

# Core values

Exponents of Pilates believe beauty and health come from inner strength, writes *Rosalie Higson*.

In an airy studio flooded with light and overlooking some of the most valuable real estate in inner Sydney, six women and a man are performing graceful moves on neatly arranged metal and wood equipment. These contraptions of pulleys and springs, known as the Cadillac and the Reformer, are the engine room of the Pilates method. There are no crashing weights, no sweating jocks, loud music or treadmills. The atmosphere is one of quiet concentration, with an occasional clanging as machinery is adjusted. Everyone here is improving posture, flexibility and core strength.

"Core strength is the buzzword of the millennium," says Sally Anderson of Pilates International Studio. "People are looking for wellness, coupled with a big interest in how celebrities keep their bodies lithe and beautiful. 'Is this what Madonna does?' people ask, and that's coming at it from the wrong angle. Some articles claimed Pilates alone made her gorgeous, but there's much more to it than that.

"Even when the hype blows itself out, I believe interest will increase, particularly because of the referrals from practitioners."

In her former incarnation as a professional dancer, Anderson became

interested in Pilates after it was recommended as a treatment for a serious injury to her ankle ligaments. She was back on stage in four weeks and now has 16 years' experience in teaching Pilates behind her.

Core training is not a new concept; in the early 1900s, German-born Joseph Pilates had, by the age of 14, developed his system for conditioning the whole body based around core stability. But perhaps driven by the mind + body + spirit impetus of the Aquarian age, combined with a shift in the mentality of people who are increasingly looking for holistic health, physiotherapists, personal trainers, yoga teachers and gyms are advocating the benefits of a strong set of transverse abdominals and back muscles. You use core muscles to sit, stand and lift objects; improving them is about functional day-to-day fitness. Most of us use only around 60 per cent of our muscles in the core area.

"Everyone has realised how important core strength is," says Anderson. "Without strong, deep abdominal muscles and the deep spinal stabilising muscles, as soon as you get lower back pain or trauma to the spine, the little spinal stabilisers called multifidii switch off [no-one yet understands why]. The transverse

abdominals and the multifidii are the two most talked about muscles in relation to core stability. They hold the vertebrae apart and stabilise them – without that, the body is working with unstable vertebrae. They can float and drift apart, you get pressure on one side, and that is one of the main causes of lower back pain."

As the population ages, people are looking for a low-impact alternative to working out, jogging and running. Golfers love Pilates, as it provides a balance for the one-sided sport; triathletes stretch out their pounded bodies; footballers mend their inflamed groins and pulled hamstrings.

Accident victims are often referred to Pilates; WorkCover covers it and, increasingly, health funds. One of Anderson's most successful rehabilitations involved a woman suffering from a rare and severe form of epilepsy. She was able to bring the condition under control within a year. For people with osteoporosis, the exercises open out the body, with backward rather than forward bends that put less pressure on a compromised spine.

Some people find the Pilates method too intellectual – too much mindfulness. Fair enough, says Anderson, "but in Pilates you have to

integrate mind and body. It's based on regaining body awareness and then being able to work with and control the body. It's intense. And it's gradual. Men especially come in all gung ho and say, 'Oh, I can lift the big blue weight' ... It takes retraining; some people hook into that and others don't. It usually takes a good ten sessions to get the flow of it."

The likelihood of injuries in Pilates-type exercises tends to be far less than in most forms of aerobic exercise. But Anderson says "the biggest issue in the industry is there are no real regulations; we are pushing for that. There are any number of courses: you can do a two-day course and call yourself a teacher. Many gyms offer classes with far too many people in them. They are merely teaching movement, rather than Pilates. There should be a maximum of four people per instructor."

Exercise fads come around often but Pilates goes way beyond providing photogenic muscles. "If there is one word to describe Pilates, I would say balance," says Anderson. "It balances the mind with all the physical systems. Anyone at any level of fitness can do it."

So, turn your attention inward. Your stomach is no longer just a place to put food. As Joe Pilates would say, it's your powerhouse. Tap into it. ☉

