

From

Pilates to Pole Dancing

By SUSAN O'NEILL

Photography by
JILL KITCHENER

Shedding those extra pounds and getting in shape for spring doesn't mean you have to chain yourself to your treadmill.

There are countless fun ways to get fit that will have you feeling energized and counting down the hours until your next workout.

So, whether you fancy pole dancing or Pilates, there is undoubtedly a class in the city that will help you meet your fitness goals.

"I don't like to sweat," said Amy Brown, who started taking Pilates classes several years ago. "I thought, 'Oh, I'm getting a great workout.' I felt energized afterwards instead of exhausted."

Brown, who was working in public relations at the time, became certified to teach and soon started instructing classes for her friends and family in

the evenings.

Before long she had quit her day job and was teaching fulltime at various gyms and community centres around the city.

Two and a half years ago, she went into business and opened Pilates for Life in Yorkville.

"It's kind of crazy how 10 years ago you couldn't make a living being a yoga instructor or a Pilates instructor," Brown said over a salad at the recently opened Lettuce on Bloor Street east of Yonge.

There are now 12 instructors teaching yoga and mat and machine-based Pilates classes at her studio, which Brown refers to as her baby.

"I love it. I really do. It's my baby. I'm so protec-

tive of it," said Brown who is often referred to as Pilates Amy.

"When I was little I used to say I wanted to be the head of a company so I could wear my pyjamas to work," said Brown, whose daily attire isn't far off that. "I live in Lululemon."

Pilates is essentially a series of exercises that focus on the core: waist, hips, butt, thighs, back and stomach.

And the exercises not only improve your core strength, they also improve flexibility, co-ordination, balance and mobility, Brown said.

"Pilates is something that permeates into other aspects of your life," she explained. "You walk taller and it helps you in your other sports."

There aren't many of us who wouldn't want to feel taller, longer and leaner.

And that's what Pilates has done for many of her clients, she said, adding that many people stand taller after taking only a few classes.

"I think it does have a lot to do with improving your self-confidence," she said.

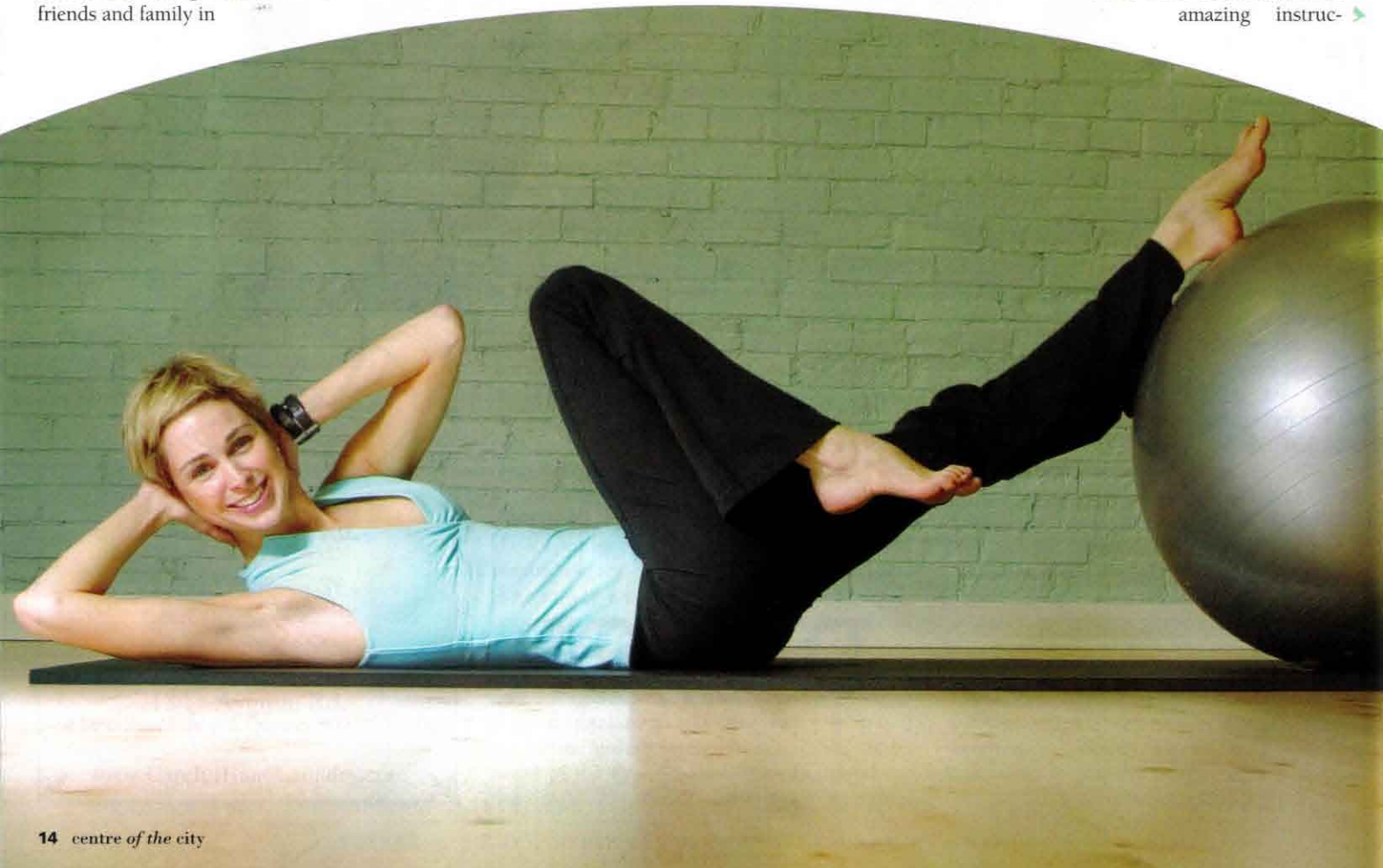
Brown, 31, said Pilates helped to tone her core and add definition to her arms.

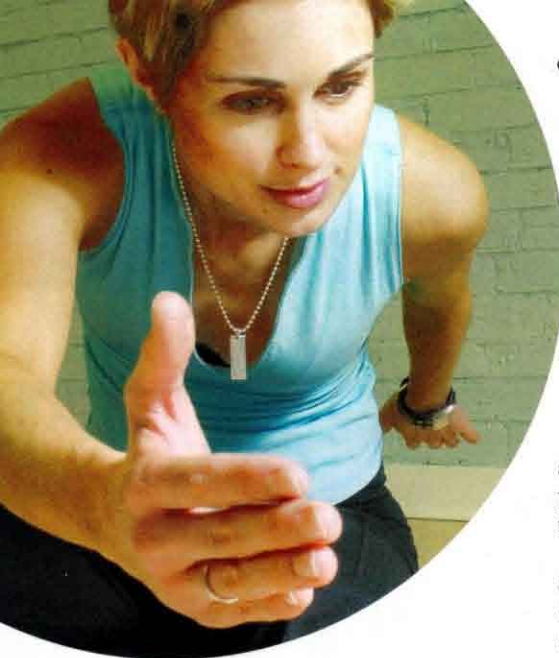
"My arms were like little noodles and it gave me upper body strength," said Brown, a former model who stands six feet.

"It also really helped with my balance, my co-ordination and my flexibility," said Brown, who admits that regular Pilates sessions enable her to indulge her sweet tooth.

"I love to eat. I eat a lot of sweets. That's why I do the Pilates. It lets me have a sweet tooth," she adds. "And I love doing it."

"I take other classes and we have amazing instruc- ➤





↳ tors so I love learning what they have to teach me," she said.

The studio offers a range of classes from introductory to advanced levels. There are also prenatal classes, programs for moms and babies and a men-only class.

"I've been so fortunate and so blessed meeting such amazing clients," she said, adding the men and women who come to the studio are totally into their workouts.

"It's really nice to see people's bodies change too," she said. "I get a little piece of what it is to help people and heal people. It is nice to know there is some positive impact."

For Micheline Wedderburn, founder of Quad Spinning on King Street West, a workout isn't a workout unless she's working up a sweat.

Wedderburn, a mother of three, started attending spin classes in Los Angeles in the 1990s.

"I didn't think I would love riding a bike," she said.

But she did like the fact that it's possible to burn as many as 800

calories in one 45-minute class.

"It depends on the class and it depends on the tension," she said.

Wedderburn explained that spinning is more than simply riding an indoor stationary bike.

Classes are choreographed to music and designed to feel like a virtual ride on a road bike.

"You're supposed to get the sensation of what it's like to be on the road," she said, adding that in a class you "are constantly engaged and before you know it you're done and you're hooked."

Wedderburn lost 30 pounds in four months and was asked to start teaching classes, which prompted her to open a spinning gym in California's San Fernando Valley.

When she left L.A. and moved to Toronto, the self-confessed spin addict soon realized the city didn't have a studio that catered exclusively to spinning.

Four years ago, the concept for Quad became a reality here.

"People talk about this gym," Wedderburn said of the loft-style facility, which she runs with her husband Martin. "I'm proud of it...we designed the place around spinning....Quad feels like the place to be."

The one-hour spin classes, which include a 15-minute cool down, are the staple at Quad, which also offers endurance classes and theme nights featuring music by a particular artist such as Madonna or Led Zeppelin.

"You're in a class with people who love it," she said. "Spinners are addicts."

And the atmosphere in the evening classes is brilliant, she said.

"The night classes are awesome," she said of the energy level.

"We have such a cross-section of cyclists and moms and regular people, bankers...it's kind of everybody," she said, adding that spin classes often appeal to "those of us who are mildly competitive, who have that in our nature."

"You get this high payoff," she said of the feeling in taking a spin class.

"There is something very collective and viby about being in

the room with a group of people all going to the same beat...you get that feeling that you've done something, that you've pushed yourself...and it was almost fun."

Having fun and feeling sexy while toning up was key for the Knee sisters, Kerry and Krista, when they decided to launch a gym in Toronto last year.

The pair, aged 35 and 31, are the two women behind Flirty Girl Fitness, which opened in a studio on Wellington Street West last December.

"Women can't get motivated to run on a treadmill," Krista said during a tour of the trendy studio, which features a large mirrored room outfitted with 11 poles.

"The women who come in all love it," she said. "They all come in so shy and so insecure."

But before long, they're letting their guards down and are pole dancing as if they always had.

"No one has a dance background (in the classes).

Everyone is out of their realm so they really support each other," she said. "At the end of the class everyone is applauding."

As the name implies, Flirty Girl offers a variety of sassy exercise classes ranging from pole dancing to striptease, belly dancing and Flashdance Aerobics.

So far, the response to the classes offered has been great.

"For just starting up a brand new fitness studio it's amazing," said Krista, who first heard of the concept of a stripping fitness class while watching Oprah.

Not long after that, her sister Kerry had a pole installed in her house.

"I thought she was crazy," Krista said.

But she soon came around.

"We had been dying to go into business together. We never dreamed it was going to be this," she said, noting that both girls had corporate jobs prior to launching the studio, which took about a year to set up.

"I hang out all day and teach women how to pole dance and at night we do bachelorette parties...I love it," she said.

The average client is in her late 20s to mid-30s, Krista said, adding they have had women in their 60s attending classes.

"Every class is designed for beginners," she said.

"They're for the average person who has never done any of this and is in average physical shape."

And, for those who think swinging around a pole looks like a breeze, don't be fooled.

"It's like a sport," said Krista. "But it's fun and sexy too." ❧

Amy Brown of Pilates for Life teaches how to improve flexibility, co-ordination, balance and mobility.

