



# Global Pilates Ambassador

THE POWERHOUSE IN ACTION, FILMING A VIDEO FOR PILATES ANYTIME.

Michael King's love of Pilates has brought him from London to Houston to Los Angeles and back again. Now he traverses the globe to bring top-quality training to teachers around the world.

by Anne Marie O'Connor

#### **Pilates Style:** TELL US ABOUT YOUR CHILDHOOD.

**Michael King:** My story is kind of like the *Billy Elliot* story. I came from Scunthorpe, a northern steelworks town in England. I think I was the first boy to ever dance in the town. As a result, I never felt like I belonged. I was tortured by my sports teacher because everyone had to play soccer and I hated soccer. He once made me run around the football field in barefoot in the snow because I refused to play.

When I was 11, a local operatic society was looking for children for a production of *The Sound of Music*. They made me Kurt, as I couldn't sing and Kurt didn't have to sing alone. After that, I started getting seriously into dance and at 18, I went to The Place, the London Contemporary Dance School, which was the Martha Graham School in London, on a full, three-year course. My mother was in tears. She wanted me to get a "real" career and become a schoolteacher. Even now, she still says, "I wish you'd find a proper job and settle down."

#### **PS:** HOW DID YOU DISCOVER PILATES?

**Michael:** At The Place, we had to do regular Pilates classes with Alan Herdman [who first brought Pilates to the UK]. At the time, I didn't see the point of Pilates: I wanted to dance, not lie on a mat. It was only when I had a back injury, a prolapsed disc, that I began to understand Pilates, and then I loved it so much because of what it did for me.

#### **PS:** HOW DID YOU END UP TRAINING TO BECOME A TEACHER?

**Michael:** As much as I loved dance, with my back injury, a career was not going to be easy. So I trained with Alan and eventually managed his studio. Back then, learning Pilates was through an apprenticeship system that was quite torturous: You had to sit for hours and hours and observe, and then when they thought you were ready, you could start assisting. I now realize how much I learned watching, but at the time it seemed like years of sitting.

#### **PS:** AND HOW DID YOU END UP IN THE U.S.?

**Michael:** Alan had set up the Pilates program at the Houston Ballet Academy. The first guy he'd sent over had received a green card and then left suddenly to work for some glamorous person. I was literally sent over the next day to replace him.

When the doors on the plane opened and the Texas heat hit me like a hot, wet blanket,

I realized this was where I was meant to be, that I was never meant to live in a cold country. But the legalities weren't in order, so three months later, I was back in London, where I opened my own studio in Pineapple Dance Studios, a famous dance studio that was new then. My grandfather, who was a blacksmith, helped build my first equipment, as we didn't yet have equipment companies in the U.K.

One year later, I was invited back to Houston and stayed for the next 10 years. The people at the Houston Ballet Academy wanted to have the best, most comprehensive studio for their dancers and clients, so they sent me around the country to study at all of the best Pilates studios at that time. I went to San Francisco, where James Garrick was the first doctor to put Pilates in a medical setting at St. Francis Hospital. And I went to New York, where I took classes with Carola Trier in the mornings and Romana Kryzanowska in the afternoons. Apparently, Romana didn't speak to you unless you'd been going to her for a long time. So when she started correcting me, the other teachers were so surprised. To this day, I still think it was for one of three reasons: one, I was a male dancer and she liked male dancers; two, I was British with an odd accent; or three, my technique was so bad she couldn't stand it. (I always lean toward number one or two!)

#### **PS:** AND YOU ALSO WERE PART OF THE '80S FITNESS REVOLUTION?

**Michael:** Yes, Jane Fonda was jumping up and down with aerobics then and I thought that was the best thing ever. So, besides working at the Houston Ballet, I started teaching up to five high-impact aerobics classes a day at the local YMCA, with my leg warmers and my headband. Teaching aerobics really taught me how to teach group exercise, a skill that has been really important to me in the last 10 years in Pilates.

#### **PS:** HOW DID YOU END UP IN LOS ANGELES?

**Michael:** I moved there for a relationship. People thought I was crazy when I said I'm leaving the Houston Ballet, which was an amazing job with a full-time salary and benefits. I think my mother started crying all over again!



**TOP:** TRAVELING THE WORLD TO TEACH PILATES IS JUST ANOTHER DAY IN THE LIFE OF MICHAEL KING. HERE, HE LEADS A CHAIR WORKSHOP IN POLAND.

**BOTTOM:** MICHAEL KING PILATES CO-FOUNDER MALCOLM MUIRHEAD DEMONSTRATES THEIR MOVEMENT SEQUENCE, ROLLING BACK INTO JACKKNIFE.



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**PS: DID YOU FIND A JOB IN L.A.?**

**Michael:** Right after I arrived, I auditioned for the Karen Voight studios (a popular aerobics studio) and I started teaching the very next day. I taught everything—step, aerobics, circuit, body sculpting and eventually, a Pilates mat class. But people weren't ready for Pilates yet, so the class wasn't popular. I'd have to make two of my friends come!

By coincidence, Voight was right across the street from Ron Fletcher's studio on La Cienega Boulevard and I would take classes with Diane (Severino) and Michael (Podwal), who were teaching there then. That space was later taken over by Mari Winsor, who recently reminded me that I had helped her open her studio.

I was also doing a lot of personal training, which often included Pilates, as many clients had equipment in their homes. One of my daily clients was the Marvin Davis family. They had a

full Pilates studio in the basement as well as an aerobics studio, weight room, full swimming pool and of course, full spa. Many of my clients were celebrities—which is inevitable in L.A.—and I was on call sometimes 24 hours a day, in case they wanted to work out at three in the morning. Surreal times!

**PS: HOW DID THE PILATES INSTITUTE EVOLVE INTO MICHAEL KING PILATES?**

**Michael:** In 2006, we had taken on additional business partners. They decided to go in a different direction, so in 2008, the three original partners (including myself), parted ways from The Pilates Institute. It was a very hard decision, as we had spent years building the company, but we wanted to take back responsibility for what the company was doing. Malcolm and I started Michael King Pilates and Nuala moved to St. Tropez; we still work together at events and conventions.

The concept is still the same under Michael King Pilates, but we made some changes. Before, we did modular training courses, which allowed people to take the comprehensive training at their own speed. But a lot of people would do the first course and then never complete the program. To fully train in this technique, you need to commit to the whole comprehensive training, so we make sure everyone takes the full training course.

We also offer courses that fill in what I always thought was the missing gap with most training courses. We've started a mentor program to help teachers improve their teaching skills. And with our new Custom Training Programme, we tailor your training to what you really need, especially if you have been out there teaching for a while. Once teachers are certified, we help them apply the teachings and give them feedback based on real clients they see in their studios. I either visit teachers in their studios, they come to me or I can watch them via webcam.

**PS: AND YOU WERE INSTRUMENTAL IN MAKING PILATES AN OFFICIALLY ACCREDITED PROFESSION IN THE U.K.?**

**Michael:** Yes, in 2002, we were the first organization to work with a national accrediting organization, called the OCR (Oxford, Cambridge and RSA Examinations) in order to make Pilates a nationally recognized qualification. It was set up to show competence in teaching skills, professionalism and responsibility in the health and fitness industry. It was an important step because in many European countries, you need insurance to be able to teach, and you can't get it unless you have a nationally accredited qualification.

In 2008, the qualification was upgraded to what's now called a Level 3 qualification. All the major Pilates organizations at the time came together and agreed on the necessary criteria, as measured by an assessment that's both written and practical.

The written exam is set by an accrediting board of writers and not by one Pilates organization and is graded by the accrediting board, not one Pilates company; the practical exam is given by a trained assessor who has

not been involved in your training, which ensures a basic competency standard. Today there are similar national qualifications in Australia, New Zealand and South Africa.

**PS: WHAT ARE THE PROS AND CONS OF HAVING A GOVERNMENT RUN THE ACCREDITATION PROCESS?**

**Michael:** Because it's government backed and not commercially based, it keeps it unbiased so no one training provider can overly influence the content. And there's only one assessment process, so that the only thing that matters is that you're teaching safe and effective Pilates. It's not about what style of Pilates you're teaching. This also prevents people from just buying a book and starting to teach Pilates, which was very common beforehand.

A negative thing is that once people have the qualification, it's hard to inspire them to continue to learn. You have to have continuing-educational credits each year, but they can be in many different subjects. And, for right now, the accreditation is only for matwork, though we have hopes of adding an equipment qualification in the future.

**PS: YOU REALLY PUSH YOUR STUDENTS TO CONTINUE LEARNING, EVEN AFTER THEY'VE COMPLETED THEIR COMPREHENSIVE TRAINING?**

**Michael:** Absolutely! Like any young person, when you first start learning, you think you know it all. But back in the '80s, when I started traveling to different studios in the U.S., it showed me there was so much to this technique that I didn't know.

I realized that when you learn from everyone, you're going to learn different things. It's important to stay with one organization until you have that comprehensive foundation, but then you should go out and learn from as many different people as you can. I think it was Kathy Grant who said, "If you say you know Pilates, stop teaching!"

**PS: DO YOU SEE A GOVERNMENT-BACKED ACCREDITATION PROGRAM WORKING IN THE U.S.?**

**Michael:** The challenge you have in the United States is basically the states are not united. If you're an accountant, lawyer, massage therapist, etc., and you move states, you have to take another exam. To take it into individual states would be a huge challenge—and it's really hard in the world of Pilates to get everyone to agree to one thing other than the fact that there has to be standards.

In the U.S., you have the Pilates Method Alliance [PMA], which is great. The challenge with the PMA is that they cannot assess teaching skills with only a written exam. They must rely on individual companies' processes and that you have been trained and have achieved the required hours. It's

still so varied out there between good, comprehensive programs by companies, such as STOTT PILATES®, Polestar, Peak and BASI, and less comprehensive options or even online training programs. This is a really big challenge for the PMA.

To move it forward, I believe it has to be monitored by an unbiased, independent, educational organization, so there's no argument about brand names. If we have transparency on content and the assessment processes, if the consumer knows what it means to be certified versus having a diploma or a certification, then these issues become less misleading and Pilates' reputation can move forward in the public's awareness.

**PS: YOU TRAVEL SO MUCH. WHERE ARE SOME OF THE EXCITING PLACES YOU SEE PILATES EMERGING?**

**Michael:** Pilates is so popular in Russia. They have Romana's Authentic Pilates in World Class, one of the biggest fitness chains in Russia. In Turkey, my students were practicing Pilates in the daytime and demonstrating each evening against the government. India also has a huge developing market; they do Pilates in small rooms literally with cows walking outside. One of our first teachers there was from a village in Nepal. When she first went back six years ago, the villagers hated Pilates. But over time, they asked more about the technique and now they want it all time; she just opened the first Pilates studio in Nepal! That's fun, to see the transformation from the '80s, when it was all celebs doing it in their gorgeous mansions, to now when it's in tiny rooms in Nepal. The story of Pilates continues, and I am so happy to see it grow and flourish and touch so many people's lives. **PS**



FULLY CLAD IN A LEOTARD, MICHAEL TEACHES A STEP CLASS IN SWITZERLAND, CIRCA 1995.

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**PS: HOW DID YOU END UP BACK IN EUROPE?**

**Michael:** The personal relationship ended really badly. So in 1995, I decided to move (with my dog) to Sion, Switzerland, for a couple of years, where I managed a club that offered fitness classes and Pilates.

Through the years, I had stayed involved in theater, and in 1997, I moved to London for a job choreographing *The Official Tribute to the Blues Brothers*. It was a very popular show in Europe, and in fact, is still running today.

**PS: HOW DID YOU GET BACK INVOLVED WITH PILATES?**

**Michael:** In 1999, three of us, Malcolm Muirhead, Nuala Coombs and I, created a company called The Pilates Institute. We had a studio and a training center in the City of London. We were the biggest Pilates training center in the U.K., and have had over 1,500 instructors go through our programs. Over the next eight years, we also opened 27 training centers around the world.

TOP: ARIF DURGEÇ, A MICHAEL KING PILATES TEACHER IN ISTANBUL TURKEY, DEMONSTRATES CLIMB THE TREE ON THE LADDER BARREL.

BOTTOM: TEACHING CADILLAC IN TURKEY, WHERE THE METHOD IS CATCHING ON.

