

# Pilates

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- What I Mean By 'Core Set Up'
- My Verbal Cues ~ a "Heads Up"!

## Scope

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This document is written for:

- People about to attend one of my classes for the first time or
- Who may have missed one of my earlier "Introductory Pilates 101 Sessions" or
- Who do ab-crunch classes galore and yet are wondering why they still cannot achieve a flat LOWER stomach and/or get rid of their 'love-handles'...!

*If you read this article, you should gain a LOT MORE out of ANY Pilates class (not just mine).*

Topics covered include:

- My definition of the 'core'
- Ab-crunches... why they SUCK!
- Why Pilates is safe and highly effective
- Examples of and reasons for verbal cues I give in my classes

Personal Trainers, CX-30, TTB Instructors:

Some of you may be offended by my comments. However, I hope you may also be open minded enough to give some serious consideration to my remarks. (Hint: The uber sceptical might like to skip directly to the section 'The Strap Test'!)

## “Six Pack/Rectus Abdominis – Friend Or Foe?”!

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- Rectus Abdominis (RA) ... your ‘six pack’....
- A well defined ‘six pack’ may look good (if that’s your “thing”) BUT..... it does very little by way of supporting or stabilising the lower back.
- Furthermore, a ‘ripped six pack’ and a flat, lower stomach are entirely different things!
- Stabilising and supporting the lower back is the role and function of your ‘deeper’ core muscles (defined later on) – not the six pack.
- The ‘six pack’ is extremely dominant – it is very difficult to ‘turn it OFF’ in order to allow the lower stomach (bikini area) and obliques (“love-handles”) to ‘get a look in’....
- When you are pregnant, the six pack is the last thing you will need to give birth. The same applies after child birth when you wish to close the abdominal separation (the diastasis recti gap).
- Think about doing ab crunches to try and restore your flat bikini tummy when the abdominals have separated.... The muscles behind the gap will follow the ‘path of least resistance’ and there is a very real risk of hernia!
- Instead, the Pilates focus on Internal/External Obliques and Transverse Abs will assist with the muscles that ‘wrap around’ and close this gap from the sides.

## As Shrek Said To Donkey – It’s All About “Layers”

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- Three layers – from inside to out:  
Transverse Abs (TA)  
Obliques (Internal / External)  
Rectus Abs (RA or 6pack)
- I think of the first abdominal layer, Transverse Abdominals (TA), as a ‘elasticated wrap around’ that connects to either side of the lower rear rib cage. This is the layer that gives you a flat lower stomach and has a major impact on lower back stability/support. This is NOT the layer ab-crunches tends to target.
- I think of the next layer, obliques, as a pair of very long hands placed around my sides, wrists anchored at the rear and the fingers almost touching at the front. I visualise the fingers contracting around at the front, sliding the side muscles sideways and then backwards. You can get a ‘sense’ of these muscles when you exhale and visualise your waist ‘narrowing’.
- I think of the six pack (Rectus Abdominus) as the ‘FRONT outer layer’ and visualise it as a washboard that bolts on to the front (note – it is NOT connected to your lower rear rib cage and therefore does nothing for lower back stability / support). This is a very dominant muscle and is difficult to disengage.

- A Pilates approach to movement is very effective at targeting TA and Obliques. These are the groups that give flat lower stomach and lower back stability / control.
- This is done by *gently* engaging Pelvic Floor and floating navel to spine \*\* before and DURING various moves. It's very subtle and definitely a case of 'less is more' when trying to engage the inner layers. 'Overcook the effort' and you will engage the six pack layer!

## **Ab-Crunches – Why They SUCK!**

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- In my opinion, most of the classes that target stomach (such as ATB, TTB, CX30 – all fancy names for an ab-crunch type workout) are over-recruiting the six pack muscle group. Maybe not by intent/design but more by a lack of emphasis on correct positioning, length, breathing and focus on Pelvic Floor.
- I also feel these type of classes seek to make the moves more difficult per se rather than aimed at working muscle groups EFFECTIVELY.
- (I have genuinely lost count of the number of people I have trained who came to me complaining that they did ab-crunches galore and yet they could not achieve a flat LOWER stomach and could not get rid of the 'love handles'. This is because ab-crunches target/favour upper six pack.)
- Apart from an undue emphasis on 'six pack', my other concerns with the ab-crunch type classes is
  - the potential for lower back injury
  - the potential for hernias in women trying to reduce a diastasis recti gap after childbirth
  - they cause bulking up rather than toning
- Consider a typical set of ab-crunches.....
- **Done at speed, with jerky movements, these put enormous stresses on the lower back.**
- **As if that wasn't bad enough, ponder this.... most of the movement is achieved due to motion and momentum. Only a small portion of the muscle is actually being worked – the bit in the middle of the movement. Or, putting it another way, you are not actually WORKING most of the muscle – and this leads to bulk, not tone.**
- If you need convincing (staying on my 'soap box' for just a moment longer), the same applies to your gym based activities. As an example, ever noticed the guys curling huge weights? Massive biceps and yet, in many cases, the arms still don't look toned – the biceps actually look bulky? Ever wondered why?....
- The weights are often extremely heavy, resulting in a need for fast, jerky movements to lift the bar. These moves are only working a small part of the muscle – the bit in the middle. The muscle either side isn't being worked terribly well, with the result it gets flabby by comparison. Big, bulky arms.... No thanks.
- Then look at the toned guys.... notice how much lighter their weights are and, more importantly, watch the SPEED (or rather LACK of it) of their movement... slow, controlled and working the whole RANGE of the muscle – ie tone not bulk.

- Have a look at some of my photos on [www.adelaide-pilates.com](http://www.adelaide-pilates.com) : The Instructor / Photos. I am nearly 50 years old and do NOT use heavy weights (never have, never will). I have been doing Pilates for five years .....

## **So Why Is Pilates Different/(Dare I Say 'Better'?!)?**

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- Ab-Crunches and Pilates.... OMG, poles apart!
- Pilates involves far fewer repetitions than you might expect, much slower and under control. As mentioned above, this works the entire length of the given muscle – leading to tone, not bulk.
- Acknowledging that the six pack muscles tend to be very dominant, Pilates aims to turn them off! Or, at least, switch focus so that your lower, deeper, intrinsic, "Core" muscles activate and work
- In my Pilates classes, I try and accomplish this by what I refer to as 'Core Set Up'

## **So, What **\*\*Is\*\*** 'The Core'?**

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- I view it in these terms:
- Lower Abdominals  
(**NOT** the six-pack)
- Transverse Abdominals, Internal & External Obliques  
(the ones that wrap around the side of your lower torso)
- Pelvic floor  
(nb – Guys have one too!)

## **Engage The Mind To Help Control The Body**

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- Pilates is very much about controlling movement rather than simply 'cranking out ten zillion ab crunches in 5 nano seconds'.
- Like most Pilates Teachers, I use numerous visualisations and verbal cues. I find these highly effective at getting the correct body position and/or muscles engaged. This in turn helps the body control the movements.
- For example, if your shoulders are hunched and holding tension, you are taking focus and work away from the core. Try this one visualisation to relax the shoulders and lengthen the neck:
- Sit comfortably and close your eyes..... *"as you exhale, imagine your neck is like a giraffe's elevating upwards over the tree line – feel your neck floating upwards and away from your shoulders".....*

## About The Core First And Foremost

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- The next few sections will cover four methods to ‘activate the core’.
- However, before explaining them, I’d like to stress that I see Pilates as more about these ‘core setups’ than about the fun extra things we do with our arms and legs.
- The question to consider being: “Can you maintain the activated core for the duration of the move?”
- Sounds easy?..... We’ll see.

## ‘Engaging The Core’ – The ‘Fab 4’

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- So, ‘Engaging The Core’ or ‘Core Set Up’..... What’s it all about?
- I use four ‘approaches’ to help you engage the core muscles.
- Please note, I would NEVER use terms such as ‘*brace your core*’ or ‘*activate your core*’ because I think these cues are too harsh.
- IMHO, they conjour notions of about to be punched in the stomach. Try it yourself, visualise this and feel you six pack engaging. FAIL! 😊
- Instead, I’m seeking to elicit a far gentler and more subtle, deeper set of muscle responses.
- These ‘approaches’ are designed to take focus and work AWAY from the dominant six pack area and I constantly emphasise the both before and during the exercises
- They are :
  - “**Floating navel gently to spine**”
  - “**Engaging pelvic floor**”
  - “**Pelvic tuck**”
  - “**Narrow the waist**”
- Before I continue and explain each of these in turn, I must reiterate, **please be aware that Pilates is about maintaining the core-set up DURING A MOVEMENT – not as easy as you may think. Therein lies the challenge, therein lies the reason for its effectiveness.**

## Aspect 1 of 4: “Floating Navel Gently To Spine”

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- Some trainers ask you to “Activate your core” without actually explaining what this MEANS.
- Some trainers ask you to “Brace your core” ...
- I don’t use this as I find people react as if about to be punched in the stomach and the six pack activates. I want to avoid this – I am targeting the lower area.
- I therefore ask you to ‘**float navel gently to your spine**’
- It’s a small move – about a centimetre (definitely NOT a case of ‘sucking you tummy in until you are blue in the face!’ )
- This tends to activate the lower area withOUT overly activating the six pack

## Aspect 2 of 4: Engaging Pelvic Floor

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- There's no 'polite' way of explaining this!
- Close your eyes and visualise you are going to the toilet and then stopping the flow mid way
- *That* muscle....!
- Actually, guys often find this visualisation quite effective: Imagine you are walking into an icy cold sea and the water is getting higher and higher....
- *That* muscle....!

## Aspect 3 of 4: Pelvic Tuck

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- **Important Concept:**  
**In broad terms, when performing Pilates moves lying on your back, if you have a large gap under your back, this tends to work the 'Six Pack'. However, if you can MAINTAIN a flat back DURING the given move(s), this tends to push the work deeper into the 'Core Muscles' (as explained/defined in a previous section)**
- Close your eyes and imagine you are lying to top of an analogue clock face – 12 o'clock underneath sternum and 6 o'clock underneath pubic bone
- Now imagine a marble in your belly button
- Slowly moving just your pelvis, visualise rolling the marble to the 12 o'clock position and then the other way so it rolls to the 6 o'clock position
- As you do so, pay attention to the gap between the floor and your lower back – in particular, when the marble is at 12 o'clock, there should be no gap
- The pelvic tuck is a subtle move – you typically move your hips/pelvis about an inch and yet, this simple move greatly assists shifting the work away from the six pack and into the core
- MAINTAINING a flat back in this fashion while moving legs might sound easy.....**See the section entitled 'The Strap Test' later**

## Aspect 4 of 4: 'Narrow The Waist'

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- As you exhale, visualise the waist is narrowing. This should help you start to gently engage the Obliques.
- Alternatively, imagine you are wearing an old fashioned woman's corset it being done up from behind.
- The final aspect of 'core set up' is a little bit more obscure in that often you can't actually FEEL anything happening – you just have to visualise it and eventually it 'clicks' and you get a 'eureka moment'! When I was doing my Pilates Teacher training, I had an ultra sound

displaying my Internal/External Obliques and Transverse Abs – although I couldn't actually FEEL them wrapping around, when I did the 'corset tightening' visualisation, I could see them wrapping around on the screen! Not by much – and that's the point – they don't move by much – it's quite subtle. So, as I say, just 'go with it' even if you can't feel anything happening.

- This aspect of 'core set up' is very helpful for women either preparing for childbirth or trying to reduce the size of the Diastasis Recti gap post partum.

### **'Four For The Price Of One!'....**

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- To practise all FOUR core preparations in the one visualisation, try this:
- Close your eyes and imagine you are lying on a bed, with a seriously tight pair of jeans on. They are around your hips but.... the zip isn't done up.
- Breathe in to prepare
- As you exhale, visualise the zip coming slowly up....
- You should find all of the above four core setup steps happening quite naturally.
- See if you can identify them individually as you practise....ie
  - your pelvic tuck so that your belly button arches underneath the approaching zip
  - your pelvic floor activating to pull your pelvic tuck further down
  - your navel floating towards your spine as the zip gets higher etc

### **'Join All 6 Dots'**

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- This is another cue I sometimes use in a class - it combines pelvic floor activation with a pelvic tuck.
- Sit on the floor and close your eyes.
- Visualise your two sitz bones.
- Then your tailbone. (2 dots)
- Then the front of your pubic bone (another 2 dots).
- Visualise a sling of muscle joining all four dots (the Pelvic Floor).
- Exhale and visualise all 4 dots drawing together.
- Next, visualise the two 'sticky out parts at the front of your hips' (PSIS) (another 2 dots)
- Exhale and visualise all 6 dots drawing together
- You should feel pelvic floor and a slight pelvic tuck.

## **The 'Challenge'**

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- The challenge is....
- Can you maintain the 'Core Set Up' DURING the various movements?...
- Definitely NOT as easy as you might think and this is a major aspect of Pilates

## **The 'Strap Test'**

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- Reckon you have great abs? Think Pilates is a load of rubbish and of no benefit to you? You do lots of 'manly ab crunches' and don't need this stuff?
- Maybe – but humour me – give this a go:
- Lie on your back
- Place a tie (or a thin strap) directly underneath your navel (the tie is across your body – ie at right angles to your torso)
- Have a partner take the tie in one hand – holding it at 45 degrees to the ground
- Raise both legs to the ceiling
- Notice how there is no gap underneath your back where the tie is
- Get your partner to pull the tie outwards at 45 degrees – feeling the tension in the tie
- This is your benchmark  
– your partner will need to pull at this amount of tension as you continue with the next part of the exercise
- Lower your legs, keeping them straight, toes pointed, slowly to the ground
- Can you get them to the ground WITHOUT THE TIE SLIPPING?.....
- If you have good core control, you should be able to get down to about an inch off the ground.....
- This is a test of your LOWER abs, your core – these are the muscles you will need to maintain a pelvic tuck and to maintain a flat back on the floor. Your 'Mr Universe' six pack is NOT going to help you here.
- Gym junkies – are you brave enough to try this?.....

## **Finishing Up – The Verbal Cues**

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- So, although I explain the above in my classes, you now have a heads-up on what I mean when I say:
- "Roll marble to 12"
- "Narrow waist"
- "Float Navel"

- “Pelvic Floor to a 3 out of 10”
- “Draw the 6 dots together”
- “Giraffe neck”

### **If You Remember One Thing After My Class, Please Let It Be This....**

- Pilates (and its effectiveness) is more about the ‘Core Set Up’ than it is about what you might also happen to be doing with your arms and legs – it’s about putting your focus into the ‘Core Muscles’ doing the work
- Example:  
When lying on your side, gently lowering / raising a leg – sure, your inner thigh muscles are obviously involved! However, Pilates is about trying to use your ‘Core Muscles’ to initiate and drive the movement. Your core should be the ‘prime mover’ and the leg muscles activate in response to your core