiating it, which is contrary to the approaches that many trainers employ in designing exercise for their clients. Good technique in most sporting, and daily living tasks demand that power be generated at the hips and transmitted through a stiffened core. Pushing, pulling, lifting, carrying, and torsional exertions are enhanced using this basic technique of hip power generation but are compromised when the spine bends causing what is often referred to as 'energy leaks'. Interestingly, these task classifications greatly assist the organization of program design (think of building exercises to fulfill a push, pull, lift, carry, and a torsional buttressing task rather than specific isolationist exercisers for the abdominals, back extensors, latissimus dorsi, and the like)."

The old ways of ab crunches and feeling the "burn" in the mid section is truly an ancient art. Side planks, bird dog extension (on hands and knees and extend opposite foot and hand in opposite directions), planks on a stability ball carrying a weight during lunging or heavy loads on only one side of the body are examples of types of exercise that are current and supportive for the core to stiffen and help other parts of the body to excel in all movement.

I will be the first to tell you that I get outdoors as often as possible but do have a maintenance workout two to three times a week. In addition, no one ever said the workout had to be performed indoors. Training to be Balanced offers outdoor core workouts especially during the summer months. All you need is a little creativity to fulfill two objectives – working the core and spending time outdoors.

Another avenue for core stability is Pilates. Pilates has long been a part of the exercise industry embraced by boxers, gymnasts, football players, and dancers but recently hitting the main stream at high regard by celebrities such as Madonna and Liz Hurley who swear by its results.

Katie Jackson, a certified Pilates instructor at T2BB states that, "Practiced faithfully Pilates can yield numerous benefits. Increased lung capacity and circulation through deep, healthy breathing, strength and flexibility, particularly of the abdomen and back muscles, coordination-both muscular and mental, are all key components in an effective Pilates program. Posture, balance, and core strength are all heartily increased. Bone density and joint health can improve, and many experience positive body awareness for the first time. Pilates teaches balance and control of the body, and that capacity spills over into other areas of one's life." The benefits of Pilates are so profound that we often say at T2BB, that "real men do Pilates".

Remember, while playing outside, do a few exercises that will increase the strength of your core. Maintenance is important for not only during the summer activities but easily increases when the next seasonal sports comes about.