

ART100

technique series

Pilates: a Method Revived

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MOST FITNESS INSTRUCTORS and personal trainers today have heard of a popular form of exercise called Pilates. Although Pilates appears to be a new technique, it was actually a method developed in the 1920s by a German-born American, Joseph Pilates (1880-1967). Within the past ten years, the method has regained a resurgence of followers. In addition, many variations of the original technique have been created, first by some of Pilate's main instructors and succeeded by second, third, and fourth generation followers, who created their own programs and called them Pilates. The trademark expired and now, anyone can legally use the name, Pilates, to describe their exercise program. Some of the modern versions are very much like the original, but others are very different. There are many watered-down or transmuted forms of Pilates. Many of the new generation of "Pilates" exercisers are unfamiliar with the history and the original technique.

JOSEPH PILATES WAS A SICKLY CHILD suffering from a number of health problems including asthma and rickets; so he developed exercises to strengthen his own frail body. He created a series of movements that aimed to make people more aware of their bodies. The technique did not use music, but instead focused on the rhythm of the exercises and the breathing to teach the exerciser to use their body more efficiently. He developed over 500 exercises to stretch and strengthen muscles, open joints, and release tension. Joseph emigrated from Germany with his wife, Clara, and settled in New York City in 1926 where they opened a studio to teach the technique. The studio and method became popular with performing artists especially dancers in the 1950s and 60s; devotees included famous dancer/choreographers Martha Graham, Jerome Robbins, and George Balanchine. Many of the original exercises and the fundamental principles of the technique are used today in physical rehabilitation and athletic training. It is only in the last decade that exercise professionals have become more aware of the value in the exercises. It is estimated that over five million people in the United States practice the Pilates Method of exercise today.

PILATES NAMED HIS ORIGINAL PROGRAM "THE ART OF CONTROLOGY," and in 1945, he wrote the book, "Return to Life," about his method. The exercises were modeled after Zen, Greek, Roman, Yoga, and western forms and were designed to be performed on a mat; they worked on body alignment, proper breathing, reciprocal strengthening, stretching, and safety. The underlying theory promoted the use of the mind to master the muscles to bring total harmony to the body. We take this idea for granted today, but in the early 1900s, this was a unique concept. When he was older, Joseph worked with hospital patients, who could not walk, and developed a series of pulley cables and springs to help weak individuals perform the exercises by themselves.

He created other pieces of equipment, but one of his most popular was the “Reformer,” which remains a standard today with both exercisers and physical therapists. It should be noted that all machines called Pilates may not be the ones developed by him because that trademark also expired and is open to be used.

THE PRIMARY CONDITIONING FOCUS of the Pilates Method is on the deep core muscles of the body that stabilize the pelvis, spine, and trunk. The muscles are worked in a balanced way, strengthened and stretched, as movers and stabilizers in combination with a unique rhythm and breathing pattern. The exercises establish a central core around which all other movements take place. The focus is on the quality of the movement rather than the number of repetitions. It should be mentioned that the concept of core stabilization is not totally unique to Pilates but is a fundamental scientific principle; the body’s strength and ability to balance comes from its core or center of gravity. Pilates bases his concept of core on what he calls the “Powerhouse” muscles, which are a group of muscles that begin approximately two inches below the navel and two inches above the navel (the body’s center of gravity) and then wrap around the body like a corset/girdle. In Eastern philosophy this area is the location of the “Hara” or center of the body’s energy. The Powerhouse includes the gluteus muscles. When performing any single Pilates exercise, the focus is always on the Powerhouse group. Pilates also emphasizes reduced stress, flowing movements with light resistance, and full breath. Eastern philosophy uses this technique to circulate energy (Chi) through the Hara.

IN MODERN SCIENCE, P.N.F. (proprioceptive, neuromuscular facilitation) explains that muscles have an automatic neurological programming that moves the arms and legs in spiral and diagonal patterns, and the movement stems from core muscles. This concept is intrinsic to other methods of physical training such as Feldenkrais, Alexander Method, and traditional ballet, which use the core muscles and P.N.F. movement patterns.

POSTURAL ANALYSIS IS AN INTRINSIC PART OF a Pilates program, and so, it is an ideal method of training when used in a one-to-one situation. Personal trainers can find great value in using Pilates techniques with their clients because the exercises and the theory can be integrated with traditional floor exercises, stretching, and weight training. Yoga partners ideally with Pilates.

PILATES TEACHES SIX BASIC PRINCIPLES, which are the foundation of a true Pilates exercise program:

- **Concentration** - focus on the action of the muscles; how they respond and feel;
- **Control** - at all times coming from the core (Powerhouse);
- **Center** - all energy begins at the core and flows outward to the extremities
- **Fluidity** - movements transition smoothly from one position to the next
- **Precision** - the quality and placement is exact
- **Breath** - inhale and exhale fully and in a coordinated manner with each movement

The following exercise contracts the Powerhouse and stretches the hamstrings. It is a modification of a Pilates exercise called

THE ROLL UP

Perform this exercise slowly and at a constant speed with an awareness of each muscle fiber coordinated with breath.

Lie on your back. Bend your knees, feet flat. The soles of the feet are planted firmly on the mat. Squeeze your knees together and tighten your gluteus maximus and abdominal muscles. Inhale and slowly roll up bringing your chin to your chest. Continue moving forward by feeling each portion of your torso contracting to roll up and the muscles on each side of the vertebra in your spine stretching one at a time. Exhale as you slowly straighten your knees and slide your legs/feet forward along the floor. Continue moving the torso forward toward the legs. Pull your navel toward your spine. Stretch your back as your head and chin continue forward over your chest. Lift your chest over your ribs. Lift your hips and thighs as you continue stretching forward. Initiate rolling back by squeezing your gluteus and bending your knees. The pelvis is scooped. Exhale as you feel each vertebra pressing into the mat, one at a time. Repeat. Finish by lying on your back on the mat, hands resting at your sides.

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END

ART100 QUIZ

In the body of an email to askesa@aol.com, place your first and last name on the first line and number the page from 1 to 10. DO NOT SEND AS AN ATTACHMENT. Answer TRUE or FALSE to the accuracy of each of the 10 statement below based on the information in this ESA article. You will be emailed a CEC validation certificate of completion, which you must keep for your records. ESA cannot replace lost forms and the article would need to be resubmitted.

- 1 - Pilates exercise is a new technique created in the 1960s.
- 2 - Pilates aims to make a person more aware of their body.
- 3 - The exercises are performed to upbeat music that motivates the exerciser.
- 4 - Pilates developed over 500 exercises.
- 5 - The exercises stretch and strengthen muscles, open joints, and release tension.
- 6 - "The Art of Contrology" was the original name of what we now call Pilates.
- 7 - Pilates exercises are modeled after Zen, Greek, Roman, Yoga, and western forms.
- 8 - The "Reformer" is the name of a popular exercise performed on a mat.
- 9 - The following are basic principles of Pilates: concentration, control, and speed.
- 10 - Control must be executed at all times and comes from the core or Powerhouse.