

Working from the Core

By Selina Foreman

It's an all-too-common mistake: You're active, you play tennis twice a week, jog regularly, do some weight training in the gym. You're perfectly healthy, strong and fit. So, why did you injure your rotator cuff to the point that even picking up your racket makes you cringe?

The answer could be that your core fitness is lacking. Pilates is all about core. The most important muscle, the transversus abdominis, is actually at the core of your abdominal muscles, your deepest layer of muscles. Pilates is a fantastic way to enhance all your other activities by strengthening that core and giving you the body awareness necessary to avoid injury.

"I think it's an important way to be, working from the core," says Moira Stott Merrithew. "You're just more powerful and there's research to prove that." Merrithew is co-founder of Stott Pilates, along with husband Lindsay. Stott Pilates is rooted in the traditional style as taught by Joseph and Clara Pilates, but incorporates modern biomechanics and breaks down each exercise, focusing in on single joint stabilizers. Merrithew often starts clients out with simplified versions of traditional Pilates exercises so they can focus on individual movements.

Working from the Inside Out

In Pilates, you're literally working from the inside out; tapping into those deep abdominal muscles helps stabilize larger, more superficial muscles as you go through the exercises. Referring to the transversus abdominis, Merrithew points out, "You kind of want that to fire before you go into movement so that that's stabilizing and working as you're going through the movement."

That idea of stabilization is carried over into daily life, which is why Pilates is often touted as being so universal. The movements you perform on the reformer can easily be

translated to movements you perform every day—especially things like a tennis serve or a golf swing. However, it takes a good instructor to link the benefits you receive in class to your specific daily activities.

"Pilates should be more than just exercise," says Karen Sanzo, a physical therapist, certified Pilates instructor and Pilates teacher trainer who co-founded Pilates Unlimited, based in Dallas, Texas. "If you're a new mother with twins, your requirements are different than if you're Lance Armstrong."

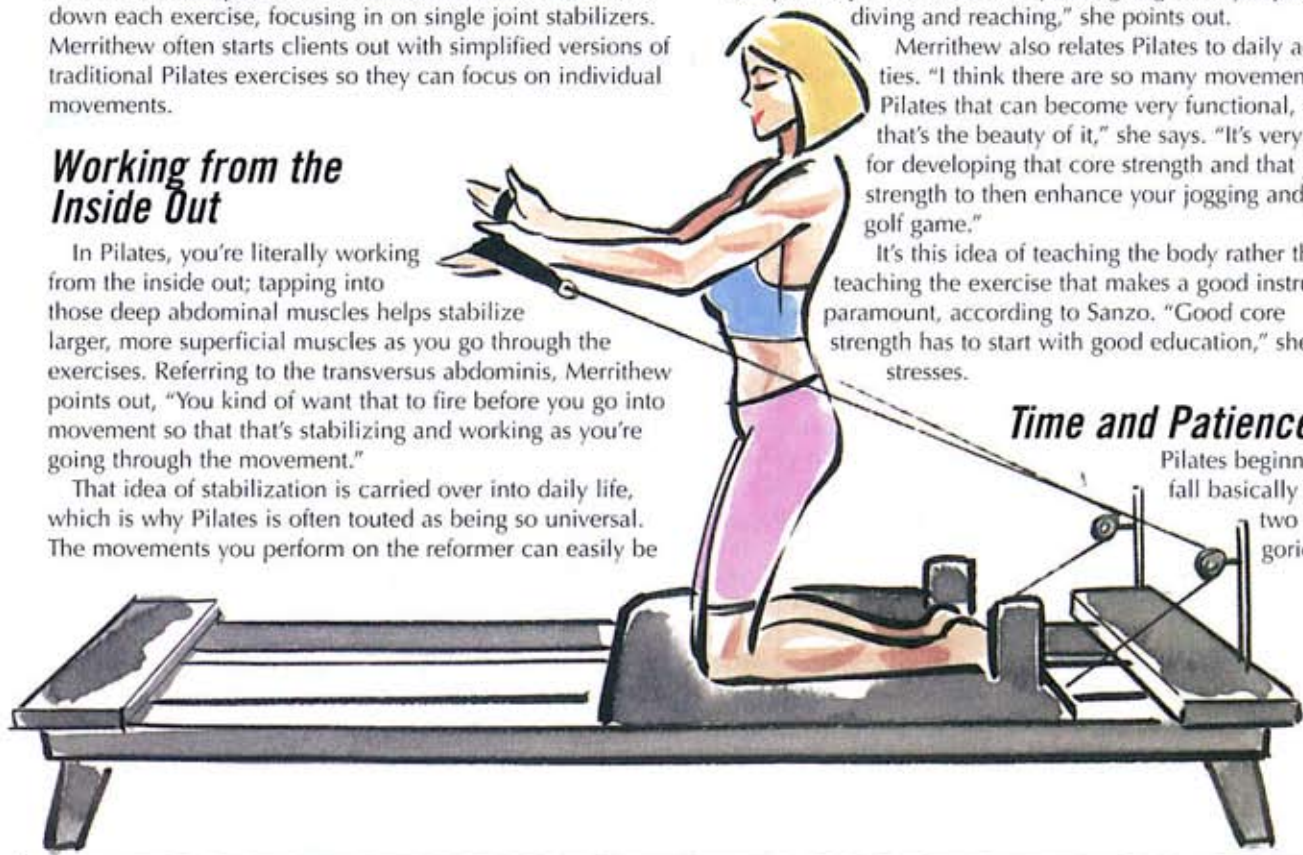
As a physical therapist, Sanzo evaluates patients' strength and flexibility based on the spinal column and the three-dimensional area identified as the core. The space from your diaphragm to your pelvic floor, front and back, makes up the core. She then connects movements she teaches to movements patients perform in daily life. "If you're a sand volleyball player, your core better work with your arms and legs as far apart as possible, because you're going to be jumping and diving and reaching," she points out.

Merrithew also relates Pilates to daily activities. "I think there are so many movements in Pilates that can become very functional, and that's the beauty of it," she says. "It's very good for developing that core strength and that joint strength to then enhance your jogging and your golf game."

It's this idea of teaching the body rather than teaching the exercise that makes a good instructor paramount, according to Sanzo. "Good core strength has to start with good education," she stresses.

Time and Patience

Pilates beginners fall basically into two categories,



Pilates body

according to Sanzo. One type is seeking help because something is out of balance—an injury, chronic pain, or some other malady has led them to Pilates. The other type is someone who is searching for a cure-all that will easily melt away pounds, making them feel and look better in a matter of weeks. “I don’t think we should see Pilates as a panacea,” says Sanzo.

In fact, it often takes time—and patience—to tap into the deep abdominal muscles that are critical to most hallmark Pilates exercises. Most of us simply haven’t used these muscles before because it is so easy to let larger, more superficial muscles do the work, even if you’re in great physical condition.

Most beginner classes spend a lot of time on body awareness, connecting the mind to what the body is doing. Teaching clients the difference between hollowing out your C-curve as you slowly roll up one vertebra at a time, and engaging superficial muscles like the external and internal obliques to power yourself upright, is subtle business. But doing even the simplest exercises from the core is the difference between doing Pilates and performing Pilates choreography.

“It’s very much an inward focus and an inward learning about how your body works,” states Merrithew. “You know, really focus on how you’re moving your leg from A to B. Don’t just do it mindlessly.”

The Mind-Body Thing

It is this mind-body component to Pilates that many find so satisfying. Even if you’re used to pounding out 60 minutes on a treadmill, absently listening to a thumping beat, Pilates may give you some much needed peace and focus. In this way, Pilates addresses a different kind of core fitness—the mental kind.

Pilates is not typically as spiritual as something like yoga, but there is a yogic quality to some of the components that make up Pilates. Breathing is critical, and different instructors have different ideas about what makes a Pilates lesson fulfilling. Some dim the lights, tune into chanting monks and begin each lesson with breathing. Others warm you up with a few roll-ups and then dive right into “the hundreds,” the customary warm-up exercise.

“You have to be willing to look at your perception of exercise,” says Sanzo. Keeping an open mind about what a hard workout looks like and feels like might be tough to do for fitness gurus, but cross-training is critical for everyone. Pilates provides a good complement to almost any repertoire. The level of spirituality can be tuned up or down depending on individual taste. Of course, some classes can evade the mind-body connection altogether.

“It can be done completely non-mind-body,” says

Merrithew. “But I think for Pilates to be effective, you need that component.”

Sanzo doesn’t even recognize Pilates that’s taught without the mind-body connection, claiming the mental component

Experts in the Field Wax Poetic about Core Fitness...

“I think there are so many different ways and approaches to core fitness. The core is one of the major emphases of Pilates.”

- Moira Stott Merrithew, co-founder of Stott Pilates based in Toronto, Canada

“Good core strength has to start with good education.”

- Karen Sanzo, physical therapist, certified Pilates instructor and co-founder of Pilates Unlimited in Dallas, Texas

“The Pilates method of body conditioning is designed to give you suppleness, natural grace and skill that will be unmistakably reflected in the way you walk, play and the way you work.”

- Joseph Pilates, founder of Pilates

is “100 percent” of what Pilates essentially is. “People can do Pilates for a long time and never understand core strength,” she says.

Learning Pilates’ choreography simply isn’t Pilates and will not provide the benefits Pilates is known for. In fact, Joseph Pilates himself is often quoted as saying, “The mind itself creates the body.” ■