



# pilates

Annie Clark is used to challenging cardio workouts in the outdoors, so the low-impact, highly focussed art of Pilates came as a welcome change...

So what is so effective about the Joseph Pilates system? His system of exercise is based on his belief that "it is the mind itself which builds the body". Pilates is said to develop a strong core or centre of the body. The core consists of the deep abdominal muscles along with the muscles closest to the spine. Pilates exercises develop core control, integrating the trunk, pelvis and shoulder girdle. It is also designed to build long muscles and flexible joints. Pilates elongates and strengthens, developing muscle elasticity and joint mobility. A body with balanced strength and flexibility is less likely to be injured. Pilates can also help to create an evenly conditioned body. In an unconditioned body, weak muscles tend to get weaker and strong muscles tend to get stronger. The result is muscular imbalance – a primary cause of injury and chronic back pain. Pilates is designed to condition the whole body. The entire musculature is evenly balanced and conditioned, helping participants enjoy daily activities and sports with greater ease and less chance of injury.

Pilates exercises train several muscle groups at once in smooth, continuous movements. By developing proper technique, you can actually re-train your body to move in safer, more efficient patterns of motion – invaluable for injury recovery, sports performance, good posture and optimal health. Pilates is also designed to improve the mind-body connection. It can help

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get your mind in tune with your body. The quality of movement is valued over quantity of repetitions. Proper breathing is also essential. Correct breathing helps you execute movements with maximum power and efficiency. Learning to breathe properly can also reduce stress.

Pilates is promoted as a safe workout. It is designed to be gentle to your body while giving it a challenging workout. Many of the exercises are performed in reclining or sitting positions, and most are low impact and partially weight bearing. Pilates is often used in physical therapy facilities to rehabilitate injuries.

I turned up to the class early and, while I waited, I realised I may have come ill-equipped. "Do I need a mat?" I asked one of the friendly women, hoping that my towel would do the job just as well. She reassured me that a towel would be fine but that I should take off my shoes and socks. This was not something I'd been accustomed to in aerobics, so I prayed the participants – me included! – didn't have smelly feet. There were about twenty people in the class – and forty feet. Fortunately, I could breathe easy! We were told the class was an hour and a half long so I hoped I had the stamina to go all the way. We were all given long, rubber strips called AusBands. Apparently, Pilates can either be done with a range of equipment and machines (such as the Reformers) or simply with mats/towels and rubber bands.

We started the class by standing with our backs to the wall and our feet placed about two feet away from it. With deep breaths, we reached down between our feet with knees bent and then straightened our knees, keeping our hands near our feet to stretch our hamstrings. We then had to get into a sitting position, with our backs still against the wall and our legs at 90 degrees, and hold this position for two minutes. This was harder than it sounds! By the end of the two minutes, my thighs were shaking slightly with the effort of holding myself up.

We went back to our towels/mats and stretched our hamstring muscles even further in various positions. The first exercise involved sitting with our legs straight out in front of us and, with our hands behind our heads, lowering our heads to our legs. We did the same with first the right leg bent and then the left. The next position involved lying on our backs and leaving one leg straight. The other foot we placed in the AusBand and pulled towards our heads, keeping the leg straight. I really felt the effect this was having in stretching my hamstring muscles. Some of the class who weren't as flexible placed their legs up on the windowsill instead.

We moved on to the core. The first position was to hold ourselves in the shape of a V. That is, sitting with our legs and back raised at an angle, with our arms out in front. We then lay with our legs pointed to the ceiling and reached up to our feet. The third position involved lying face down on the floor then raising ourselves up on our elbows and toes, holding our bodies as straight as a board. I really felt this in my torso muscles, as we had to hold the position

## THE HISTORY OF PILATES

The Pilates method of exercise was created by Joseph Pilates, who was born in 1880, near Dusseldorf, Germany. Joe was frail as a child, suffering from asthma, rickets and rheumatic fever. He overcame his physical limitations with exercise and bodybuilding. Joe went to England in 1912, where he worked as a self-defence instructor for detectives at Scotland Yard. At the outbreak of World War I, Joe was interned as an 'enemy alien' with other German nationals. During his internment, Joe refined his ideas and trained other internees in his system of exercise. He rigged springs to hospital beds, enabling bedridden patients to exercise against resistance; an innovation that led to his later equipment designs. An influenza epidemic struck England in 1918, killing thousands of people, but not a single one of Joe's trainees died. This, he claimed, testified to the effectiveness of his system.

twice, thirty seconds each time. We finished the core exercises with leg scissors in the seated position and pelvic thrusts on our knees with our arms straight.

Our shoulders were the next muscle group to be worked on. We grabbed light weights and slowly circled our arms in small circles while raising them from our sides to over our heads and back again. We reversed the circles and repeated the process several times. This exercise really makes your shoulders burn. Hip exercises followed. One position was to lie on our sides and raise the top leg, then move it in slow circles one way then the other.

We stretched our hamstrings again by sitting on the floor with our legs apart and leaning our bodies forward, reaching out in front and as low as we could go. The last stretch was a gluteus maximus stretch, with one foot placed sideways on a bent knee, then pulling the bent leg towards the head while lying on our backs. After relaxing in the prayer position for one minute, we were instructed to get up slowly. This brought the session to a relaxing close.

Throughout the class, the instructor emphasised proper breathing and correct spinal and pelvic alignment, as well as getting us to concentrate on smooth, flowing movements. This made me become very aware of how my body felt, where it was in space, and how to control its movement. For anyone who needs to improve their flexibility and strength, or for anyone who wants to learn how to relax and improve their body's balance and co-ordination, add Pilates to your weekly exercise program.

## ULTRA-FIT CLASS RATING

### Cardiovascular: 1

Pilates is not a cardiovascular workout.

### Strength: 7

Pilates develops strength in your abdominal, pelvic and shoulder muscles.

### Agility: 7

Pilates helps to increase your agility and body balance.

### Co-ordination: 7

As Pilates works the body evenly and provides exercises to improve your balance, it will improve your co-ordination.

### Flexibility: 10

Pilates is excellent for improving flexibility as the class focuses on stretching and lengthening the muscles of the body.

### Local Muscular Endurance: 7

Pilates develops muscular endurance in your legs, stomach and shoulders because it involves forming a position and holding that position for an extended period of time.



Annie Clark is a registered fitness leader who has been involved in the fitness industry for the past ten years. She is also a psychologist, freelance journalist and model, and has won several fitness titles including Miss Fitness, Miss Fitness Model and Body Beautiful.