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### Mat and Balls Manual

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The Small Balls
Small balls are a fun and inexpensive way to add variety, stability challenges, self massage and an enhanced mind body connection to Pilates based mat classes, personal training sessions and home programs. While many sizes and kinds of balls can be used, we are including the 2” hard rubber ball for release work and self massage, the 5” inflatable playground ball for enhancing core awareness and the 13” Pilates Balance Ball for increased proprioception, stability challenges and support.

Joe Pilates did not use small balls in his practice but as Pilates has evolved many instructors have discovered that these simple toys are powerful teaching tools that can accelerate the learning process for students as well as expanding the traditional repertoire.

The 2” balls have been used to release tight areas since they were first discovered by someone with a knot in their shoulder, hip or foot. The 5” balls have been used by many people including Marie-Jose Blom for core activation and Yamuna Zake for intensive myofascial release work. The 13” ball was created by Christin Kuhnert, a Pilates instructor from Germany to create a dynamic surface for teaching stability exercises and increasing proprioception.

Benefits of the Balls
» Dynamic stabilization - The Pilates Balance Ball is a great tool for waking up the nervous system and training stabilization of the pelvis, shoulder girdle and torso in a dynamic environment.

» Myofascial release and self massage - The 2” and 5” balls are useful tools for releasing unnecessary tension and improving alignment

» Enhanced core work - The 5” and 13” balls help you to stay focused on the core for many of the Pilates exercises and are a wonderful teaching tool for new students or people recovering from injuries.

» Variety and fun - All of the balls can be used to create new exercises or variations on familiar exercises for clients who need a new challenge.

Choosing a Ball
Small balls come in a limitless range of sizes and textures. Once you become familiar with the basics of small ball exercises, feel free to experiment with balls of different sizes and textures.

Other Ball options include:
» 4”, 6” and 7” inflatable balls - Different sizes can be used to intensify or decrease the challenges or to better match your size and alignment needs.

» Spiky balls - Spikey balls come in many different sizes and are especially useful for self massage and myofascial release work.

» Larger inflatable balls - Inflatable balls come in a range of sizes and stiffness from the relatively small and soft gerty or bender ball to the somewhat larger and stiffer Triad or purple ball. Most of them can be used in place of the Balance ball.
Using the Balls

The 2” hard rubber ball is used either to release tension in areas such as the feet, hips and shoulders or to draw attention to alignment by holding the ball between the ankles, calves or thighs. If it is too firm, substitute a tennis ball or a small inflatable ball. For more stimulation use a small spiky ball.

The 5” inflatable ball is used for myofascial release work all over the body as well as activating the core by holding it between the thighs for Pilates abdominal exercises. It is generally used fully inflated. A slightly softer ball provides less intense release work and conforms better to the legs for alignment work. The ball is inflated using a needle pump.

The 13” Pilates Balance Ball is used primarily as a support and challenge for a variety of exercises. It is usually used partially inflated at anywhere from 20% full to 80% full. The ball is inflated using a straw.

Ball Safety

The small balls are generally safe unless there is an injury or limited range of motion in a certain area. Check the modifications and precautions listed in the manual for information on specific exercises.

» Myofascial release exercises - Self massage can be contraindicated for people with acute inflammation, blood clots, circulatory disorders, cancer and other diseases. As with any new workout, if a serious medical condition is present, consult a medical practitioner before proceeding.

» Spinal injuries - People with acute spinal injuries to the neck or low back are often too unstable to use the small balls safely. Consult your medical practitioner before proceeding.

Using this Manual

This manual contains a wide range of exercises organized by exercise category. Each exercise includes the starting position, movement sequence, modifications, variations, cueing and imagery, purpose and precautions. At the back of the manual are several exercise sequences you can do depending on your goals for the day or the focus of your class. Once you have worked through a few and have a good idea what the small balls are all about, feel free to experiment!
The feet are an important part of the body. They contain essential nerve endings that tell the rest of the body what to do through a process called proprioception. The fascia of the back of the body also ends at the bottom of the feet so when you release the feet, you will often find that the hamstrings and back will loosen up as well. The 2” ball is the perfect tool because it is small enough to get into the small muscles in the foot.

**Starting Position**
Stand with one foot on the ball and the other on the floor.

**Movement Sequence**

- **Lateral line**
  - Begin with the ball at the back of the heel and press into it gently. Slowly move the ball toward the little toe pressing into each spot on the foot as you go.

- **Middle line**
  - Once you have completed the lateral line, place the ball back in the center of the heel and slowly move it forward along the middle line of the foot until you reach the toes.

- **Medial line**
  - Once you have completed the middle line, place the ball back in the center of the heel and slowly move it forward along the medial line of the foot toward the big toe.

**Cueing and Imagery**

- Use the pressure of the ball to release and massage any tight spots in the foot. Pause when you reach a spot that feels especially tight.

**Purpose**

- Release tension in the feet.
- Relax the whole body.
- Balance the gait.
- Improve balance.

**Precautions**

Plantar fascitis and acute foot inflammation - Be cautious with the foot release with plantar fascitis or other painful foot symptoms. Avoid deep pressure or avoid all together.
Using the balls on the Hundred provides either a greater challenge on the inner thighs and midline with the 5” ball or some upper body support and lower body challenge with the Balance Ball. Either way it will shake up your everyday Hundred.

**Balance Ball Starting Position**

Ball inflated 50 to 75%

A person with a smaller torso will usually prefer a less inflated ball.

Place the ball between the shoulder blades with the hips on the floor. Bend the knees and lift the feet off the floor into a chair position. Reach the hands forward of the chest.

**5” Ball Starting Position**

Lie supine and place the ball between the thighs or the ankles with the knees bent in a chair position and the hands up toward the ceiling.

**Movement Sequence**

» Exhale – Engage the abdominals, roll the head and upper body up, lower the hands toward the hips, straighten the legs and lower them as far as you can without disturbing the lower back.

» Inhale – Pulse the arms as you breath into the ribs for 5 counts. Keep the legs and torso steady as you pump the arms.

» Inhale – Pulse the arms as you draw the abdominals in for 5 counts.

» Repeat for 10 breath cycles or 100 pulses.

**Modifications**

Tight hamstrings: Bend the knees as needed to accommodate people with tighter hamstrings.

Feet on the floor: Keep the feet on the floor for a beginning version.

**Variations**

Chair position: Keep the legs in a chair position as the upper body lifts up and the arms pulse.

Legs straight: Straighten the legs toward the ceiling.

Leg lowers: Lower the legs as far as you can without changing the position of the lower back.
**Cueing and Imagery**

- Engage the abdominals to draw the legs in toward the center.
- Lower the legs only as far as you can without moving the back.
  - *Instructor cue: Monitor the low back to make sure it does not come off the ball as the legs move.*
- Keep the neck and upper body as relaxed as possible as the legs move.
- Place the ball higher or lower on the back to change the support of the upper body.

**Purpose**

- Strengthen the abdominals.
- Strengthen the hip flexors.
- Teach pelvic stability.

**Precautions**

Back problems - You must be comfortable supine on the ball otherwise avoid.

Avoid with osteoporosis.
Spine Twist

Starting Position

Ball inflated 25 to 75%

Sit on the ball with the pelvis neutral and the weight balanced on top of the sit bones. Bring the inner thighs together and flex the feet. Reach the arms out to the sides of the body no higher than the shoulders. Sit up on the center of the sit bones. The stability challenge on the ball will generally increase with a more inflated ball.

Movement Sequence

» Inhale – Zip the inner thighs together and root both sit bones into the ball. Rotate the torso to the right keeping the arms directly out to the sides. Pulse twice in the rotation with a sniffing breath.

» Exhale – Return to the starting position with the weight centered on the sit bones and the arms out to the sides.

» Inhale – Rotate the torso to the left and pulse 2 times with a sniffing breath keeping the lower body perfectly still.

» Exhale – Return to the starting position.

» Repeat 4-6 times.
Cueing and Imagery

» Sit up on the very top of the sit bones.
  › Your sit bones are a mountain top, don’t slide down either side.
  › Stay balanced on the ball throughout.

» Engage the abdominals to lift the pelvis off the legs.
  › Imagine someone is holding your hips and lifting them up.
  › Imagine someone is pressing down on the top of your head and reach up to press their hand away.

» Rotate from the torso keeping the hips square on the ball.
» Keep the shoulders down and the neck long as you rotate the arms to the side.

Purpose

» Teach axial elongation.
» Learn how to sit up tall with support.
» Increase torso rotation.
» Improve pelvic stability.

Precautions

Low back and hip injuries – Limit the range of motion to what is comfortable.

Shoulder injuries – Choose the most comfortable position for the arms.

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Plank and Push Up exercises are excellent for strengthening the chest, shoulders and arms and for toning and integrating the whole body.

Elbow Plank

Starting Position

Ball inflated 50 to 75%

Lie prone with the forearms on the mat and the ball in one of the following starting positions. Starting Positions are listed from easiest to hardest.

Ball under pelvis: Place the ball under the pelvis and extend the body into one long line from head to toe.

Ball under thighs: Place the ball under the thighs just above the knees and extend the body into one long line from head to toe.

Ball under ankles: Place the ball under the front of the ankles and extend the body into one long line from head to toe.

Ball under elbows: Place the ball under the elbows and tuck the toes under to extend the body into one long line from head to toe.

Movement Sequence

» Inhale and Exhale – Press the forearms into the mat to engage the scapular stabilizers. Hold the torso in one long line from head to toe keeping the shoulders wide.

» Hold for 3-6 breaths.

Variations

Arm lift: Lift one arm off the mat and balance. This is easier with the ball under the legs. It is very hard with the elbows on the ball.

Leg lift: Lift one leg off the ball and balance. This is challenging no matter what starting position you choose!

Sternum Drops

Movement Sequence

» Inhale – From the elbow plank position, slide the shoulder blades together and lower the sternum towards the floor.

» Exhale – Press into the mat and slide the shoulders apart as the sternum lifts up.

» Repeat 5-10 times.
**Plank**

**Starting Position**
Place the hands on the mat with the shoulders directly above the wrists. Place the ball under the hips, thighs or ankles. It is very hard on the wrists for the hands to be on the ball so don’t use that starting position for the Plank.

**Movement Sequence**
- Inhale and Exhale – Hold the torso in one long line from head to toe keeping the shoulders wide.
- Hold for 3 to 6 breaths.

**Push Ups**

**Movement Sequence**
- Inhale – Bend the elbows and lower the torso towards the ground maintaining the plank position.
- Exhale – Straighten the elbows and press the torso back up.
- Repeat 4-20 times.

**Variations**
- Triceps push up: Aim the fingers straight ahead and keep the upper arms against the sides of the torso as you lower the torso to focus on the triceps.
- Pectoralis push up: Aim the fingers slightly in and open the elbows so the arms are at about a 45 degree angle to the torso as you lower the body to focus on the pectoralis major.

**Leg Pull Down**

**Movement Sequence**
- Inhale – From the plank position with the ball under the ankles, lift one foot off the ball and pulse it twice towards the ceiling with a sniffing breath.
- Exhale – Lower the leg back to the ball.
- Switch sides
- Repeat 3-5 times alternating sides each time.
Using the ball between the legs on any of the inversion exercises, Roll Over, Jackknife, Corkscrew or Boomerang requires core strength and control. This is for advanced students only!

**Roll Over**

**Starting Position**

5” Ball or Balance Ball

Lie on your back with the ball between the ankles, the hips flexed with the legs up to the ceiling and the hands at your sides.

**Movement Sequence**

» Exhale – Anchor the upper arms on the mat, engage the core and lift the legs up toward the ceiling to prepare.

» Inhale – Roll the lower back off the mat reaching the legs overhead until they are parallel to the ground. Press the upper arms into the mat and roll up until you are balanced no higher than the top of your shoulder blades. Do not roll up onto your neck!

» Exhale – Roll down, engaging the core and pressing the upper arms into the mat to make the roll smooth and steady. Keep the chest open and the back of the shoulders on the mat. Lower the legs as far as possible without letting the back arch off the mat.

» Repeat 3-6 times.

**Modifications**

Beginning version: Support the low back with the hands as if doing a shoulder stand.

**Variations**

Leg lowers: To increase the challenge of the Roll Over, lower the legs to the mat with control at the top of the move and flex the feet to increase the stretch. Lift the legs until they are parallel to the floor before rolling down.