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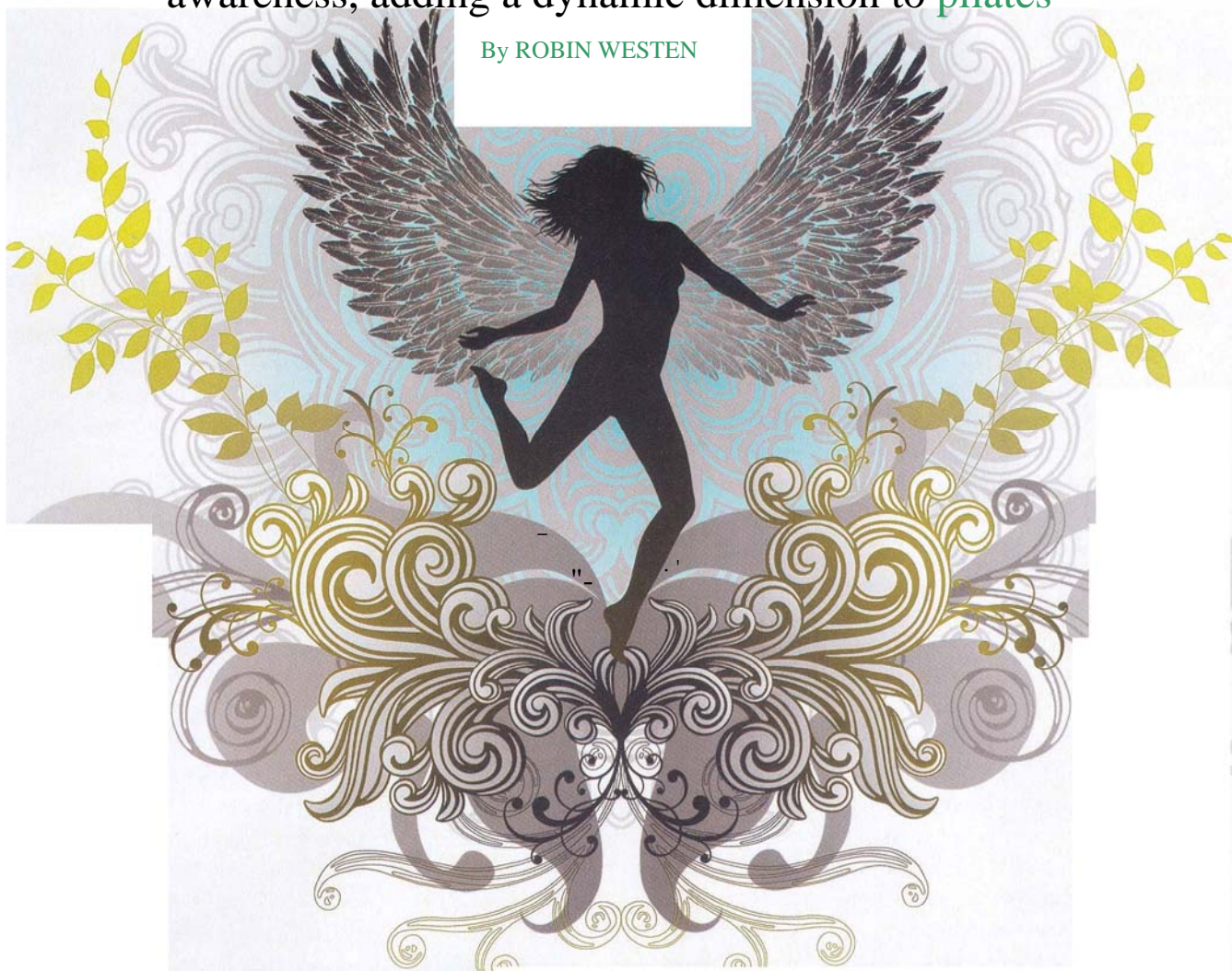
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IMAGERY TAKES WING

the franklin method combines visualization with anatomical awareness, adding a dynamic dimension to pilates

By ROBIN WESTEN



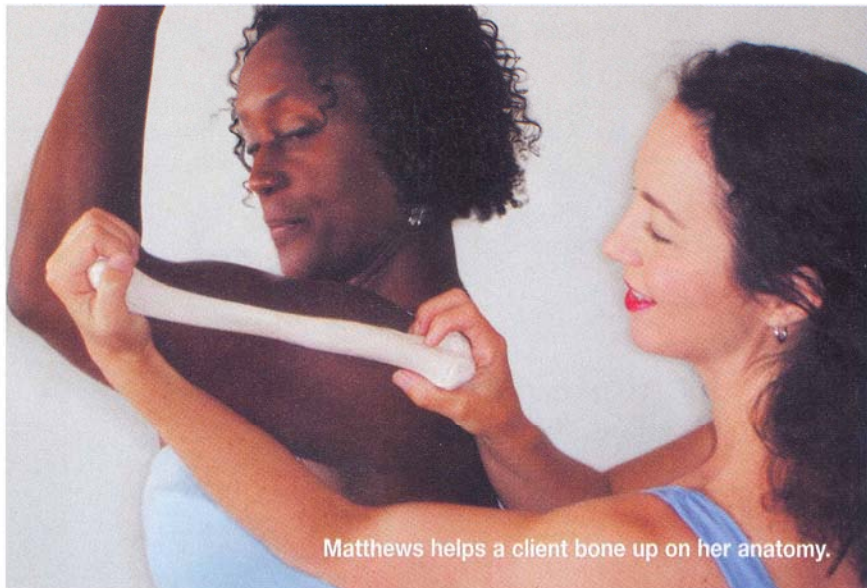
IT'S ONE OF THOSE LONG AND HECTIC DAYS IN NEW YORK CITY..
I'M RUNNING AROUND WITH A LAPTOP AND A PURSE THE SIZE OF
A CIRCUS TENT. NO WONDER MY SHOULDERS ARE TENSE AND
CURLED FORWARD LIKE TWO Cs. BUT WITHIN THE NEXT HOUR,
I GROW A PAIR OF GOSSAMER WINGS.

My stiff shoulders are miraculously released, thanks to the Franklin Method, a scientifically based technique that marries a practitioner's anatomical knowledge with personally meaningful, dynamic imagery. Using the technique not only increases body awareness and corrects posture, but it also strengthens bones and muscles and improves athletic performance. And when it's fully embodied, it brings about near miraculous changes-in one session.

There's nothing new about employing imagery and visualization to improve posture and performance. It's been used by professional athletes and coaches around the world to reach winning goals for decades. But the Franklin Method builds on this technique in a highly personal way.

Developed some 25 years ago by Swiss-born Eric Franklin, a boyish 50-year-old with elfin features and exuberant energy, the method is now embraced around the world. Among its adherents: the Royal Ballet School of London, the Juilliard School's dance department, the Music Conservatory of Vienna, countless athletes and dancers from China to France, as well as practitioners and instructors of yoga, Gyrotonic and, most often, Pilates.

Franklin created his method through a combination of experience and intuition. A gifted artist, he spent much of his childhood making detailed drawings of the natural world as he observed it around him. He studied acting and dance and then moved to New York City, where he earned an MFA in dance from the Tisch School and danced with Rebecca Kelly and Solaris, among others. (He did not study Pilates, however.) Inspired by his deepening awareness that the images we create in our mind directly affect the way our muscles move, Eric founded his institute in Switzerland in 1984. Since then, he has written and illustrated more than half a dozen books on his method, many translated internationally. His latest project is a book, as



yet untitled, about the relationship between Pilates and the Franklin Method. (Find his books at amazon.com.)

IMAGE MEETS FORM

"The Franklin Method enhances Pilates because it focuses on what a person is thinking, emoting or picturing while doing their exercises in order to perform them in an anatomically correct way," Franklin says. "If you have in your mind negative pictures, resentful feelings or distracted thoughts, you can be doing the Hundred, but you'll be infusing your body with negative energy. There's a chance that, as a result, your form won't be ideal and you'll probably get tired fast."

In the Franklin Method, one starts with imagery before doing any movement. "In order to move or align your body in a new way, the brain needs new information," says its creator. "This comes through feeling and envisioning new experience." For example, people often lift their shoulders to their ears when doing the Hundred, which can create a lot of stress and tightening in the area. The solution? The image of a buoyant balloon weightlessly lifting the head will effortlessly release tightness in the shoulders. But Franklin is clear that the image has to suit the individual

using it. It's up to the client to work with the teacher to come up with a personalized vision.

PILATES + FRANKLIN METHOD

Kyle Lynn Matthews, a Pilates and Gyrotonic teacher at Burlingame Pilates Studio (just south of San Francisco), is a Franklin Method enthusiast who says that she always integrates imagery with her private Pilates instruction. "When you use the Franklin Method, you meet your clients where they are, because a good part of the method is learning to help them put their consciousness into their bodies, notice what's going on and open to the possibility of change."

Often, she'll start a session by asking a client to show her exactly where a body part is by touching it. "Most of the time, even though we think we know our own anatomy, when it comes to the technical stuff, we're way off the mark," she explains. That's when Matthews either rolls out a skeleton or an anatomy book to help her client get the true picture of the body's construction. Franklin's method also taught Matthews to understand and experience bone rhythms, as Franklin describes them. Matthews explains, "Even though most of us think of our bones as straight and dense, our skeletal system is actually a series of mov

Founder of the method,
Eric Franklin

ing spirals. In fact, there is not a bone in our body that isn't curved or spiraled," she says. "When you can envision the true nature of the skeletal system, you begin to understand that we're not just two-dimensional, and we don't move just in a linear fashion. Movement is actually circular." And once the client grasps the anatomical facts, she and the teacher collaborate to come up with an image to rectify the problem.

One of the many Pilates students Matthews has helped using the Franklin Method is Andrew Klein, a busy consultant in his late 40s. An active and fierce exerciser, Klein swam and played competitive sports for years. By the time he got to Matthews' Pilates class, his body was worn out. He had a torn psoas (the muscle that embraces the side of the lumbar spine) and a herniated disc. On a pain scale of one to 10, he reported experiencing an excruciating six, sometimes seven. He came to Pilates to recover from his injuries.

"Based on what the Franklin Method taught me," Matthews says, "I observed Andrew's stance was wider than his pelvis, which meant that because his femurs didn't line up, his pelvis and spine were putting tremendous stress on his body."

Matthews suggested that Klein place his hands on his inner hip joints (not the outer hip, where he thought his joint was located) and feel the bones. Then she showed him an actual skeleton, along with images from anatomy texts to fix the placement of his hip joints in his mind's eye. Then—and this is key—they developed an image to roll around in his mind. "Because he's an avid athlete, I suggested his femur heads were tennis balls supporting his hips and asked him to line up his ankles and knees under these tennis balls." After that first session Andrew was able to accurately visualize his own anatomy and "see" where his bones should properly align. By making the adjustment, he reduced his pain to a very bearable level in a single session.



EMBOD'JING KNOWLEDGE

Susan Powers, an instructor at the Pilates Center in Boulder, CO, loves using the Franklin Method with Pilates because "knowledge of the body increases knowledge of function," she says. But that's only the beginning. "You also need to embody that knowledge," she notes, "and the best way to do that is through experience."

A recent success story was a student in her mid-60s. (We'll call her Barbara.) She suffered from spinal stenosis, a narrowing of the spaces in the vertebrae, where calcification settles and ends up curving and stiffening the spine. As a result, Barbara's posture was rounded from head to tail.

"You have to be very careful with people with this kind of condition because you don't want to exacerbate it," Powers says. "But one of the many things I've learned from the Franklin Method is that movement is always better than holding still."

Using Franklin Method imagery, Powers was able to teach Barbara a healthy position for her pelvis, and they worked on strengthening her upper-back muscles to keep her more upright when sitting and standing. One of the images Barbara used was of fluid flowing through her spine to wash out sediment, like silt in a riverbed. "Now she gets much greater benefit from her Pilates exercises, especially Roll-ups," Powers reports.

THE "AHA" MOMENT

SO now you may be wondering how I sprouted my wings. After Matthews pulled a couple of bones from her purse (literally) and showed how my collarbone attached to my shoulder, she had me fee! my own bones. Once I understood how my shoulders were connected, as we were working together the image of angel wings spontaneously sprouted from my shoulder blades. From that moment on, I've been able to use those wings to release my shoulders whenever they get tense. Not every student can carry the imagery away with him or her the first time out of the class setting. It takes practice sometimes several sessions. But once the student can do it, Matthews calls it an "aha" moment. I was lucky to have one in my first session.

GETTING CERTIFIED

Matthew says qualifying for Franklin Method certification is a thrilling ride, but it takes time and commitment. To start, all students must attend at least one full-day Franklin Method workshop. Then, after that, you decide you want to become a practitioner, you would register for the first of the three series: Introductory, Intermediate and Advanced. It's suggested that only one level be completed each year. To date, there are more than 400 certified Franklin Method teachers worldwide.

For Pilates teachers and students it seems like a natural fit. Susan Powers says the Franklin Method is crucial to her teaching: "It's more than just learning about your body; it's having an actual experience of it. And when you have this kind of understanding—and you're teaching Pilates—the benefits to students and teachers are out of this world." Learn more at franklin-methode.ch.

Contributing writer Robin Westen lives in New York City and Vermont. ~