**A few defensive backs take a different approach to gain an advantage**

By Jimmy Robertson

Some college football players are willing to do just about anything to gain that extra edge on the field, even if it means skirting the rules.

But a few of Tech’s defensive backs took a novel – and totally legal – approach to their workout regimen heading into spring practice. It’s an approach they hope gives them added benefits not just this spring, but also next fall.

Antone Exum, Kyle Fuller and Boye Aromire signed up for a Pilates class once Tech’s season ended in the Sugar Bowl in an attempt to strengthen certain muscle groups related to their positions as defensive backs. The trio goes at least once a week to Blacksburg Pilates and Fitness Studio and receives individual instruction from instructor Marianne Zolman.

The idea came from Exum, who is always looking to do things beyond the training he does under Mike Gentry in Tech’s strength and conditioning program. Last summer, he took hot yoga to get stronger and more flexible. This winter, he wanted to work on his abdomen and core muscles, so he decided to try Pilates and talked Fuller and Aromire into taking the class with him.

“When I was in middle school, my best friend’s mom was a personal trainer for women around the neighborhood. I did a [Pilates] class with her, and it was tough,” Exum said. “I only did, like, two classes, and I was done.

“But I strive to be great, and I know you have to do extra stuff outside of what we do as a team. When it’s time to get up for Pilates, that’s what I think about. I know it’ll only make me better. It makes it that much easier to go and do it.”

Essentially, Pilates – designed by a German physical trainer named Joseph Pilates – is a series of exercises that helps build long, lean muscles and strength and endurance in the legs, abdominals, arms, hips and back. It places emphasis on spinal and pelvic alignment, breathing to relieve stress and to allow adequate oxygen flow to the muscles, and developing a strong core (the abdominal muscles and the muscles in the lower back), while also improving balance.

Exum, Fuller and Aromire wanted to focus on all of these things, at least at first.

“I didn’t really know anything about it [Pilates],” Fuller said. “I found out it was more about the core and stuff like that. I was down with trying something new. There’s that saying that says, ‘In order to get where you’ve never been, you have to do some things you’ve never done.’ That’s something I go by, and I’m enjoying it.

“It was pretty hard at first. The first 10 weeks, we did just Pilates. We did core exercises and mat drills and some machine work. As we kept going, it got easier. Some days were tough. Now, she’s putting a little more yoga into it, so we do yoga toward the end [of the sessions]. I know it’ll help us.”

The trio also took on Pilates as a measure against injuries. Defensive backs tend to struggle with groin and hamstring pulls, and both Fuller and Exum wanted Zolman to focus on making their ankles stronger. The amount of backpedaling and running done by a defensive back tends to wear on the ankles.

“I think the most important thing it’ll help with is injury prevention,” Exum said. “We told her we wanted stronger ankles. That helps not only with injury prevention, but also with coming out of the breaks and stuff like that. The core strength will help all around. I think we’ll be doing it [Pilates] for a while.”

All three players earned honors in Gentry’s program for their efforts. Exum earned Super Iron Hokie honors – the top honor in the program – while Fuller earned Iron Hokie honors, the second-highest honor. Both ran under a 4.4 and both recorded vertical jumps better than 36 inches. Pilates wasn’t the sole reason for their success in the program, but the extra work certainly didn’t hurt.

Getting Exum and Fuller in top physical condition – and keeping them there – is important for Tech’s coaching staff because those two are really the only experienced players in a young secondary. In fact, most considered Fuller as Tech’s defensive MVP a year ago, and Exum actually led the Hokies in tackles last season with 89.

Exum finds himself at a new position this spring, as the coaching staff decided to move him to boundary corner opposite of Fuller and into the role created when Jayron Hosley decided to leave school early and make himself available for the NFL Draft. Last year, he alternated between rover and free safety, but Tech’s coaches envision him being better as a cornerback, where he can focus less on making calls and more on making plays – similar to what Jimmy Williams did a few years back.

“I was excited,” said the 6-foot, 219-pound redshirt junior from Glen Allen, Va., of the move. “I always thought I could perform at that position despite me being bigger than the normal corner. I just think that it can’t hurt me. Either I’ll get out there and not be able to do it, or I’ll get out there and perform – and I think I will.”

Tech’s staff also discussed moving Fuller, a second-team All-ACC selection a year ago, to either free safety or rover. But in the end, they decided to keep him at field cornerback.

To shore up the rover and free safety spots, Tech’s staff moved redshirt sophomore Detrick Bonner and sophomore Kyshoen Jarrett into those roles – both played cornerback a year ago. Aromire, a sophomore, backs up Bonner, who started four games at cornerback last season, at the rover position.

“I think they’ll do well,” Fuller said of Bonner and Jarrett. “We’ve been meeting with them. They know the corner position, so it’s not a bad thing for them to learn safety. Back there, what it comes down to is getting reps. Those guys are picking it up well. In the meeting room, they know where to get lined up, but it’s different on the field. We’ll see how they look, but I think they’ll be able to get it.”

If Exum, Fuller and Aromire enjoy success in 2012, they may just point to their extra work doing Pilates as one reason why. And in doing so, they may also be doing their part to break the myth that Pilates is for women.

“That was the thing with hot yoga as well,” Exum said. “I try to look past that and not stay narrow-minded with things that can help me as a player and better my game. Anything that can help, I’m open to it. I don’t care if it’s just for women. I’m open to anything.”