

ACTIVE

A weekly look at how people keep fit

Real men take Pilates classes

BY JANICE TURNER
LIFE WRITER

Tony Armstrong knows guys who are into heavy-duty weight training and who think that anything less simply isn't worthy.

He's not convinced.

Plagued by persistent back, neck and shoulder pain, he decided to follow the lead of his girlfriend (now wife) and take a Pilates class, a stretch and strengthen workout that targets the abdominals as well as the muscles that surround the spine.

Two years have passed and Armstrong, 38, producer of and cameraman for *Cottage Life Television*, is a devotee. He takes an hour-long session two mornings a week.

"I feel a lot better," he says. "I have less pain, better posture and, over-all, more energy."

He seriously injured his knee last summer and had to have surgery. And yet he is still able to do his workout, with some minor changes.

Armstrong is no couch potato. He's an avid water and snow skier. He's also into snowboarding and loves to play tennis. He doesn't consider Pilates an exercise for wimps.

Pilates (pronounced puh-LAH-tees) is a no-impact stretch and strength workout that requires significant concentration. Some of the exercises, particularly the gentle, stretch and curl movements, can look almost cat-like.

Many of the exercises are based on familiar (though modified) move-

ments such as leg lifts, sit-ups and push-ups. Repetitions are limited to no more than 10 so participants can focus on the quality of each movement.

Done regularly, it can result in well-toned muscles without the bulk, including a firm stomach — a goal of both men and women. It is not a cardiovascular workout, but will nicely complement that type of activity.

Moira Stott-Merrithew, 38, an ex-ballet dancer who opened Stott Pilates Studio in Toronto in 1987, has developed a contemporary approach to the conditioning regimen pioneered by Joseph Pilates more than seven decades ago.

At an hour a session, participants definitely break a sweat

Because the concept is often described as having elements of yoga, it can be a tough sell for some, particularly men who associate a "real" workout with high-impact pursuits.

Terming it kinder and gentler can be misleading, she says. At an hour a session, participants definitely break a sweat.

Pilates is based on the premise that building strong core muscles can bring the spine and the rest of the body into balance. It is a concept that has been popular among dancers for nearly 80 years.

A routine can be done on the floor with just a comfortable mat, or done with a variety of equipment.

Pat Saunderson, 67, has been doing Pilates off and on for the last nine years.

"I find the stretching useful in keeping the body limber," says Saunderson, who took up golf last year, four years after having hip replacement surgery.

"I'm generally healthy, from a heart point of view, but I am not very flexible. I find I stretch better, and I basically feel better."

"I feel looser and I can do things a lot more easily, even just bending down to pick up a golf ball. I find you tend to slowly stiffen up as you age and this sort of offsets the process."

People who walk, bicycle and are generally active often overlook the importance of maintaining flexibility.

Saunderson suspects Pilates is more popular among women because "women exchange information about their bodies a lot more freely than men do."

If men want to remain vital as they age that's going to have to change, he says.

Participating in an activity still dominated by females doesn't faze Armstrong.

"I certainly have no hang-ups about it," he says.

Rather than treating his ailments with a once-a-week massage as he used to, Armstrong aims to prevent problems through regular conditioning.

"All I know is that I am less prone to wear and tear on my body because of this," he says.

Don Starr had what he considers a rather common "male problem."

He did a lot of heart-pounding exercise, but didn't pay nearly enough attention to limbering and stretching.

The film financier who mountain bikes, skis, snowshoes and swims took up Pilates six years ago after his wife introduced him to the method.

Today, he does some type of Pilates workout five days a week — twice a week with



RICK EGLINTON/TORONTO STAR

KEEPING FIT: Don Starr, a film financier and fitness enthusiast, works out on Pilates exercise equipment.

an instructor. Starr, 49, recently opened an office in England and is so smitten with the method he has found an instructor there.

"I do it to stay in condition and to relieve stress," he says. While in Toronto, he finds it more convenient to do his regimen at his home gym than in a studio. He uses machines for added resistance.

"I was skeptical initially," he concedes. "There is a common misconception that it's a woman's exercise and it's just not true. But it can take some time to get enough of the movements to keep the pace up. If you spend a lot of time waiting in between movements then an hour can go by pretty quickly."

"The theory behind this is that you're only as young as your spine. It's made a huge difference to me. It's really made me strong and allowed me to use different muscles in my cardio pursuits and to experience less muscle fatigue."

Starr says he doesn't see it as time-consuming.

"I get up in the morning and do it and start my day an hour later. I find that later in the day you leave things, the more excuses you can build up."

Stott-Merrithew says about 20 per cent of her studio's clients are male.

"How quite a few of them have started, their wives have started and they've gotten hooked," she says. "The common thread is that these men are mostly between 35 and 55, and they really want to improve their flexibility, balance and co-ordination."

The method appeals to men who want to build strong, flexible muscles without the bulk. It helps them in other pursuits, such as skiing, skating and golf.

"Injuries do come with age," Stott-Merrithew notes. "There are a lot of ex-athletes out there who really want to work out and want to get strong again, but don't know how. If you are really strong through the centre of your body, almost immediately the rest of the body becomes stronger because you're not compensating."

Pilates tunes mind and body

Pilates is an exercise discipline that works specific muscles by contracting, holding and then releasing them.

Each move starts at the abdomen, with a focus on controlling stomach muscles. Routines carefully alternate stretching and strengthening.

The method was developed in the 1920s by the German gymnast turned nurse Joseph Pilates. He used it to help rehabilitate hospital patients.

Pilates can be done with or without equipment. It is touted as a way to tone and develop muscles; improve posture; strengthen the back; flatten the stomach; improve flexibility and stamina; reduce stress and bring the mind in tune with the body.

For more information, contact the Stott Studio in Toronto at (416)-482-4050. You can also contact fitness centres and other exercise facilities in your area to learn more about class offerings and costs.

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MICHAEL STUPARYK/TORONTO STAR

IT WORKS: Tony Armstrong says Pilates has helped ease his back, leg and knee pain.