

FITNESS CENTRED

The Pilates exercise method has hit the mat in Bangkok. Augustina Brown looks at this system of detailed movement and focused breathing

You probably know Pilates as an exercise regimen favoured by singers, models, athletes and actors. Beautiful people such as Madonna, Jennifer Aniston, Hugh Grant, Gwyneth Paltrow and Sarah Jessica Parker have practised it as a way to stay beautiful and to improve body posture. The exercises, which are performed both on mats and with the use of specialised machines, comprise a series of controlled movements that engage the body and the mind and that concentrate on improving muscle control, strength, flexibility, coordination, balance and overall well-being, all within a regimen that conduces to both general fitness or rehabilitation. It's been around a while, since the 1920s when Joseph Pilates, while working in a hospital during the first world war, designed ways to strengthen patients' weakened muscles by making use of hospital bed frames. The concept would evolve into the reformer, a system of springs and pulleys meant to create resistance, and one of many specialised equipment pieces used in modern Pilates.



The first official Pilates centre in Bangkok, The Pilatestudio, opened this year. Owner and instructor Or-yah Maor explains, "What makes Pilates different from other types of exercise is its focus on a core essence, the abdominal wrap. Everything is initiated from the core. The core is the centre that supports every part of the body. Think of the body like a tree with branches. Everything is initiated from the trunk." When movement flows from a central point, that centre acts as the foundation of all movements, and a strong and stable core will ably dictate every arm and leg movement. The location of this powerhouse centre is a band encompassing the body's mid-section at the level of the navel and lower back.

Pilates stresses alignment and posture through strength and flexibility training, targeting deep muscle layers that sometimes remain unaffected in standard gym workouts. The aim is to improve posture and appearance through a stronger and more flexible spine as well as a flatter and tauter abdomen. The emphasis is on developing a long and lean musculature rather

than a bulky and overdeveloped physique. Pilates aims to create firm and graceful bodies – and the movements are themselves graceful, involving smooth and continuous motions rather than jarring repetitions. Breathing follows a technique called lateral breathing. Inhalations are made through the nose until the lungs fill completely, the air then exhaled through the mouth until the lungs empty, thereby cleansing the bloodstream and purifying the body of toxins and stress. The breathing is deep, coordinated and conscious. Or-yah says, "Breathing plays the main role, calming the mind. People's breathing is generally poor and not in full breath. Most people don't pay attention to their breathing, so this is one way Pilates makes you aware of your body and mind."

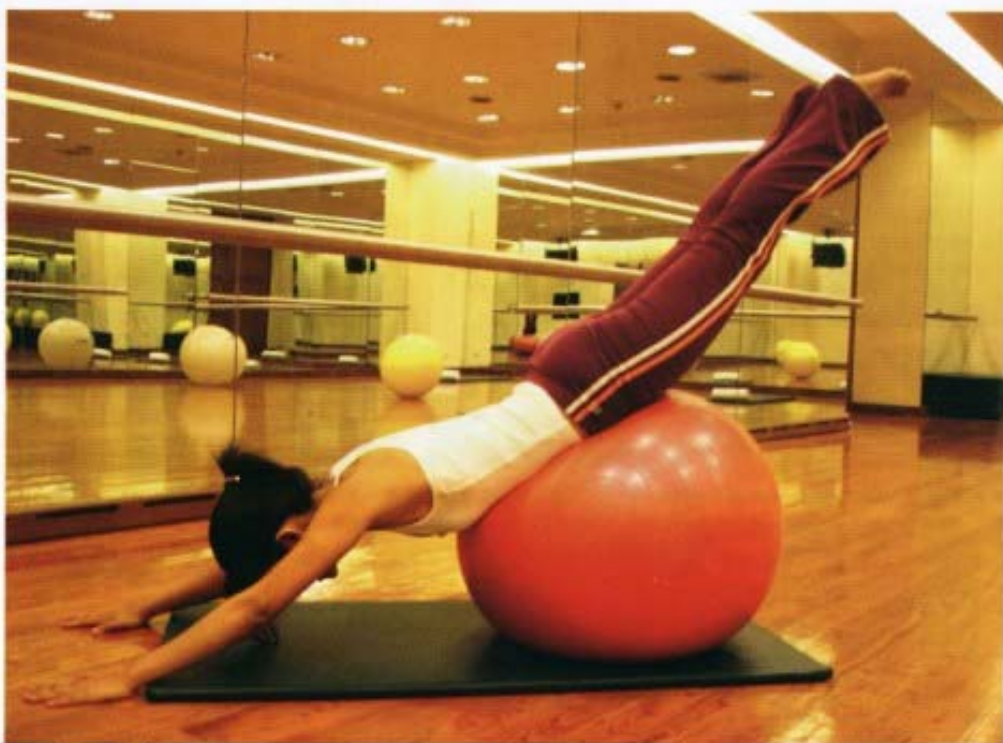
Pilates can be performed on a mat combined with balls, bands, weights or on specific machines such as the reformer. The exercises are suitable for all age levels, Or-yah notes that even the elderly can practise Pilates, though not all of the elements may be right for every participant. Individual fitness level has to be considered. Says Or-yah "With the reformer, you work against the springs and weights of the machine. It gives you something to pull against, making it easier to isolate different muscles. The class with fit ball is more advanced because it requires more stamina; the pace is faster and you must have good balance. The mat, however, is even more difficult because it's just your own body providing the resistance." Voranan Maliwan of JW's Health Club & Spa, another site offering Pilates, adds, "For mat work, your body must really be ready since it's harder to maintain control. With the fit ball, there's something to help balance the weight and assist in the stretching." An existing injury does not necessarily preclude participation because ses-

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sions can be modified so as to avoid the injured area as much as possible.

Beginners may want to start off with private sessions in which an instructor can evaluate specific needs. Or-yah explains, "When someone's lying on the floor, it's easy to see any imbalance, to see the distortion of muscles. For instance, a tennis player may have one shoulder higher than

the other. In Pilates, we then set about working on the body and finding ways to fix problems and relieve stress." She continues, "Pilates calms the mind. And it integrates the body and mind so that both work better. You will feel relaxed and more focused." Because Pilates isn't a heavy cardiovascular workout, you can combine it with jogging and the like. Voranan elaborates, "Jogging helps you burn fat while Pilates helps you reduce stress and get your body firmed. And it can be directed at specific muscles." She concludes, "Students have told me that after Pilates, their overall personality improved and they felt more confident." Sounds like required elements for anyone in the beautiful people competition. If you're looking for a way to get an edge, or maybe just to get rid of some stress, then Pilates may be right for you. □



Above: On the ball: Pilates makes use of various accessory pieces
Left: Specialised machines are an integral part of the Pilates exercise method