



PHOTOGRAPHY BY ARTHUR COHEN

# Work of Ages

pilates helps athletes improve their game—  
and helps average joes and janets  
look and move like elite pros

BY JOHN GAREY, MS

I've been teaching Pilates for almost 15 years, from Chicago, New York and Miami to Majorca, Moscow and Toowoomba, Australia. Most of the people I meet are hoping that Pilates will help them achieve something very specific. I can't tell you how many times I've heard "Make me look like a dancer" or "I want arms like Madonna" or "I want six-pack abs." Of course, fitness goals aren't always superficial. People have heard that Pilates can accomplish everything from curing back pain to growing the spine two inches. (FYI: I've been practicing Pilates just about every day since the early '90s, and I'm exactly the same height as when I started. If *only* I were two inches taller!) What *is* true is that Pilates is not only an excellent stand-alone workout, but it's also a fantastic complement to almost any other activity. And when practiced regularly, it will help you look your absolute best.

One of the reasons I fell in love with Pilates is that it can give you a compact and strong body without creating bulk. I've spent my life working out and have enjoyed practically every minute of it. When I started Pilates, I couldn't touch my toes (not even close), and that's not good for a Sport Aerobics competitor. (For those of you who've never heard of Sport Aerobics, it was really popular back in the '90s: Think high-speed gymnastics performed to music on a hardwood floor. It hurts just to think about it now.) Having heard that Pilates was great for increasing flexibility, I plunged in head-first, with Patrick O'Brien in Chicago. Not surprisingly, I did improve my flexibility, but beyond that, *everything* I did got better. I jumped higher and had better balance, and even those one-arm pushups were suddenly much easier. I was completely sold on my new exercise program and made it my goal to let everyone possible know about Pilates. (P.S.: I snagged the U.S. National Aerobic championship in 1995 in the team division, along with incredible athletes Patrick Knowles and Johnny Underwood.)

In the late 90's I started working with Moira and Lindsay

Merrithew, cofounders of STOTT PILATES®, and I fell in love with their scientific approach to the original work of Joe Pilates. Over time I became a master instructor trainer and was very involved in the program development of Stott Pilates' athletic series of DVDs. Along the way, I've taught many dancers, of course, but I've also worked with a former kicker for the Dallas Cowboys, the captain of the U.S. rugby team, members of Cirque du Soleil and countless other pro and amateur athletes. Every last one of them improved their game by practicing Pilates. But you don't have to be a professional anything to benefit immensely from Pilates. Everyone has his or her own physical goals, and by learning which exercises will help achieve specific goals, you can design effective workouts for anyone.

Pilates isn't a magic bullet—even after a year of practicing, the average Joe will probably not be mistaken for Michael Phelps. But you can look your best through proper nutrition and by incorporating Pilates into your workouts. We often hear that Pilates works you from the inside out, but what a lot of people don't realize is that this is literally true. Many of the exercises are designed to work all layers of muscle and to help clients achieve a balanced and toned overall muscular system. By utilizing both traditional mat and apparatus exercises, clients can strengthen muscles and achieve great flexibility through all of the major muscle groups, and develop that graceful but strong athletic look.

To get you started on your way to *your* best body, I've put together variations of some of my favorite traditional Pilates exercises. The workout is designed to recruit all the major muscles and to add balance, strength, flexibility and control. The exercises can be done with or without the small equipment recommended. You can substitute anything for the weights (toning balls, soup cans, etc.). Flexbands can be purchased at any sporting-good store or online, as can the fitness circle or Magic Circle. ▶



## standing matwork

reformer footwork without the reformer

**props:** fitness circle (optional for upper-body work). You may also use a medium-size kid's or fitness ball.

**muscles targeted:** butt, thighs, calves and chest

1. Stand with feet hip-distance apart and legs turned out, holding the fitness circle in front of your chest.
2. Inhale and bend your knees and hips, keeping your back straight, and simultaneously press fitness circle away from your body.
3. Come up on your toes and raise your heels.
4. Exhale and straighten knees and hips as you simultaneously bend your elbows again, then lower your heels. Do 5–10 repetitions in each direction.



## Single-Leg Standing Work

**props:** fitness circle (optional for upper-body work)  
You may also use a medium-size kid's or fitness ball.

**muscles targeted:** butt, thighs, obliques, chest and anterior deltoids

1. Stand with your legs together and hold the circle in front of your chest.
2. Inhale and lunge back with your left leg and then touch the floor with your toes as you simultaneously extend the circle forward.
3. Exhale and bring your left knee up and extend it as you simultaneously flex your elbows out to the sides and squeeze the circle, rotating your torso to the left. Do 5–10 repetitions on each side.



# standing BREAST STROKE WITH FLEXBAND

**prop:** flexband

**muscles targeted:** thighs, butt, shoulders and back extensors

1. Stand on the band with your feet hip-distance apart, holding the ends of the band in your hands, arms by your sides.
2. Exhale and bend your knees and hips, keeping your back straight, as you simultaneously reach your arms over your head, making sure you keep your spine in neutral.
3. Inhale and straighten your knees and hips as you simultaneously extend your arms out to your sides in a wide V and then back by your sides while extending your spine. Do 5–10 repetitions.





## the hundred variation with bicep work

**props:** toning balls, hand weights or soup cans  
**muscles targeted:** abs, front of thigh, hips and biceps

**1.** Lie on your back with your knees bent, feet flat on the floor and arms by your sides with a weight in each hand.

**2.** Exhale and curl your upper torso away from the mat as you bend one knee into Tabletop, keeping your arms close by your sides and hovering above the mat. Inhale and maintain your position.

**3.** Exhale as you simultaneously curl your arms and extend your knee out. Do 5 repetitions on each leg.

**4.** Do 5 repetitions of entire sequence.



## shoulder bridge

variation with hand weights

**props:** toning balls, hand weights or soup cans

**muscles targeted:** back of thighs, butt, chest and front of shoulders

1. Lie on your back with your knees bent and feet flat on the floor, holding a weight in each hand, arms reaching toward the ceiling.
2. Exhale and press your hips up, then inhale and open your arms out to your sides.
3. Exhale and return to start. Do 5–10 repetitions.



## PUSH-UP Challenge

**muscles targeted:** core, chest and triceps

1. Begin on your hands and knees. Hips should be slightly flexed, and your back should be as straight as possible. Toes are on the floor.
2. Bend your elbows and hover your body just above the mat. Exhale and extend your knees into a full Plank while keeping your arms bent and your body the same distance from the mat the whole time.
3. Inhale and straighten your elbows into a push-up position.
4. Return your knees to the floor. Do 5 repetitions. 🌀