

# Pilates

Version 3 –5/4/2016



## My Teaching Style ~ Things That Work For Me & ~ Tips 'From The Trenches'

### **Scope**

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This document outlines some of the class 'flow' and teaching techniques that seem to work for me – especially in gym situations

It includes hands on, 'from the trenches' advice on some scenarios you are likely to encounter (especially in large gyms) and might be useful for a new Pilates teacher to consider

## **Arrival/SetUp**

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- I always arrive at least 15 minutes early to set up mats, distribute therabands, locate a few FitBalls (see later), blow up my ChiBalls, adjust lighting, test sound etc
- I think it looks incredibly unprofessional to arrive at the same time as clients
- As far as music is concerned, in my classes, the music is present but almost imperceptible and I always try to avoid using a microphone (unless the class is massive).
- Regarding music volume, I have attended classes where the only reason the Instructor was wearing a headset in the first place was..... because.... the music was too loud for her voice to be heard. Der.....
- OK, it's a personal thing but it seems to me that with increased volume comes a tendency to be more 'gym junkie'. Don't get me wrong, I like running listening to increased volume but when doing Pilates?... p-lleeeaaassee....

## **Safety First**

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- If teaching at a new gym, first thing is to work out where all the fire escapes are
- As I walk around collecting tickets, I point out ALL fire exit routes, ask for mobiles to be turned off, tell people it's OK to stop for water at any time etc

## **Equipment**

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- Part of my arriving early setup routine involves finding a few Fitballs and getting my supply of Chi Balls ready.
- As I walk around collecting tickets, I'll often hand out Chi Balls to people who look like they will be needing extending (ie you try doing Femur Arcs with a Chi Ball underneath your tailbone...!). Similarly, I have the FitBalls ready to allow regressions for people (ie 100's can be greatly regressed by placing feet on a FitBall – although the balance aspect of the ball still provides a bit of a challenge)

## **First Few Moves – Standing Warm Up / Finishing With Standing Roll Down**

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- The first few moves are nearly always standing warm ups so that I can get through a 'pre-amble' (see next section) at the same time.
- Things like gentle squatting, arm circles, neck rolls, closing eyes and being aware of shoulder positions, calf raises, setting intentions (balance, flexibility, pelvic floor awareness, strength etc) for the class etc.

## **Pre-Amble - Things I Cover During The Standing Warm Ups**

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- Introduce/remind that:
- Pilates is NOT competitive – direct comparisons can't be made in any case  
- ie “just because the person next to you has their leg higher, doesn't mean they are working the Pelvic Floor better than you”
- Pilates is NOT an ab-crunch class and NOT about 'going for the burn'
- I explain it is far better to do a few moves PROPERLY and get the benefit from them than to perform as many reps as I ask for irregardless – ie “just because I might suggest ten reps doesn't mean you have to DO ten reps”.
- Extol the virtues of slow, controlled motion over jerky, staccato ones
- Warn that no pain should be felt in the lower back – if it is, STOP! It isn't about 'pushing through'  
- chances are the pelvic tuck isn't correct and I will constantly be cueing this / reminding
- I also ask for a show of hands to gauge experience in the room  
– ie Hands up you have been doing Pilates:  
More than a year  
Between 3 mths and a year  
Less than three months  
First timers
- I also use this time to run through my contra indications screening

## **Pre-Amble - Contra Indications**

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- There is a separate document on my website detailing the pathologies/conditions I screen for but I will mention a 'gotcha' with Pregnancy.
- After one class, a young girl advised me she was pregnant. She didn't mention it at the start of the class as she hadn't been ready to 'go public'.
- So, the dilemma? How to get the information out there for those in 'First Trimester' (ie essential to have Doctor approval and to avoid too much abdominal work – favouring PF/TA/IO/EO instead) withOUT blowing the cover of those 'in purdah'?....
- I came up with this.
- Figuring people with other conditions such as Oesteo, Stenosis etc wouldn't mind who else knew, I put these pathologies to the beginning of the screening list and deliberately FINISHED with pregnancy.
- Here's a summary  
*“If you have any of the following conditions, it's ESSENTIAL (pause for emphasis) you let me know. Oesteo, Stenosis etc etc ... etc and are pregnant/have given birth in the last few months”.  
“It's essential you tell me because there are some types of movement which can be extremely dangerous for these conditions. Some of them are not obvious – for instance, with pregnancy, in the first trimester abdominal work should be reduced and it's ABSOLUTELY VITAL that doctor's approval has been given”.*

- In this way, I have used 'Pregnancy' as a 'random example'. I haven't required anybody in the room to 'go public' but at least the information is 'out there' (the bit about seeing GP approval is critical – there may be specific circumstances that only a GP would be aware of). Thus, if someone in the room **\*\*is\*\*** in first trimester, they can leave the room under some other pretext.
- I finish this section (standing warms ups / pre-amble / screening) with a few standing roll downs as a way of getting the class onto the floor.

## **Pelvic Clocks & Leg Raises**

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- Once on the floor, I nearly always include Pelvic Clocks next so I can ensure the class is aware/reminded of concepts of Pelvic Floor, floating navel gently to spine and awareness of gap under spine
- My next move is typically extending Pelvic Clocks into Shoulder Bridge – visualising P/F peeling hips of the ground/towards knees. I like this move because it's another spinal articulation warm up/prep.

## **Get 'Em Moving ASAP**

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- That's pretty much the warm up over
- Time to get into it quick!
- Rather than do too much 'prep work' on any given move to start with, I try, wherever possible to get the class moving ASAP
- I will quickly go through positional preps (covered previously) – ie float navel, pelvic tilt and THEN starting the move ASAP for a couple of reps each side
- Next, I will introduce the breathing pattern
- Next I cover the 'watch points' – ie shoulders back and down, keep an imaginary peach under chin etc
- Next, the reminders – ie is P/F still activated and driving this move? Is navel still floated, how's the gap underneath the back?....
- I typically do two sets of a move
- After the first set, while the class is resting (with a stretch – eg Child's Pose a favourite), I explain the muscle groups used etc

## **Dead Bugs - A Worked Example**

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- Start with one foot in 'coffee table position'
- Cue shoulders relaxed, slight chin to chest (holding an egg under the chin)
- Cue imprinted back, float navel and rotate leg at hip, floating leg down, dipping toe in the water
- Then return leg, knee stopping when thigh vertical

- Repeat on same leg
- Swap legs – repeat on other side
- Having got the basic movement up and running, the next step would be to swap leg and then add the breathing – exhale on way down, inhale on way up
- After a few of these on each side, I would then focus on drawing in navel and keeping it drawn while the move is continued
- Next I would add awareness of Pelvic Floor engaging and being the focus of the move
- Next, I'd remind the class to check in with the shoulders, are they still relaxed? Likewise, the Pelvic Floor – is it still the focus of 'driving the move'
- Then, I'd bring in the notion of continuing with all of the above but additionally being aware of the gap underneath the back and maintaining imprinted spine as the foot goes all the way down.
- Because the move Femur Arcs does not involve long lever loading on the base of the spine, I figure I can 'get away with this' ie leaving the notion of gap under the back until last.
- Obviously, if the move was a long lever one, I'd be having the concept of lumbar imprint engaged at the very start of the move to protect the lower back.
- At this point, with the base move covered plus all the breathing and watch points covered, I would add on some optional extensions – ie "either continue with the move as done so far or have a go at this" .....I'd demonstrate going into shoulder bridge, remaining there (keep hips from sinking) and taking one leg into 'coffee table position', either staying there or extending the leg to point to the ceiling, either staying there or adding on by a few small circles (each way) of the extended leg .

## **Go 'Walkabout'**

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- As one gymnastics instructor once put it? "If it was YOU in the class, would YOU pay for it?"
- This was in response to my question about demonstrating verses walking about correcting people.
- For her, she felt it was all very well having a teacher at the front constantly demonstrating, but if she got no feedback, she might just as well do a Pilates session at home watching a DVD.
- It is sometimes difficult in a gym situation to do this – especially if the numbers are large.
- A compromise might be walking around and, at least, giving feedback when a move is being done correctly. I find that in large classes, it's too disruptive to the 'flow' to stop and provide more than a modicum of individual correction so when this is required I sometimes suggest 'see me after the class' to the individual concerned.

## **Names – Learn Them / Use Them!**

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- I have a truly lousy memory.

- I need to commit almost everything to writing, people's names being no exception.
- One thing that has helped me learn names is to USE a person's name back to them almost immediately after having asked for it. Eg "I hope you don't mind Jodie, but I'm going to write your name down to try and help me remember it".
- I write the name with and add suitable aide memoires during the class (something which wouldn't be embarrassing if the piece of paper was misplaced...) ie has done Pilates before, cyclist, hated side plank, found my Angry/Happy/Disco Cat funny etc
- Before the next class, I review the list several times over.
- I find people really appreciate you using their names in a class – and it's very handy for verbal cueing across a crowded room.

## **Latecomers**

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- This is a tricky one – especially in a gym situation with a large number of participants
- If someone enters after I have gone through my screening questions en-masse to the class, I run a risk if I do not repeat the screening process.
- For each late entrant (up to about 5 minutes – any later and I will typically not allow entry) if I do not recognise the person or recall any applicable pathologies, I ask them if they have ever heard my screening questions before and responded 'yes' to any of them.
- If they haven't been subject to my particular 'screening', I apologise to the class and explain I will have to stop to quickly run through the questions to allow the late comer to continue.
- Let's just say "peer pressure" is a wonderful ally .... The late comer most often gets the message and it seems the message gets around... "be late for one of his classes and you'll get daggers from everyone else in the class"
- I will add insult to injury, asking the latecomer to do a five minute warm up on the treadmills and then return. (This is actually safety thing but when you are a hammer, everything else is a nail....)

## **Feedback**

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- I spent a few months covering at a gym. At the outset, I canvassed opinion via a questionnaire – ie what sort of things would the class like to see
- I thought the stint had gone pretty well but after I left, I heard (third hand admittedly) that there had been some dissatisfaction in the group.
- Maybe my mistake had been only asking for feedback at outset – from that point onwards, I would typically ask for feedback at the end of every class
- I also advise the class that there is a feedback form on my website where they can leave anonymous comments if preferred

## Departure

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- Maybe it's just a "Guy Thing" but I just don't 'get' the practise of the instructor clapping towards the assembled class at the end. I suppose it can be construed as the instructor praising the class en-masse for having done the moves well but, for me, this action has connotations of the instructor 'seeking praise in return' because the gesture elicits an identical response from the class.
- Likewise, my day job is "IT Security", so saying 'namaste' just ain't 'me' either....
- Instead, my departure 'mechanism' (something of a trade-mark almost) is to recite a quotation from a book of them - my particular favourites being Winston Churchill and Woody Allen.
- Maybe it's just a 'me-quirk'....! ☺

## Ask For Imprinted Back (Settle For Neutral Spine)!

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- (See Appendices)
- I typically do NOT bother about the concept of neutral spine for several weeks when taking on a new class! I focus solely on imprinted back.
- My reasons are twofold
- Firstly, I can get TA/IO/EO working using bridge positions
- Secondly and more poignantly, if I start out asking for neutral spine, I most likely won't get it!
- However, if I start out asking for imprinted spine, I may get it or I may be neutral instead but probably won't get a massive gap under the back.
- One of my favourite tricks is to get a tie underneath the person's belly button when doing Pelvic Clocks and, as the "marble goes to 12 o'clock" (ie full lumbar imprint), I see if I can move the tie (pulling at 45 degrees). In a class, I may also break participants into pairs with one person doing the move and the other pulling the strap.
- So, most of my participants will have seen this 'trick' and it's a great one to refer back to in subsequent cueing – ie "is your marble rolled to 12?".... "would I be able to pull the strap out from under you?".....

# Appendices

## Flat Back & Neutral Spine – A Recap

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- In supine, doing moves like Dead Bugs/Femur Arcs, if there's a 'large' gap under the back, tends to work more of the 6pack abs – NOT what we want at all.
- If there is NO gap, ie full imprint, this tends to put the work down into the lower abs (bikini area)
- If there is a half way gap (aka 'neutral pelvis') and this gap is maintained, this tends to recruit more TA/IO/EO.
- One of my favourite tricks is to get a tie underneath the person's belly button when doing Pelvic Clocks and, as the "marble goes to 12 o'clock" (ie full lumbar imprint), I see if I can move the tie (pulling at 45 degrees). In a class, I may also break participants into pairs with one person doing the move and the other pulling the strap.
- So, most of my participants will have seen this 'trick' and it's a great one to refer back to in subsequent cueing – ie "is your marble rolled to 12?" .... "would I be able to pull the strap out from under you?" .....

## How To Instruct 'Neutral Spine'

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- I have found these two methods to be effective.
- Before either method, I will outline the above concepts (ie flat back, neutral back etc) and then stress to the class that lower back STABILITY is a direct function of core control
- This segues beautifully into the quadruped move. I will coach the class to do 'Angry Cat' and then 'Happy Cat', alternating between the two until they come halfway. OK this is more neutral spine rather than neutral pelvis but for the first of the two methods and as a prep for the second method, it's good enough to get the concept across.
- I then place a Chi Ball on the tailbone and continue coaching the quadruped move.
- This is a great way to teach an awareness of the shape of the lower back – ie if the back shape/position changes, the Chi Ball falls off.
- As per a quotation from "Ice Age 1" .... "So, *who's up for round two.....?*" ... !
- Method Two involves lying supine and raising one leg up and down (straight leg) fast – gym junkie style.
- "Put aside everything I just told you and imagine you are doing a typical ab-crunch class. Both legs out straight. Now raise one leg – keeping it straight. Lower it. Repeat, faster, faster – keep going, using plenty of momentum and near zero core control – as you keep going, feel the GAP UNDERNEATH YOUR BACK.....!!!! Can you feel it constantly changing? ...."

- I would then coach (still in supine) pelvic tilts backwards and forwards until neutral pelvis was located. At that point, I'd go directly into Dead Bugs but this time focusing on MAINTAINING THE GAP UNDERNEATH THE BAG – reminding the class out the ChiBall/Quadruped move earlier.
- I'd also get the class to focus on IE/EO/TA doing the work (given that neutral pelvis in supine lends itself more to this muscle group)