

The Pilates body? 'Long, slender thighs and calves, a flat tummy, a strong back, and a high tushie'



Dancer
Joao
Mauricio.
Hair, Gad
Cohen
for Gad
Studio.

Ballet Theatre, and the School of American Ballet. "One of the major faults of other exercise methods is the way they emphasize strength over flexibility—because as we get older, there's a natural process of tightening. Pilates helps correct that process." Hamilton himself is a Pilates practitioner—"since last fall, when my wife dragged me there"—who claims twice-a-week sessions at Robert Fitzgerald's Manhattan studio have made him "much less stiff." As a surgeon, he touts the advantages of "balancing protagonist and antagonist forces in the joint." As an exerciser, he adds: "There's pleasant variety to the workout—not like jumping on the Lifecycle."

The standard studio session begins with a student lying down on a horizontal apparatus, called a Reformer, that looks like the frame of a single bed. After adjusting the number of springs to regulate resistance, students place their feet, turned out at a 45-degree angle, on the machine's footboard. Meanwhile, they'll have straightened their spine, relaxed their shoulders, elongated the neck, tucked abdominals, and aligned hips, knees, and ankles. Then—and only then—will they push against the footboard.

After ten rhythmic repeats of that push, they'll progress to the next exercise—usually a push from the heels—until they've completed about two dozen exercises culled from the official canon. No shoes are worn, because the work includes even the muscles of the feet. No music is

used, because concentration on control of the body should be total.

And Pilates gives you a lot to think about: each exercise has a prescribed placement, rhythm, and breathing pattern. The method mandates few repetitions—rarely more than ten. Muscles are never worked to exhaustion; ergo, there's no soreness the next day. During a studio session, the student usually uses various machines and gadgets, like the Reformer or rubber balls of assorted sizes, that help him or her locate specific muscles.

Muscles—or the lack thereof—was the peculiar obsession of Joseph Hubertus Pilates, born near Düsseldorf in 1880. The proverbial skinny, sickly kid, he overcompensated so effectively that by the time he moved to England in 1912 he could claim success as a bodybuilder, diver, and gymnast. By the outbreak of World War I, he had added stunts as a boxer, circus performer, and instructor in self-defense. Interned in England, Pilates passed the war years devising spring-driven machines to aid the reconditioning of the wounded and disabled. Back in Germany after the war, his exercises attracted the attention of modern-dance pioneers Rudolf von Laban, Mary Wigman, and Hanya Holm—to this day, Pilates' moves remain part of the Holm technique.

In 1923, Pilates and his wife, Clara, emigrated to the U.S., opening a small gym that, at one time, shared an address with the New York City Ballet. Almost immediately, the dance world

beat a path to his door. "Uncle Joe" had managed to create the only conditioning system able to encompass the range of motion and function peculiar to professional dancers. In the days before special sports medicine and dance medicine centers, the Pilates method was also the easiest and most effective route to rehabilitation for injured athletes. Over the years, Pilates' "Body Contrology" underwent several surges in popularity, but never crossed over to become a fad.

This is the kind of technique that's dependent on a skilled instructor, it doesn't come with flashy computers and graphs and choreography like other exercise fads," points out Elizabeth J. Larkam, coordinator of Dance-medicine Rehabilitation at the Center for Sports Medicine at St. Francis Memorial Hospital in San Francisco. Although St. Francis Memorial sponsors a short-term program that has attracted potential trainers from as far away as Australia, Pilates himself never gave his imprimatur to any program of accreditation or certification. Neither Pilates nor Clara licensed the system, incorporated an institute, or expanded beyond their single (now defunct) Manhattan studio. Copyrights and patents, designed to discourage bastardization, also discouraged dissemination. The method was, and is, handed down through informal apprenticeships.

The Pilates' method's grande dame and official heir, Romana Kryzanowska, still, after 50 years, practices what she preaches at both the Body Art studio