

Some yogis are finding that Pilates's focus on **BUILDING AND ENGAGING A STRONG CORE** can propel their yoga practice into new realms.

Through Contrology (Pilates Method, 2003), he wrote that age is gauged by years but by the suppleness of the body. He also noted that full, deep breathing is a key component to efficient movement. And a stint on any Pilates mat reveals similarities between Pilates exercises and yoga: Side Lift (see page 84) is much like Bhujangasana (Pose Dedicated to the Sage), Roll Over (page 82) is reminiscent of Bhujangasana (Plow Pose), and Swimming (page 85) could be mistaken for Salabhasana (Locust Pose).

But the similarities stop there. While yogis are instructed to either hold poses or flow quickly through them in vinyasas, Pilates is a rhythmic practice of precise movements repeated five to 10 times for each exercise. "There is a method to the practice, with a simultaneous emphasis on precision of movement, but a controlled flow," explains Rebecca Slovin, a certified Pilates instructor in San Francisco. By focusing on targeted movements that develop core strength, Pilates can help you build a stable center, lengthen the side body, and increase awareness of alignment. "Pilates helps some of my [yoga] students

slow down and work deeper," Slovin says. Ultimately, she says, it can help yogis get stronger, avoid injury, and sometimes advance into poses that they hadn't previously felt were possible.

Engaging the Core

WHEN YOU HEAR THE word *Pilates*, you might think of an apparatus involving pulleys, springs, or a movable platform used for a resistance workout. While equipment is an integral part of Pilates practice, the ultimate goal is to get to the mat work—a series of 34 exercises outlined in *Return to Life*. Done correctly, mat work is a lot harder than performing the hundreds of moves designed for the Universal Reformer, the Trapeze Table, the Step Barrel, and other types of Pilates equipment, because without the support of the apparatuses, students must rely solely on their own strength.

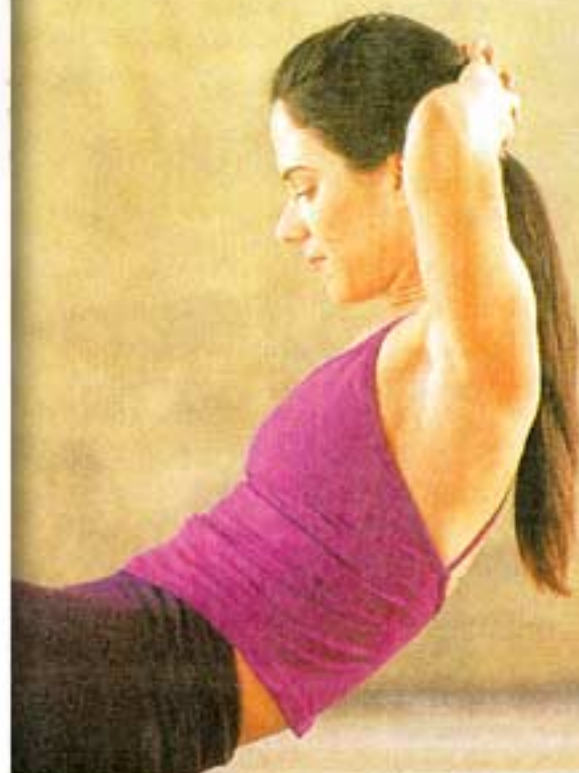
But whether practitioners work with an apparatus or on a mat, the emphasis is on using the breath to channel core energy into the center of the body and out to the limbs. "In Pilates, we say the periphery comes out of the core," says former dancer

Bob Lickens, a yoga teacher and the education director of Power Pilates, a training center based in New York. "Most of the energy in yoga is out in the periphery, but in Pilates, we learn how to bring it back to the center and send it out again."

The core, also called the Powerhouse, is the body's center of gravity; it is composed of the muscles of the lower abdomen, lower back, buttocks, and pelvic floor. Jillian Hessel, a Pilates instructor and yogi in Los Angeles who instructs the sequence of Pilates exercises shown here, explains how to locate your Powerhouse: Stand with one hand on your lower abdomen and the other on your lower back. Inhale deeply through your nose and then exhale through your mouth while pulling the lower abdominals up and into the spine, simultaneously drawing your pelvic floor muscles up and squeezing the base of your buttocks together.

The aim is to engage and strengthen the transversus abdominis (the deepest layer of abs that wrap around the torso horizontally), the obliques, the lower back muscles, and the pelvic floor during complex movements. By doing so, you develop a strong,

MODEL: SAMI BASTILL; STYLING: SAMI BASTILL; HAIR: ANDREW; MAKEUP: COLLETTE TUMER; COURTESY: PILATES MATWORK; PILATES PHOTO: MICHAEL HESSER



corsetlike support system that protects your back from injury. "Many dancers and yogis who come to Pilates are hyperflexible," Lickens says. And sometimes these extremely bendy people rely so heavily on their flexibility that they just let their muscles stretch rather than engaging and strengthening them.

"If the center is not realized or strengthened, then the structure is weak and the energy is not being channeled properly," Lickens says. Exercises such as Seal (page 83) and Swimming are ideal for challenging the core muscles and building strength, even in those who enjoy a great deal of flexibility. "As the poses get more advanced, rather than just breathing into them, you start

Neck Pull

The bending portion of this exercise promotes spinal flexibility and stretches the hamstrings; drawing the spine tail as you sit up strengthens the upper back extensor muscles. Lying on your back, extend your legs and flex your feet, keeping them hip width apart. Place your hands behind the back of your head, thumbs just below the occiput (the ridge where the skull meets the neck), and open your elbows away from each other. On an exhalation, contract from your core muscles and curl the upper body forward into a scooped-out, curved shape. Feel as though you're lengthening your spine even as you curve the crown of your head toward your kneecaps. At the bottom of the curve, fold the elbows inward and stretch the entire spine by pulling your occiput gently with your thumbs (Figure 2A). Then, on an inhalation, roll your spine up to vertical, placing each vertebra on top of the others like building blocks. Open the elbows wide again, slide your shoulder blades down your back, and use your thumbs to draw your head and spine upward.

On an exhalation, strengthen the engagement of your core and slowly round yourself back onto the mat vertebra by vertebra (Figure 2B). Come down with control and keep your elbows open as wide as you can in this phase of the exercise. Repeat 6 to 10 times.