Reformer

By Daniel Wilson

The Pilates

A perfect tool for low-impact, resistance-based therapy

Lindy Royer had been a PT for more than 20 years before she discovered what she calls the “missing link” to her practice—Pilates.

The Pilates principle of core stabilization addresses posture, muscle performance, and motor control—the same concepts that form the basis of most orthopedic rehabilitation and therapy. Mention Pilates to many, and the response will likely be that it is predominantly done on a mat, much like yoga. But those familiar with the exercise method know that the majority of Pilates for rehabilitation is primarily done on various types of equipment. The most well-known of these is the Reformer.

The Reformer came about at the outbreak of World War I, when method creator Joseph Pilates was interned in England as an “enemy alien” with other German nationals. During his internment, Pilates rigged springs to hospital beds, enabling bedridden patients to exercise against resistance—an innovation that led to his later equipment design for the Reformer.

Today’s Reformer provides an effective, low-impact, resistance-based therapy session that is friendly to a client’s joints. It consists of a gliding carriage inside a wooden or metal frame connected to a system of springs, pulleys, and ropes/straps. Users sit, kneel, stand, or lie on the carriage, and push and pull the footbar and the ropes. Resistance is provided by the attached springs, and exercises target every part of the body.
Therapists all over the globe are turning to Pilates on a Reformer as a successful and lucrative adjunct to their physical therapy practice. Its focus on movement and breathing brings them new and effective treatment methods. And it’s also extremely versatile—the extensive exercise repertoire can be modified on the Reformer to fit the needs of each patient. In addition, it improves strength, flexibility, balance, control, and muscular symmetry. The series of rhythmic exercises promote elongated and toned muscle, and are noted for turning the abdominals, lower back, and hips into the body’s power center.

Royer, a PT since 1976 and a certified Pilates instructor since 2001, is the owner and director of Park Meadows Pilates, a Pilates-based therapy center in Lone Tree, Colo. She started her Reformer program in 2005 with very successful results.

Key to her program’s success, Royer believes that the essential first step was not an examination of how the Reformer is applied to Pilates, but rather the development of a solid understanding of how Pilates for physical therapy differs from Pilates the fitness method, as well as how it compares to other traditional therapy techniques. She highly recommends taking this approach.

**Pilates for Rehabilitation Versus Pilates for Exercise**

“I think the big difference between Pilates for rehabilitation and Pilates for fitness is that the former focuses on get-

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ting an individual to a desired state of functional movement, whereas the latter focuses on general athletic or health goals,” Royer says.

Royer points out that PT professionals use the exercise to assess and evaluate an ailment, prescribe a treatment modality, and then reassess to see if it was effective. In addition, critical reasoning with Pilates is key.

“A therapist is not just delivering a recipe of exercises that could be found in a gym setting,” Royer says. “He or she is delivering to a patient a set of specific exercises to meet a patient’s specific needs and facilitate a positive movement experience. They must also know how to modify the exercises where the standard repertoire may be contraindicated for special populations like osteoporosis—something that may not be addressed in the fitness world.”

PILATES ON THE REFORMER

Compared with using a standard mat, the major asset in treating patients on the Reformer is how the equipment assists with gravity. Simply put, Pilates done on a mat requires that a person’s own body provides the resistance to gravity. This is contraindicated for clients who cannot tolerate weight-bearing positions. The Reformer, with its myriad of adjustable ropes, pulleys, and springs, helps clients attain positions they would not be able to while using a mat.

The Reformer also changes the therapeutic environment by breaking down a functional movement into separate components. It does this by changing the handling of gravity and by using spring resistance. “The end result is, you are now able to retain a faulty movement pattern and help a client relearn a functional task that had been difficult when gravity was involved. Basically, they learn to move more efficiently on the Reformer,” Royer says.

SPECIAL POPULATIONS ON THE REFORMER

Because of its versatility and its ability to change the orientation of gravity, the Reformer allows a therapist to expand his or her client base to special populations like older adults or those with neuromuscular disorders.

At Park Meadows, Royer deals with many afflicted multiple sclerosis and...
Parkinson’s disease sufferers: “The Reformer is a very safe way to work with these populations. While supine on the Reformer, they can replicate movements that would not be possible if they were standing.”

With clients who are older adults, she finds that many have a hard time recovering from their weight-bearing physical activities—or worse, from injuries sustained by these activities. The Reformer is an optimal tool; with it, clients can maintain their mobility and flexibility because the equipment is assistive and movements are easier on the joints.

**PROPS ON THE REFORMER**

Props are smaller pieces of equipment (for example, balls and poles) that can make an exercise on the Reformer easier or more challenging. Royer has found that clients enjoy exercises using props. They also make conducting a group class much easier: “In a single group class, we can combine six different populations and achieve a different level of difficulty for each group participant by using a prop.

Props help you increase the challenge for some, yet provide more assistance and safety for others of a different fitness level.”

**BUYING A REFORMER**

Several important factors should be considered when purchasing a Reformer: functionality, versatility, durability, and aesthetics.

**Functionality and Versatility**

These two are somewhat intertwined, since the effectiveness of a Reformer can be dictated by its overall versatility. This

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is especially true for a therapist working with a wide variety of body types,

"I work with populations of all sizes," Royer says. "Sometimes I'll have a 6-
foot-2-inch football player on the Reformer, and other times I'll have a
child who is 4 feet 10 inches. The equipment needs to accommodate both sizes,
so it is important to examine how the footbar and shoulder rests adjust."