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THE GREAT BALANCING ACT



How the private ritual of the early legends of dance became the ideal exercise

Dancers have done Pilates technique for decades. Dancers like Martha Graham and George Balanchine, whose brilliant, demanding choreography changed the very shape of 20th-century dancers, endorsed it. Ever since its invention in the 1920s, Pilates (pronounced PHLA-tees) exercises have been renowned for producing lean, lithe physiques—winning over those whose business was looking good—and those who didn't get paid if they were injured, like actors, figure skaters, assorted athletes, and the occasional model or actress. And that illustrious lineup never stopped the San Francisco 49ers and the Cincinnati Bengals from doing it, too.

Today Pilates is undergoing a resurgence; certainly it speaks to all the concerns of the nineties: alignment, injury prevention, correct breathing, simultaneous stretching and strengthening, and effecting that ever-elusive harmony between mind and muscle. The exercises devised by German-born Joseph Pilates are completely non-impact and non-weight bearing. They're gentle enough to be performed by the pregnant, sophisti-

cated enough to challenge the superfit, and safe enough to be prescribed for rehabilitation. Admittedly, they don't have much aerobic advantage, but considering that Pilates requires two or three one-hour sessions a week, this may be as close as you can get to the perfect workout.

Lest that sound faddish and far-fetched, consider the client list, past and present: Besides Balanchine and Graham, more recent dance legends Suzanne Farrell and Jacques D'Amboise became devotees, as did screen stars like Gregory Peck and Katharine Hepburn. Tennis pro Tracy Everett and skater Kristi Yamaguchi, the current women's world champion, have used the technique to train. Actresses Sigourney Weaver and Jasmine Guy are advocates. Owning a Universal Reformer, a big spring-controlled contraption used exclusively as part of a Pilates session, has become de rigueur in Hollywood home gyms.

"It maintains that magic balance between strength and flexibility," says William Hamilton, M.D., consulting orthopedist to New York City Ballet, American



The movements and machines are made so you just cannot cheat'

and Drago's Gym in New York City. "I see the same ladies going to aerobics every single day and their tushies are still hanging, their thighs and calves have gotten big," the exceedingly spry Kryzanowski says. "Their bodies are going with gravity. Pilates wanted you to fight gravity, to stay youthful, to feel lifted and light!" The "Pilates body," as evidenced by Kryzanowska's regular clients, is, she says, "long, slender thighs and calves, a strong back, a flat tummy, and a high tushie."

"Bulking up at Gold's Gym doesn't work when you want to wear Armani or Versace," says Michael Podwal, co-owner of the Ron Fletcher studio in Los Angeles. Or, to put it a bit more bluntly: "When you have to do a nude scene, Pilates does a lot more for you than any lighting designer."

But even women naturally blessed with beautiful bodies have their own reasons for adoring Pilates. "Choreography may dictate eight jumps on one side, six or seven on the other—even-

tually it adds up to irregular muscle development," says Kim Stroud, a principal with the Martha Graham Dance Company. "Pilates corrects that, allowing your body to balance." Stroud became a convert to the method during rehabilitation for a back injury a decade ago, and now incorporates mat work (exercises done without the Reformer or other props) into her daily dance warm-up.

New York City Ballet principal dancer Judith Fugate, who's been using the method since 1978, has used it to strengthen her feet, improve her extension, and regain conditioning. A denizen of the Anderson Kasakove studio, Fugate practices Pilates before she sallies forth to company class in the mornings "and I leave feeling revitalized, never exhausted."

"There's no misguided energy to this approach; it's about quality, not quantity," declares Julian Littleford, a former principal dancer with Martha Graham who now owns J. L. Body Conditioning in La Jolla, California. Unlike most work in the gym, Pilates never gives an exerciser the time or opportunity to "zone out" or lose concentration. "That's one of the reasons it works so incredibly fast—most people notice the difference after 10 or 20 sessions. And the body aligns faster because you don't have to work against weight and gravity. The movements and machines are made so you just cannot cheat."

In addition to all the physical benefits of Pilates technique, Joao Mauricio of the Paul Taylor Dance Company maintains that because Taylor's choreography is so athletic, a regular Pilates workout "even made the dances easier to learn."

Because Pilates works on the principle of variable resistance, anyone at

any level of fitness can indulge: from stroke victims in their seventies to women in their twenties who simply want to look better in clothes. Anecdotes abound of mothers-to-be using the method up to the day they deliver.

And these days, the technique is more accessible than ever. Pilates' original students—Kryzanowska, Ron Fletcher, Carola Trier, and Eve Gentry—have trained a third generation of instructors, which means studios are now in most of the 50 states and range as far afield as London, Hong Kong, Tokyo, Milan, and Hamburg, in settings and situations ranging from tiny fitness boutiques to huge teaching hospitals. Newly enamored of the exercises, physical therapists are establishing centers independent from sports and dance applications. Super Bowl-caliber football teams have used Pilates for training and rehabilitation. Business is thriving for the Sacramento-based company Current Concepts, which manufactures Reformers and other Pilates-based equipment. Says Current Concepts owner Ken Endelman: "I have a list of 220 institutional clients in the U.S. alone."

The trend toward methods that synthesize mind and body hasn't hurt Pilates' popularity either. "Up until now, there were two approaches to exercise: the Eastern one, which emphasized the mind, and the Western one, which emphasized the body," says Littleford. "But there wasn't anything in between until Pilates came along."

"The first time I ever heard the word 'holistic' was over 20 years ago, and it was in connection with the Pilates technique," says Michael Podwal, concluding: "Ultimately, the whole purpose of Pilates isn't just to make your butt two inches higher. It's to make you more in tune with your body." □

Joseph Pilates made the mind-body connection long before it became the rage.

