

arch, curl, circle, spiral!

gyrotonic exercise offers pilates devotees
some exciting new movement patterns

by *chantal deeble and jen daly*

It is always such a joy to move and feel our bodies doing what they were designed to do. Freedom of choice is a wonderful luxury. Letting one activity complement another is not only natural but a great way to get the most out of everything we do.

Runners swim, swimmers cycle, soccer players play Frisbee, and professional ball players hit the links every chance they get.

For people who love to move, the notion of having to choose only one activity makes absolutely no sense. Yet because Pilates and Gyrotonic exercise fall under the same rubric of mindful exercise—and since there are inherent similarities—people sometimes feel as if it's got to be one or the other. It's true that one modality might serve some specific needs better than the other, yet countless practitioners, dancers, athletes and movement teachers feel that Pilates and Gyrotonic dovetail beautifully. This is not to suggest in any way that the two get melded together or diluted. In fact, to enhance each other,

the two disciplines must stay separate and distinct.

We each came to these techniques as young dancers hungry for anything that would improve our techniques. Our paths inevitably crossed, and as we became friends and colleagues, and now as co-owners of Kinespirit Studios in NYC and master trainers of Gyrotonic, Gyrokinesis and Pilates, we discovered we have many similar outlooks, including our approach to physicality. We both enjoy a variety of activities and have never felt the need to choose one movement approach over another.

Pilates and Gyrotonic have served us well over the span of long dance careers, and now that we run a studio, we find that offering the two modalities is the best way to serve the needs of our diverse client base. In our Madison Park studio, nine of our 14 instructors teach both disciplines, and they agree that proficiency in one supports and advances the other. About 40 percent of our clientele are proficient in both (including the editor of this magazine. She

Twist and Pull: Equal and opposite forces, coupled with rhythm, guide the spine into a gentle and effective spiral.



There are two different ways to do Gyrotonic work: equipment-based and nonequipment-based (called Gyrokinesis, the “mat class” version that applies the same principles and movement possibilities). The specialized equipment uses a weight-and-pulley system that guides you through circles, spirals and figure eights, simulating the energetic pathways found in science and nature. Its design offers both resistance and assistance in any given movement, simulating an underwater environment and enabling the participant to more easily understand such key movement principles as opposition, flow and breath. Once you understand those fundamentals, you can implement them in any activity. For example, by bringing Gyrotonic’s understanding of spirals in the body to your golf game, you can improve your shoulder turn and swing.

A typical Gyrotonic session is a sequence of series: spinal motion, arch and curl, hamstring,

abdominal, etc... Each has prescribed exercises to be learned over a period of time, but as in Pilates, only after the first layer of principles has been integrated does one continue on with more advanced choreography. Like learning the alphabet, it will form the basis of the movement language.

As new challenges and complexities are introduced, they get strung together to form a sequence with one melding fluidly into the next without interruption. At the end of a sequence comes an equipment change, then it’s on to another fluid series. Within each segment the body experiences the effect of the rhythm and repetition—two powerful tools for addressing blockages in the body. Gyrotonic’s gentle and methodical motions help the body release tension and learn to “rewire” faulty movement patterns. Rhythm and repetition can also induce a meditative quality, the simultaneous feeling of deep calm and increased energy that can induce euphoric.

Here’s where Gyrotonic differs from the Pilates experience: Whether you are following a classical order or a more “freestyle” approach, a Pilates

says it has positively changed her body and movement patterns, including how she does Pilates).

There are so many reasons that these two wonderful systems complement each other, but the bottom line—and what keeps us so intrigued by both—are the similarities and differences of the way they address the spine. In simplest terms, Pilates’ primary focus is spinal stability and Gyrotonic’s is spinal mobility. But of course, stability and mobility have an interwoven and reciprocal relationship. Stability gives the body a sound anatomical point of departure for any movement, and mobility allows this same structure to fulfill its range of motion. Gyrotonic movement involves natural, circular and fluid movements. By increasing strength, flexibility, coordination and balance, it can free the body of pain and restrictions. Plus it works in tandem with physical therapy and other rehabilitative bodywork or as a preventative health measure.

workout involves executing a prescribed number of repetitions of an exercise, usually 3 to 10, in a series that first awakens and strengthens the core and then continues to connect and integrate the rest of the body with increasingly complex and challenging exercises. Usually there's an agonist-antagonist pattern in the sequencing, like doing the Swan-dive exercise (extension) after the Teaser series (flexion). The flow in a Pilates workout comes when one is advanced enough to perform the transitions between exercises.

Core is a buzzword throughout the fitness industry these days, and of course it's a central aspect of both Pilates and Gyrotonic. But it's the subtle distinctions that separate the two. Joseph Pilates emphasized the work of the abdominal muscles, pelvic girdle, buttocks and lower back, which he collectively labeled the powerhouse. Its function is to girdle the torso inward and provide stability for the spine. Many Pilates enthusiasts consider the powerhouse the energetic center of the body. In Gyrotonic, we call the core, located at the body's innermost center point, the seed center. Imagine your pelvis is a bowl, and floating in the center of that bowl is your seed center, similar to how an egg yolk is suspended in its egg white.

In Gyrotonic, this is where all movement begins, and we learn to engage into this center so that we can lengthen away from it. This is called narrowing of the pelvis. By applying principles of opposition, this action creates a powerful yet supple support system. Seeds, to survive, must grow upward and root downward. The roots, branches and stems grow away from but also connect back into the seed, and it is this network that creates the strength and suppleness of the whole organism.

Some more obvious comparisons: Both modalities rely on specialized equipment to facilitate the technique (see *Twist and Pull*, p. 76) and each has a nonequipment-based component (Pilates mat class and Gyrokinesis). Yet even here, there are observable and subtle differences. For one thing, the resistance used in Pilates comes from springs (and the body itself, of course), and there is an emphasis on closed kinetic chain movement. The resistance in Gyrotonic is a weight-and-pulley system, and the emphasis is on

The Curl-up is an exercise that marries movement and breath.

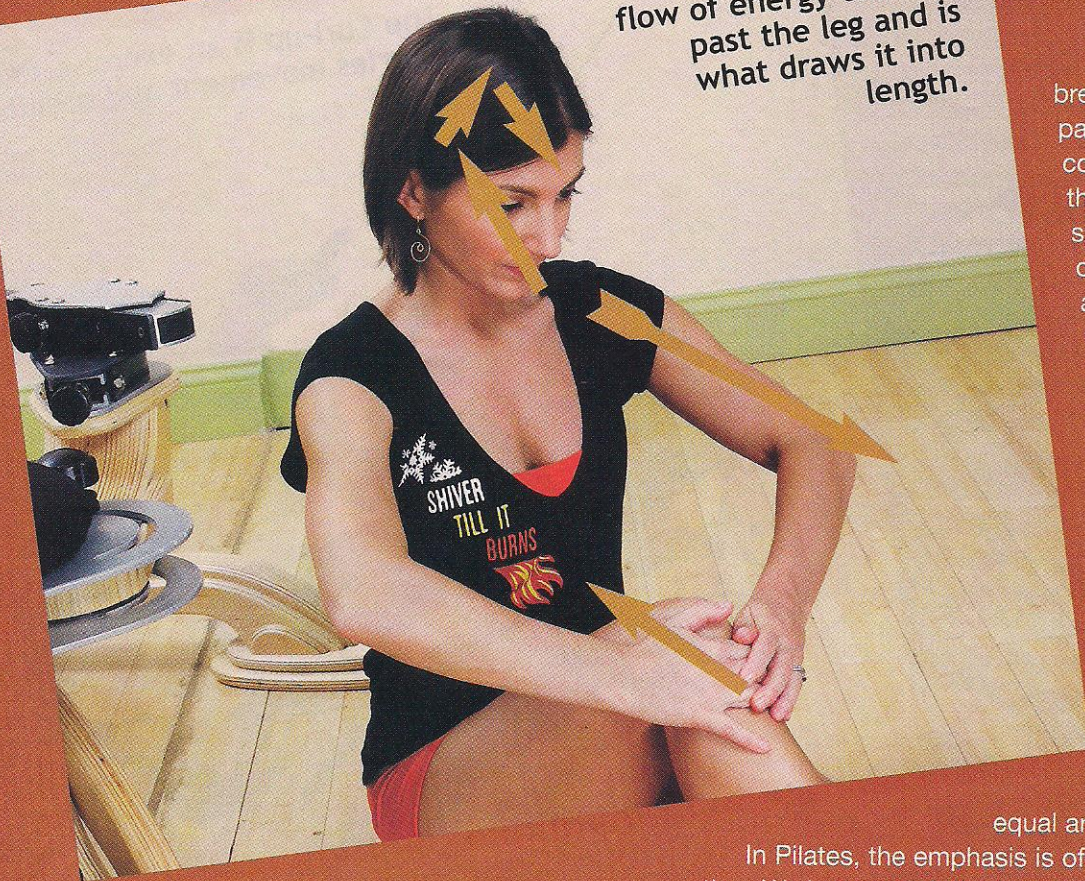


open kinetic chain movement. Both systems give resistance and support, but with the springs, you get a little pushback so it takes some effort to feel as though you're reaching beyond the limits of your body. The weight-and-pulley system is more conducive to that feeling of length.

Take Leg Circles as an example: In Pilates, to work with the spring resistance, we keep the circles confined within the structure of the apparatus. In Gyrotonic, the weight-and-pulley system provides more freedom of movement and allows for greater range of motion. Gyrotonic equipment further allows each limb to move on its own system, so that neither can compensate for the other. Also by operating separately, they are encouraged to find symmetry and balance.

Breath is a key aspect of both techniques. In Pilates teaching there's a number of philosophies about breathing: Some schools teach a clear breath-per-move approach, some prescribe a more free flow, while still others advocate audible "percussive" breathing. And classical Pilates teaches us to inhale/exhale through the nose, but some contemporary schools advocate exhaling through the mouth. But underlying all those styles are two key principles:

With Kneading, the flow of energy extends past the leg and is what draws it into length.



breath. Once the breath pattern is understood, we coordinate the timing of the squeeze to correspond with the most challenging moment of an exercise (a Curl-up, for example, p. 77). The breath and exercise become supportively intertwined and are no longer two separate things.

We've already touched on the importance of opposition in both modalities. We know from physics that every action has an

equal and opposite reaction.

In Pilates, the emphasis is often on only one direction: We learn to "girdle the musculature inward toward the spine" or "scoop the belly in and up." The application of opposition, then, is against the stability that has been created by the above approach. In Gyrotonic the emphasis is simultaneously inward and outward, as we "reach away from and back into the seed center."

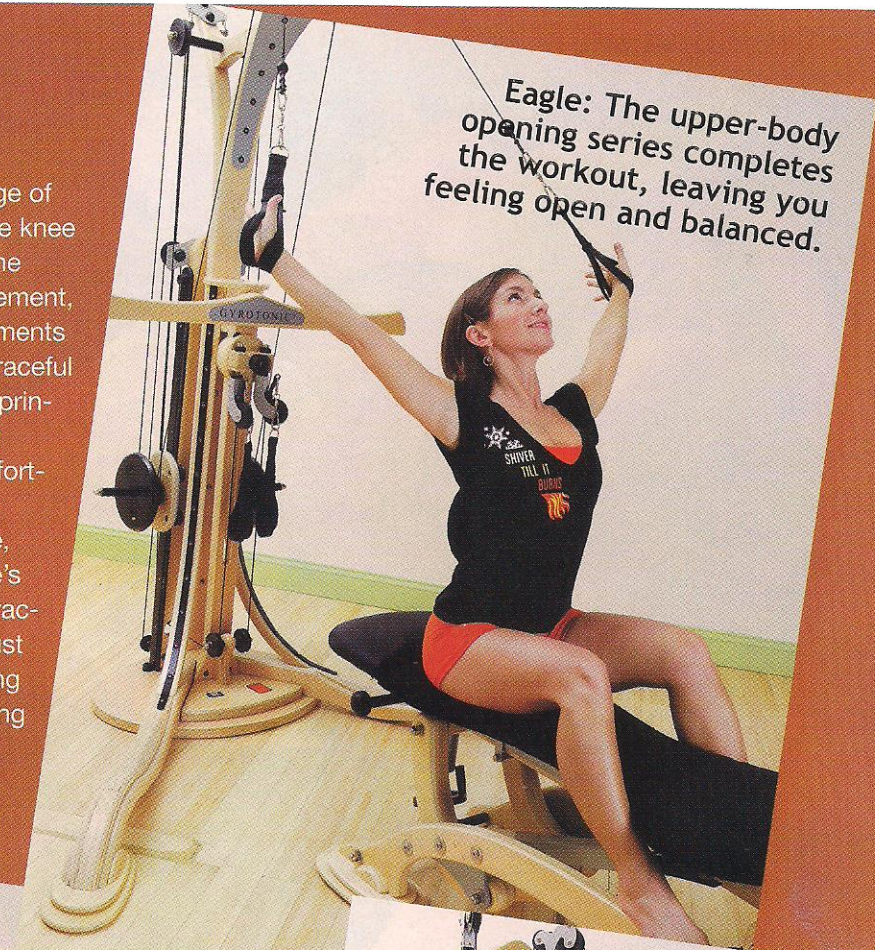
This connects to another Gyrotonic principle: the energetic lines or pathways of the body. Obviously this is not unique to Gyrotonic; awareness of how energy moves through the body is central to most of the mind-body modalities, including Pilates. In Gyrotonic, understanding the body's energy pathways and how to access them is the first step in addressing alignment and movement quality. Rather than placing an emphasis on the muscles needed to perform an action, such as extending the leg, we focus on opening and reaching through the centermost line of the leg, called the fifth line. The fifth line is a key concept in Gyrotonic and refers to the innermost energetic pathway. For instance, in the torso, the fifth line would be the center channel of the spine (the other four lines being the front/back/side/side lines). We often use the image of the fifth line of the leg being like a river, and the flow of the river moving through and beyond the length of the leg is what draws it into length. (See Kneading, above.) The result is a completely fulfilled movement: The

that the inhale is to support extension and the exhale is applied to support flexion, and that one scoops the powerhouse in and up throughout the breath cycle to maintain stability.

Gyrotonic, on the other hand, uses specific breathing techniques to deepen the effect of an exercise and to assist and augment its execution. Similar to the use of breath in yoga, the rhythm and quality of a breath pattern can support a movement. For example, while doing the basic exercise Arch and Curl, we use the "ocean" (*ujjayi*) breath. The ebb and flow of the arch and curl movement corresponds precisely to the ebb and flow (exhale and inhale) of the breath, which to the practitioner sounds like ocean waves. Something exclusive to this modality is the "squeeze breath," which takes abdominal exercises to a whole new level. On the inhale, we drink in as much of an inhale as possible. In doing this, we feel the whole torso cavity expand, including the belly. As we exhale, the quality is like a balloon deflating; the air leaves the torso cavity because of a three-dimensional gathering in toward the seed center, which funnels down to a finer and finer point, culminating with a final squeeze, which feels like a deep internal cough. That squeeze and the echo after it is the most powerful moment of the

mover is using the entire available range of motion. It is not simply extension of the knee joint, as it involves the entire body in the action. This also results in elastic movement, which, over time, can correct misalignments and imbalances and result in a fluid, graceful quality of movement. Apply this same principle to your upright axis (i.e., standing spine), and the result is a seemingly effortless rise and balance, as these photos demonstrate. Strength, power, balance, grace, fluidity, ease and comfort in one's own body: These are the benefits of practicing Pilates or Gyrotonic—or both! Just remember, as you embark on something new, to be patient with the initial learning curve. It may feel a little steep at first, but trust us, it's worth it! ©

Eagle: The upper-body opening series completes the workout, leaving you feeling open and balanced.



Flying: The seed center counterbalances the weight-and-pulley system, providing assistance and resistance and resulting in a sensation of flight.

