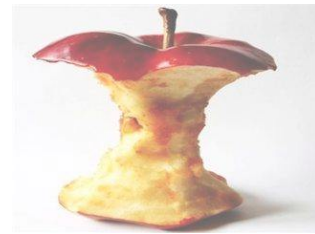


Strong Core Makes you a Better Athlete

We all love to improve our tennis game steadily, but there are times when we feel stagnant and nothing works. We take lessons, we practice, play matches, yet our improvement doesn't match the effort.

The good news is **that if you improve your fitness just a little bit, you will see huge improvements in your tennis game.**

The professional tennis players work on their strength, power, explosiveness, flexibility, agility, quickness, coordination, and balance daily. It takes a lot of commitment. The majority of tennis enthusiasts has jobs, families and other commitments and cannot devote hours to fitness training and tennis practice. As a starter, focus on one thing: **getting your core stronger** and you will see the positive results in your tennis game quickly.



Plain Plank

Having a strong core is one of the most important things in any skilled athletic movement, and tennis especially. Strong supporting muscles around the spine will decrease the risk of lower back pain or injury. One of the simplest methods to test the core strength is the plank. The plank improves your lower and upper body in strength and muscular endurance.

Get down on the ground on your elbows and toes, with your body completely straight. Have your elbows directly underneath the shoulders and hands inline with the elbows. Hold the plank for 1 minute without dropping your hips. The sign of a strong core is if you can hold the plank for 2 minutes with a good form. Another variation of plank is supporting yourself on your hands instead of the elbows. Keep practicing the plank and see how a strong core will improve your tennis game.



Plank with Arm and Leg Lift -- an Advanced Core Strengthenener

While lean abs look great, for a tennis player, the strength and functionality of the core is even more important: **1)** it will allow transferring the power from your legs and hips to your upper body and arms. **2)** You will be hitting your shots in better balance and as a result with more precision and power. **3)** You will have fewer or no injuries as all the joints (hips, knees, and shoulders) will load and work in more harmony. The plank with arm and leg lift is an advanced core strengthener.

Get down on the ground on your hands and toes, shoulders aligned over the hands. Keep the body straight like a plank. Don't let your hips sink. Get your balance first, breathe in, lift your left arm and right leg at the same time, and keep them straight and parallel with the ground. Perform this exercise slowly, or you will lose your balance easily. Hold the top position for 1-2 seconds, then switch sides. Repeat 20 times.



Plank with Knee-To-Elbow

Push-up is a well-known and excellent exercise for the entire upper body. It strengthens your chest, shoulders, arms, and core. When doing push-ups regularly, you get stronger fast. Try this more difficult variation of a standard push-up. It will **challenge not just your strength, but also your coordination, flexibility and balance -- all the qualities that you need to improve your tennis game.**

Get down on the ground on your hands and toes. Keep your body straight like a plank. Now, sink your chest down to the ground without dropping your hips. Push yourself up, bend your left leg, and bring the knee forward, toward your right elbow until they touch. Hold the position for 1 second, and then switch: touch the right knee to the left elbow. Repeat for 12-20 push-ups. Make sure you really touch your

knee and elbow! Regular strengthening of your core and shoulder stabilizers will soon transfer into your tennis game as well.



Plank with Hip Twists

Tennis players need to have strong and functional core, because the core muscles transfer the forces from the legs to the upper body through the kinetic chain. Besides protecting you from lower back problems, a strong core improves your shot making. The earlier outlined plain plank is a good test for the core strength, but the plank with hip twists adds extra element that is important for tennis players.

Get into a plain plank position, and never let your hips sink. Now, twist your hips to the left and gently touch the ground. Make sure that both your elbows remain on the ground at all times (if you are less flexible, the elbows will want to leave the ground). Return to the middle position, hold the perfectly straight alignment, and twist to the other side. Repeat 20 times. Practice the plank with hip twists regularly and see your tennis game improve.



Side Plank for Strong Obliques

Think how many times you bend and twist during your normal day, and how many times you coil and uncoil on the tennis court. The muscles responsible for the motion are obliques, located on the sides of your core and often forgotten about. Your athletic performance will improve dramatically if you have a strong core, and the risk of lower back problems will decrease. The side plank will effectively strengthen your entire core.

Get down on the ground on your left side. Stack your feet on each other and support yourself on your left hand, with the shoulder above the hand. Lift your hips up so they are in one line with your feet and shoulders like a plank. Keep your body straight from the above view as well -- don't stick your booty out or push your chest forward. Raise your right arm vertically, toward the sky. This will stretch your chest and add more difficulty. Hold the plank for 1 minute on each side. Include side plank into your training regimen and see your tennis game improve.



Side Plank with Leg Lift

The side plank trains your obliques very efficiently, and just like the front plank, the side plank is an isometric exercise, which means that the muscles are under the load without changing their length ("iso" means "same", and "metric" means "length"; isometric literally means

same length). If your core is not sufficiently strong, your body may start shaking after a few seconds of holding the plank position. Do not worry, because the trembling will go away as you get stronger.

Get down on the ground on your left side just like in the plain side plank. To add more difficulty, lift the top leg up, lead with the heel, and keep the knee straight. Hold the top contraction for one second before you slowly return to the start position. This will also train your hips, which you need in the start-and-stop movements and for changing directions on the court. For more variety for the side plank, support yourself on the elbow instead of the hand.

Performing the side plank with leg lifts regularly will strengthen your entire **core, hips, and the shoulder stabilizing muscles**. In addition, you practice your **balance, coordination, and patience**, and thus the **side plank is an ideal exercise to improve your tennis game**.



Crunches - Straight, Twisted, Oblique

Crunches are a basic bread-and-butter exercise for your abdominals. Perform different variations of crunching so you wouldn't get bored, such as straight crunches, feet up in the air crunches, twisted crunches or oblique crunches... Always make sure to contract your abdominals as much as you can -- imagine you have a walnut in your six-pack and you want to crack it. You want to contract very hard. Keep your lower back rounded as you crunch, and shorten the distance between your chest and pelvis on each contraction. Do not attempt to sit up. Support

your head on your hands that are behind your neck, but do not pull on your neck. During twisted crunches, put one foot on the opposite knee, and at the top of the crunch, bring your opposite elbow to the bent knee. Switch sides after the total amount of repetitions performed (20 or more).



During oblique crunches, bend your knees and turn on your side. Keep your knees on the ground and together at all times. Point your upper body toward the sky, support your head on your hands, and crunch your obliques. You will notice that the movement is very limited, but you don't need to worry about getting up really high, but focus on crunching as hard as you can. Switch sides after performing 20 or more repetitions.



Bicycle -- a Silent Abs Torture

Lie on your back with straight legs and hands supporting your head. Lift your feet slightly off the ground and keep them in the air during the entire set. Bend the left leg and bring the knee toward your chest, while crunching and twisting your upper body to bring your right elbow toward your left knee. Touch them together, while extending your right leg forward, close to the ground (but not touching). Hold the contraction for one second. Then switch sides to touch the right knee and left elbow. Perform the movement slow and controlled. Start with 20 repetitions, and work yourself up to 100, if you can.



Reverse Crunch

Lie on your back, bend your legs, and bring your knees to your chest. Try to keep your feet close to your butt during the entire exercise. Lift your hips off the ground and bring the knees to your chest. Your back should be nicely round. Reverse the movement and slowly return to the starting position. Make sure not to swing with your legs to help the movement. Repeat 15 to 20 times.



Hip Lifts

Lie on your back and lift your legs straight up toward the sky. Keep your knees straight. Lift the hips off the ground as high as you can (it won't be much) and slowly return to the starting position. Don't fall like a rock, try to control your movement. Make sure your legs are not swinging during the movement. Keep them vertical and still all the time.



Russian Twist

Sit down, bend your knees to 90 degrees, and lean slightly back. Extend your arms in front you and interlace your hands. Twist with the straight arms to the left as far as you can go, then to the right, and alternate in this manner for 30 repetitions. Make sure that you are leaning back and keeping your arms straight.



Leg Windshield Wiper

This is a great core exercise for tennis players, strengthening your obliques, abs, hip flexors, and at the same time stretching your lower back, IT-band, and chest. Lie on the ground on your back, spread out your arms to the sides pushing your palms to the ground, and lift your legs straight up toward the sky. Keep the 90-degree angle in your hips at all times and your knees straight. Now, let the legs slowly drop to the right side until you reach the ground. The legs should be parallel with your arms. Don't relax completely, just gently touch the ground and reverse the movement. Make sure your feet stay together at all times. No kicking! When you reach the middle position, move to the left side. Try to keep your both shoulders and arms on the ground at all times. This will be easier or harder depending on your flexibility. With a regular practice, you will get stronger and more flexible and this exercise will become your favorite. It is a good one for a warm-up before your tennis practice, as it opens and stretches the core in the

rotational movement, which will help your coiling and uncoiling on the court. Perform up to 20 repetitions, as you get stronger.



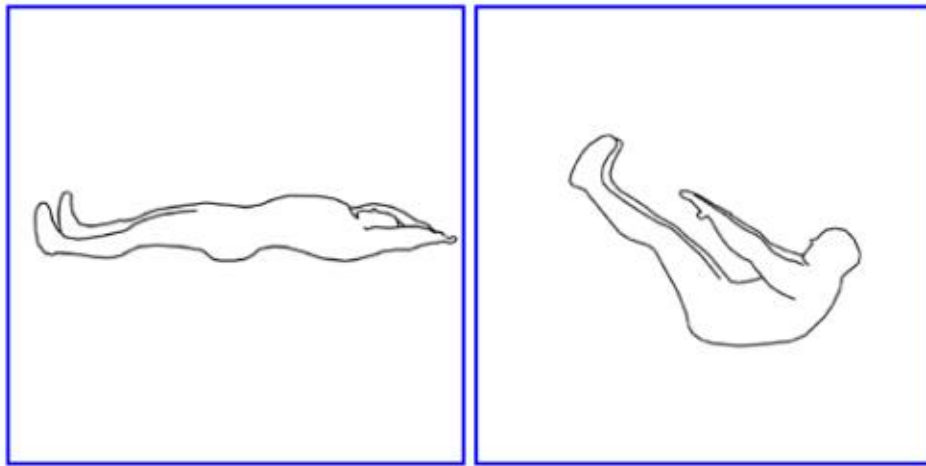
V-Sits

Sit down on the ground with straight legs and place your hands slightly behind you. Lift your feet two inches off the ground and connect with your core. Bend your knees and bring them as close to your chest as possible, while crunching your abs powerfully. Extend your legs forward, parallel with the ground, straighten your knees completely, and hold your feet two inches above the ground for a second, then repeat the movement. Don't put your feet down on the ground until you perform 20 repetitions.



Jack-Knife

This master abs exercise requires strong core and balance. Lie on the ground with straight arms above your head and straight legs. Lift both your upper body (with arms over your head) and your legs into the air as high as you can. Your body should be forming a V from the side view. Hold the top position for one second and then return to the starting position. Balancing your body on the top can be an issue in the beginning, but you will get quickly better as you practice this exercise regularly. Perform 15-20 repetitions. To make the exercise even harder, never put your feet back on the ground; rather stop the movement two inches above the ground. Make sure that you are not kicking your feet up, as they should always remain together.



Bird Dogs

This exercise strengthens your lower back, glutes, and shoulders, while it challenges your balance as well. Get down on your knees and hands. Stretch your right arm forward and left leg back, making yourself as long as possible. Keep your leg completely straight and hold the top contraction for one second. Now, slowly bring your right elbow and left knee inward to touch underneath your body. Hold the touch for one second. Repeat 15 times, then switch sides. You have to do this movement slowly, or you will lose your balance easily.



Hold one second at each position...



Superman and Alternating Superman

This exercise strengthens your lower back, glutes, back of the shoulders and all the small muscles around your spine. Lie on your stomach with straight legs and straight arms extended over your head. Lift your arms and legs simultaneously as high as you can. Hold the top contraction for one second and return to the starting position with control. Make sure that you don't bend your knees. For the alternating superman, lift your left arm and right leg simultaneously high up above the ground and hold the top contraction for one second. Make sure that the movement originates in the hips and not in the knee. Put you arm and leg gently down on the ground and switch sides. Alternate sides for 20-30 repetitions.



Sample Routine One (Repeat 3-4 times)

1. [Plank with arm and leg lifts](#) (1 min)
2. [Leg Windshield Wiper](#) (20 reps)
3. [Straight crunch](#) (30 reps)
4. [Crunch with twist](#) (30 reps left, 30 reps right)
5. [Oblique crunch](#) (30 reps left, 30 reps right)
6. [V-sits](#) (20 reps)
7. [Russian Twist](#) (30 reps)
8. [Alternating superman](#) (20 reps)

Sample Routine Two (tough one!) (Repeat 3-4 times)

1. [Plank with knee to elbow touch](#) (1 min)
2. [Plank with hip twists](#) (1 min)
3. [Superman](#) (20 reps on each side)
4. [Side plank with leg lift](#) (1 min on each side)
5. [Bicycle](#) (1 min)
6. [Reverse crunch](#) (20 reps)

Sample Routine Three (Repeat 3-4 times)

1. [Plain plank](#) (1:30 min, work yourself to 2 min)
2. [Leg windshield wiper](#) (20 reps)
3. [Jack-knife](#) (15-20 reps)
4. [Plank with hip twists](#) (30 reps)

5. [Plank with leg and arm lift](#) (1 min)
6. [Hip lifts](#) (20 reps)
7. [Bird dogs](#) (15 reps on each side)
8. [Oblique crunch](#) (20 on each side)

Sample Routine Four (Repeat 3-4 times)

1. [Crunches straight](#) (30 reps)
2. [Bicycle](#) (40 reps)
3. [V-sits](#) (20 reps)
4. [Russian twists](#) (30 reps)
5. [Superman](#) (20 reps)
6. [Jack-knife](#) (15-20 reps)
7. [Plank with knee to elbow touch](#) (1 min)
8. [Reverse crunch](#) (20 reps)

Sample Routine Five (Repeat 3-4 times)

1. [Plain plank](#) (1:15 min)
2. [Crunches](#) (30 reps)
3. [Plank with leg and arm lifts](#) (20 reps)
4. [Bicycle](#) (30 reps)
5. [Plank with knee to elbow touch](#) (20 reps)
6. [Reverse crunches](#) (20 reps)
7. [Bird dogs](#) (30 reps)
8. [Alternating superman](#) (30 reps)

Final Word

You can perform the core routine any time you want, but a good time to do it is after your tennis practice, because you are already out there and sweaty anyway. Adding 15 to 20 minutes of core training several times per week will improve your core strength and power dramatically, and you will soon see it in your tennis game as well. The sample routines are for your convenience, you can mix the abs exercises in any order you wish.

Also, make sure that you always stretch after your tennis practice and fitness training. You need to lengthen the overused muscles and recreate balance between your left and right side, which often is uneven thanks to the one-sided nature of tennis. If you need inspiration for a good tennis-specific stretching routine, read this ["stretching routine after your tennis practice"](#) article.

Always remember to be aware of how your body feels and if there are unusual aches and tightness, because they can be a sign of developing larger problem. Make sure that your left and right sides are as even as possible in strength and flexibility, to prevent future overuse injuries.

About the Author



Suzanna McGee, the author of "[Tennis Fitness for the Love of it: a Mindful Approach to Fitness for Injury-Free Tennis](#)", is a former Ms. Natural Olympia drug-free bodybuilding champion, an experienced athletic trainer, fitness expert and competitive tennis player. With her teaching and writings, Suzanna possesses the tremendous ability to inspire athletes to be the best that they can be. Suzanna's special training style that combines many different techniques of training, healing, and injury prevention, brings a lot of success and great results to anybody who learns how to master it. Besides the love for sports, she has two master's degrees in computer science, and speaks six languages. Suzanna resides in Venice Beach, California.

You can reach Suzanna via her Web site at <http://www.TennisFitnessLove.com> and find her books on Amazon.com in print or Kindle.