



*There's
a reason
celebrities love
it and gyms are
scrambling to offer
classes. Who doesn't
want to look taller
and slimmer?*

PILATES

(pib-LAH-tees)

BY **Melissa Chessher** PHOTOGRAPHY BY **Colleen Duffley**

Lyn Bushlon had begun to think she was on life's downhill slope. It wasn't long after the birth of her second child that she was diagnosed with breast cancer. After a double mastectomy and reconstructive surgery, Lyn, who owns an art gallery that she runs out of her home in Charlottesville, Virginia, started searching for a way to reclaim her physical self. A fitness-savvy sister-in-law suggested Pilates, and the first time Lyn tried it, she was hooked. "It's the first thing that got me feeling whole and stronger and energized," she says. "It's amazing, but this made me feel better than I've ever felt before."

It's hard to decide what's more impressive about Pilates (pronounced pib-LAH-tees): the claims (a sleeker, taller, stronger silhouette without a treadmill or a dumbbell) or the celebrity clientele (Madonna, Uma Thurman, and Julia Roberts, to name a few). *People* magazine dubbed it the "model workout," a reference to the occupation of choice for many of its Big Apple advocates. *Time* magazine highlighted the technique's "no pain, no sweat" philosophy in its story about how the method is taking gyms by storm.

In the sixties and seventies, Pilates was the well-kept fitness secret of elite ballet dancers and the

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occasional well-to-do client. In 1976 there were only five studios in the U.S. that offered the program. Today, there are 160 certified centers. Yet Joan Breibart, president of Physicalmind Institute in Santa Fe, New Mexico, which trains Pilates instructors and serves as a clearinghouse for information and equipment for the technique, says it was not long ago that a herd of elephants could stampede through a studio and not trample anybody. "In the eighties it didn't matter if it took 10 years to train a teacher because everyone was taking aerobics from Jane Fonda," says Breibart.

Seventy Years to an Overnight Sensation

Nothing could be further from Fonda than Pilates. It was created by Joseph Pilates, a German-born circus performer and gymnast whose childhood illnesses (asthma, rickets, and rheumatic fever) sparked a quest to overcome his physical limitations. During World War I, he began fitting hospital beds with springs and straps to help rehabilitate wounded soldiers. Pilates's motive was to devise a series of controlled movements that engage the mind and body in developing strong, flexible muscles without building bulk. He designed 500 exercises that demand concentration and focus on developing abdomen strength and flexibility to ensure proper posture and to reduce the risk of injury. Pilates came to America after the war and opened an exercise studio in New York City in 1926. Shortly thereafter, famous dancers, including Martha Graham and George Balanchine, became devotees.

Pilates and its followers stand in stark contrast to the frenetic, gym-based fitness trends of late. The equipment itself stands apart from the metallic cyber-sweat contraptions that populate most health clubs.

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Pilates consists of both floor work and machine exercises, but using machines is the way to do Pilates in its purest form. The most common machine is the Reformer, a wooden-framed gizmo with pulleys, cables, springs, adjustable bars, and a cushioned, floating carriage. (Other machines include the Cadillac and Barrel.) You secure yourself on or around a machine by adjusting a neck rest, shoulder block, foot stop, or belt. With the Reformer, a person's body weight is used for resistance as the arms or legs are stretched with slow, rhythmic movements. Muscles become taut and toned, not bulky and tight. Although

you can do the floor exercises alone, you need an instructor to assist with the machines. And the better you do the exercises, the more challenging they become.

"It's the most efficient form of exercise because you are building strength and flexibility at the same time, as opposed to taking a strength-training class and a stretch class," says Breibart.

Stand Tall and Breathe Right

Pilates bonds body and mind through two principal components: posture and breathing. By centering around the abdomen, Pilates strengthens the muscles in the back, hips, and stomach to support the spine. The method works the deepest layer of abdominal muscles (as opposed to the outer, more visible layer), which helps build a "girdle of strength" for the spine.

"It lifts your belly and your back end while it tones and strengthens all your other muscles," says Lelie Hughes, a Pilates

instructor in Birmingham, Alabama.

"But best of all, it reminds the

