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"New" training device stabilizes back during exercise

By Shari Annes

The Universal Reformer, a back stabilizing and conditioning machine, was brought to the United States in the 1920s and has long been the best-kept secret of professional dancers. Designed by fitness pioneer Joseph Pilates, the reformer is a sliding horizontal "bed" with loops and detachable springs. Though it still retains its original simple structure, the reformer has gone through a few recent modifications, and its popularity is on the rise, moving beyond the world of

professional dance into the training routines of elite athletes and all those who suffer from chronic back pain.

Pilates believed that corrective exercise begins with education and total conditioning. It's simply not enough to focus on the injury; one must balance the entire body's musculature.

The reformer does this by helping its users control pelvic stabilization: the ability to maintain the pelvis in a neutral position, neither tucked nor arched. Individuals naturally lie in the neutral position when situated properly on the reformer — with the back on the horizontal, movable carriage, the shoulders placed in front of two supports, and the legs resting comfortably with the feet placed either on the foot bar or foot plate.

When exercising on the reformer, you don't have to worry about keeping the body in one position or another — the reformer does it for you by using spring resistance that can be modified to support virtually any physical type no matter how bad the back problem. That's what makes it so versatile. It can be used for patients with serious back injuries, individuals with annoying back pain, as well as professional and weekend athletes intent on preventing injuries.

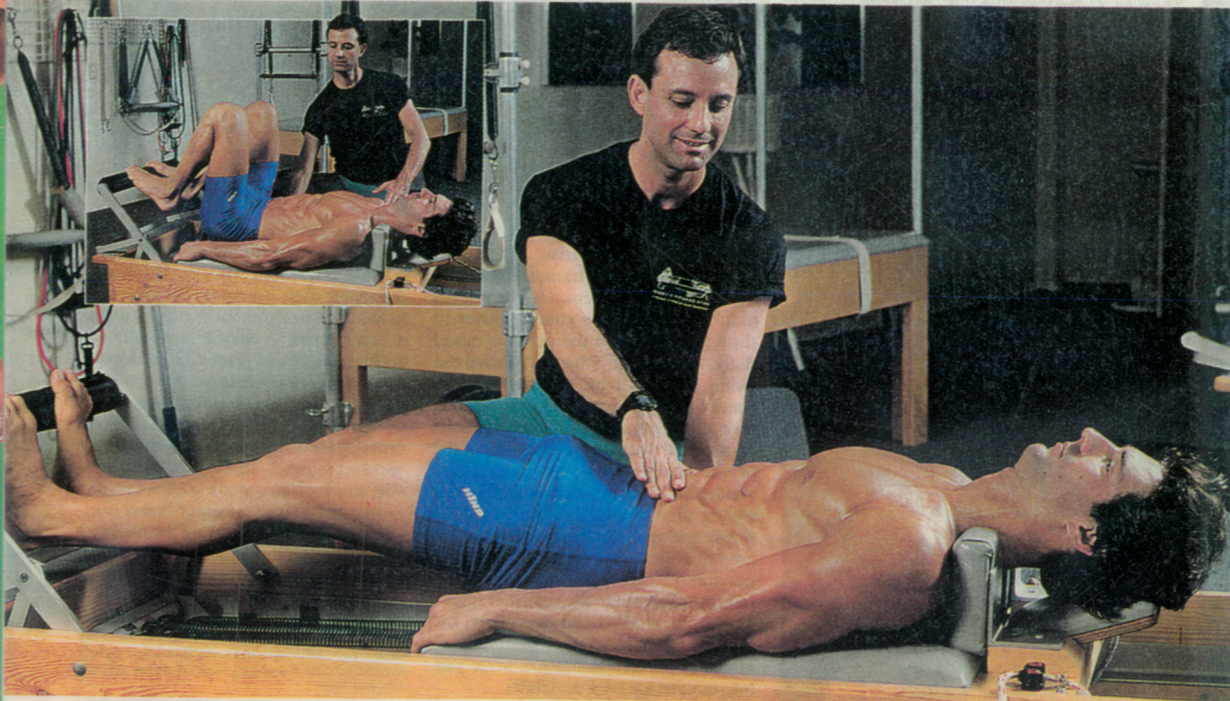
Reforming Bad Habits

Learning to straighten up!

Under the guidance of an instructor, the patient starts off with simple movements, then gradually progresses to more advanced exercises. The goal is to convert the control the reformer provides into permanent self-control without compromising elasticity. This is done by strengthening the muscles that support the back while the torso and limbs are supported by the apparatus — with the spine in proper alignment.

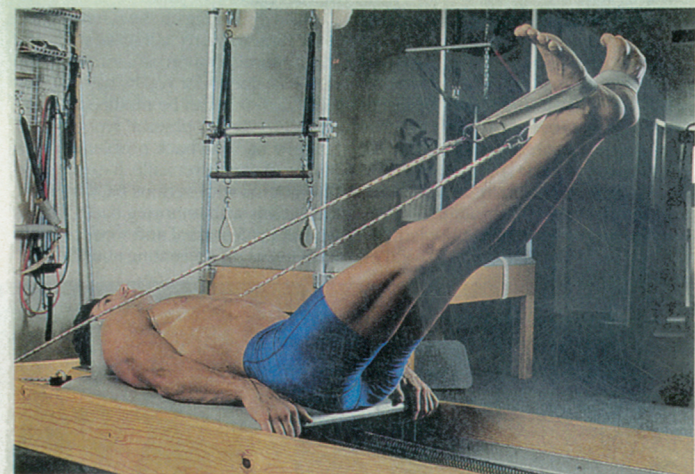
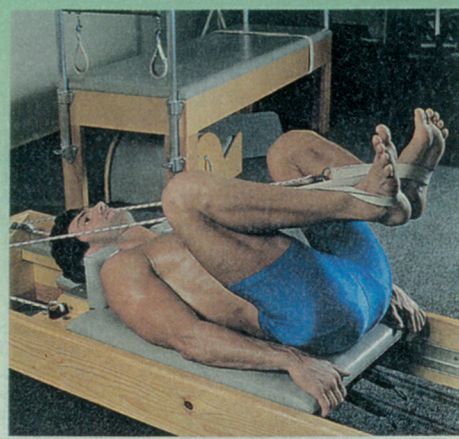
First, the patient lies on his or her

The Universal Reformer automatically positions the pelvis correctly. Here, under the watchful eye of Quentin Josephy at his Kinetic Fitness Center in Tarzana, California, an athlete is guided through the motions, executing a leg press with the pelvis maintained in a neutral position.



Photos by Robert Reiff

The Universal Reformer teaches athletes how to control pelvic stability, with the pelvis neither tucked nor arched. First popular with dancers, the device is now used by athletes from all sports.



back and learns to do abdominal or leg strengthening movements, with a special focus on the hamstrings, the gluteus, the quadriceps and the adductors. From there, the patient moves to "bridging" in which the pelvis is raised slightly (less than 5 inches) above the sliding platform to increase the work demand on the areas already noted, along with all the muscle groups between the floor of the ribcage and the floor of the pelvis. Finally, the patient performs exercises on his or her hands and knees, sliding the carriage back and forth — slowly and with control — with the degree of resistance varying according to the number and type of springs that attach the platform to the reformer frame. Throughout all these exercises, the body must make slight adjustments to maintain pelvic stabilization while sliding the carriage back and forth.

Pilates-based exercise programs may involve a variety of special apparatus, but most trainers and physical therapists start their clients on the reformer. In fact, at the Center for Sports Medicine at San Francisco's Saint Francis Memorial Hospital, Pilates programs are recommended by physicians for patients with pelvic torque, muscle or ligament strain or disc disease. The reformer is also recommended for strained or torn soft tissue and muscles. In the case of soft tissue, which often repairs itself but results in scar tissue, the reformer-based exercises are designed to retain the elasticity that's lost when scar tissue compromises functional movement. □

The Universal Reformer and a video on its uses are available from Current Concepts, the only large-scale manufacturer of Pilates-type equipment, in Sacramento, California, phone 916-454-2838.