

Prana Pilates Foundations

A Brief History of Joseph Pilates

Early Life

Joseph Hubertus Pilates was born in 1883 in Germany. As a child, he was often sick, suffering from asthma, rickets, and rheumatic fever. Determined to overcome his frailty, he devoted himself to physical culture, studying gymnastics, boxing, diving, and martial arts. By his teenage years, he had transformed his body and strength so completely that he worked as a model for anatomy charts.

The Birth of the Apparatus

During World War I, Pilates was interned in England as a German national. While there, he taught his fellow internees his system of exercises, believing that mindful, corrective movement could keep them strong and healthy. Later, while working with wounded soldiers in hospitals, he began attaching springs to bed frames, allowing bedridden patients to exercise against resistance. These early innovations became the foundation for his famous apparatus, the **Reformer**, designed to both support the body and challenge it through spring-based resistance.

Contrology in America

In 1926, Joseph emigrated to the United States, where he met his wife, Clara. Together, they opened the first Pilates studio in New York City, located near the dance district. The method quickly drew the attention of dancers, actors, and athletes who valued its ability to build strength, flexibility, and control while helping prevent and rehabilitate injuries. Joseph named his method **Contrology**, emphasizing the power of the mind to consciously guide the body with precision, efficiency, and flow.

The OG 34 Mat Exercises

Joseph Pilates published the original 34 mat exercises in his book *Return to Life Through Contrology* in 1945. He had been developing his system for decades — starting with exercises he created for himself as a sickly child in Germany, refining them during his time in England (WWI internment), and evolving them further once he moved to New York in 1926. The 34 exercises we now call the “Classical Mat Series” were first formally documented and presented to the public in *Return to Life*. In that book, he laid out the full sequence, along with his philosophy of Contrology: whole-body health, breath, spinal mobility, precision, and mind–body integration.

So while he created and practiced versions of these movements earlier, the official release of the 34 Mat exercises was in 1945.

The original 34 Pilates sequence is a brilliant piece of movement history, but it isn't always the best thing to practice these days for a few reasons:

1. Designed for a Different Era

Joseph Pilates created the sequence in the early 1900s for dancers, boxers, and circus performers—people with highly conditioned bodies. The average person today often lives with prolonged sitting, weaker core stabilizers, and tighter hips/back, which means the sequence can be too demanding or unsafe without modifications.

2. Rigid, Linear Approach

The original 34 are meant to be practiced in a strict order with little rest. While this builds stamina, it doesn't leave much room for adaptation, recovery, or honoring modern understandings of nervous system regulation and functional movement variety.

3. Modern Movement Science

We now know more about biomechanics, fascia, joint health, and core function. Many of the original exercises are still valuable, but contemporary sequencing often incorporates prep drills, neutral spine awareness (rather than always imprinting), and varied planes of motion for a more sustainable practice.

4. Accessibility & Injury Risk

Certain exercises (like Roll Over, Neck Pull, or Boomerang) place significant load on the neck, spine, or hamstrings. Without careful modifications, they can aggravate common conditions like herniated discs, SI joint dysfunction, or osteoporosis.

5. Lack of Holistic Integration

Pilates today is practiced by a wide spectrum of people—from athletes to those in rehab. Many modern teachers adapt the work by blending functional fitness, physiotherapy insights, and mindfulness so that the practice is not just a workout, but also restorative and healing.

In short: The Core 34 are a valuable foundation, but practicing them “as is” doesn’t always meet the needs of today’s bodies, lifestyles, or diverse populations. That’s why most teachers break them down, add prep exercises, and weave in modern sequencing and safety adaptations.

Publications and Teaching

Joseph dedicated his life to teaching and refining Contrology. He authored two key works: *Your Health* (1934) and *Return to Life Through Contrology* (1945), in which he outlined his philosophy of uniform physical development, spinal health, breathwork, and natural movement. His teachings blended strength, mobility, breath, and mindful awareness, creating a holistic practice far ahead of its time.

Legacy

Joseph Pilates continued teaching into his 80s, known for his vitality, charisma, and devotion to movement. He passed away in 1967 at the age of 83. His students—later called the *Pilates Elders*—carried his work forward, ensuring that his method reached beyond the studio walls. Today, millions around the world practice and teach Pilates, keeping alive the principles of Contrology: strength with suppleness, precision with flow, and the integration of body, mind, and spirit.

Contrology: The Core Principles of Contrology through Awareness & Energetic Alignment

Contrology, as you now know is the original system created by Joseph Pilates - it is a philosophy of embodied living. At its heart are six guiding principles: **Breath, Control, Centering, Flow, Precision, and Concentration.** Let's explore these a little deeper!

1. Breath

Traditional Pilates Perspective:

Breath is the foundation of movement. Joseph Pilates emphasized lateral or “ribcage breathing” to oxygenate the blood and energize the body. Proper breath supports spinal mobility, deepens core activation, and creates rhythm in movement.

Awareness & Energetic Alignment:

- Awareness: Breath anchors you to the present moment. Observe where your breath flows freely and where it feels restricted.
- Energy: Inhalation invites expansion and inspiration; exhalation supports grounding and release. Breath moves **life-force (prana/qi)** through the body.

Practice Cue:

Inhale to expand and awaken; exhale to deepen and root. Imagine breath traveling down the spine, filling the center, and radiating outward through the limbs.

Lateral Breathing - Step By Step

1. Set Your Posture

- Sit or lie down with a neutral spine.
- Lengthen through the crown of your head.
- Relax your shoulders down away from your ears.

2. Inhale into the Ribs

- Inhale **through the nose**.
- Instead of letting the breath expand the belly (like in diaphragmatic yoga breathing), direct the air into the **sides and back of the ribcage**.
- You should feel your ribs widen sideways and slightly backward — like an accordion expanding.

Key idea: The front of your core (abdominals) stays gently engaged, so the expansion goes sideways and back, not forward into the belly.

3. Exhale and Narrow

- Exhale **through the mouth**, with a controlled, “hissing” or pursed-lip quality, as if blowing through a straw.
- Allow the ribs to draw inward and downward.
- Deepen abdominal engagement, pulling the navel gently toward the spine.

4. Maintain Core Connection

- Throughout the inhale and exhale, the abdominal wall stays active — this is what allows the breath to expand **laterally** instead of ballooning forward.
- This keeps the **Powerhouse (core)** engaged and ready to support movement.

Why Pilates Uses Lateral Breathing

- Keeps **core engaged** while breathing (essential for spinal support).
- Promotes **oxygenation and stamina** during controlled movement.
- Encourages **spinal mobility**, since the back ribs expand.
- Creates a rhythm and focus, blending breath with movement (awareness + control).

Practice Tip

Place your **hands on the sides of your ribcage**:

- As you inhale, feel your ribs press outward into your hands.
- As you exhale, feel them knit back in.
This tactile feedback makes it easier to learn.