

hard-core reform

at 20 years old, i was 150 pounds overweight and cursed with a family history of premature death—then i discovered exercise...and pilates **BY JO ANN McDONALD**

Joseph Pilates always said his exercise method was for everyone. I'm living proof that that's true, because I'm about as far from the stereotypical rail-thin ballet dancer or wealthy celebrity as you can get. I grew up in Hopkinsville, a small town in western Kentucky, where health and an active lifestyle were not exactly priorities. Our family had particularly poor eating habits, so it's not surprising that I was already overweight

when I entered second grade. When I was nine, my dad left, and my mom started working full-time and going to school, and she began relying heavily on convenience foods like chips, pizza and fast food to feed my two sisters and me.

To make things worse, I had a big problem with overeating. When I was three, I

infamously drank a whole bottle of Hershey's chocolate syrup and made myself sick. In hindsight, this clearly marked the beginning of my compulsive-overeating years. I think my mom knew but chose not to address it out of either denial or pity. She was obese herself and had been since she was a teenager. A couple of times she suggested we start working out together, but then she would never follow through. And in our rural town, there were few recreational options for kids—not even many sidewalks, so I rarely got any exercise.

The high cost of obesity and inactivity was made plain to me in 1993, when I was 13. At the time, my mother was only 37 but carried around 300 pounds on her 5'2" frame. After tearing a calf muscle, she got flu-like symptoms and spent the next couple of days in bed. One night she had an episode of severe shortness of breath but wouldn't go to the emergency room.



The next day she agreed to let my grandmother take her to the doctor. I went with, and, if I remember correctly, she was diagnosed with a bladder infection.

On the way home my grandmother stopped at the grocery store to pick up a few things. My mom needed to use the restroom and hobbled back there on her crutches, huffing and wheezing. Suddenly she just collapsed in the middle of the store. My grandmother went to help my mom while I stayed up front. When I heard an announcement over the PA asking if anyone knew CPR, I realized the situation was serious and began to cry.

Paramedics rushed my mother to the hospital, but she was pronounced dead on arrival. We later learned that several small blood clots had traveled to her lungs. It turned out that the condition ran in the family: Her father had also died in his late 30s from a blood clot. I think the combination of the extra weight and her sedentary lifestyle exacerbated the problem. I was in shock for a while, partly because I'd never known anyone who'd died before and partly because I didn't know where my sisters and I would go. I didn't really feel angry, just scared and unsure of what would happen next.

After the funeral, we went to live with my mother's brother, who also lived in Hopkinsville. But he was a bachelor, and going from living a life as a swinging single guy to raising three neurotic teenagers wasn't easy. There was a lot of conflict, so after two years I went to live with my mom's sister in Owensboro. She and her husband had three teenagers of their own, so things were a bit easier there.

When I turned 18, I went away to college, but I dropped out a year and a half later and moved in with my high school boyfriend, James (now my husband of nine years). In that first year with James, my aunt, who was also morbidly obese and sedentary, collapsed and

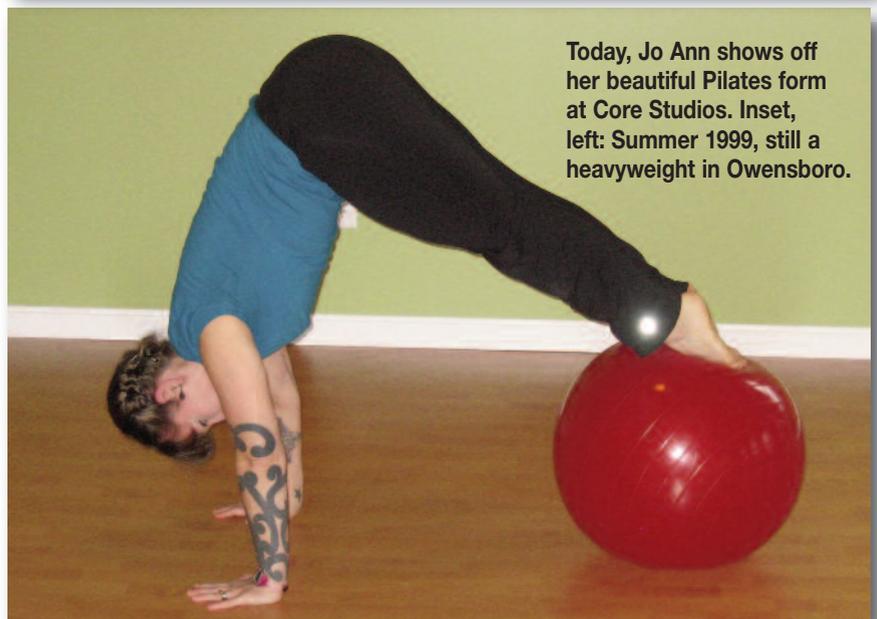
died in the doctor's office of a blood clot in her heart. She was 41.

Her death hit me especially hard because she had been a great maternal figure in that difficult transition period from teenager to young adult. It also drove home the realization that I was headed down the same path. I was already morbidly obese (though I never got on a scale, I figured I weighed between 270 and 300 pounds), sedentary and very unhappy. James and I had a discussion about it, and I remember saying, I'm going to die at 42 unless I

make some serious changes.

So in September 2001, a couple of months shy of my 22nd birthday, I joined the Owensboro YMCA, along with my best friend, Emily, who was also quite heavy and inactive. Together we could chuckle off the embarrassment of being two fatties struggling in a room with so many "normal-size" people. I started out pedaling on the stationary bike for 20 or 30 minutes, then walking on the treadmill for 15. Even walking at 2.5 mph with no incline gave me shin splints.

At first I was very self-conscious, but



Today, Jo Ann shows off her beautiful Pilates form at Core Studios. Inset, left: Summer 1999, still a heavyweight in Owensboro.

I was determined to keep a positive outlook. Slowly but surely, I increased my exercise and began making healthier choices in my diet. I also learned to stop a binge by negotiating with myself: “Hang on, Jo. If you eat that box of cookies, you’ll just feel guilty right after and you’ll totally negate your workout. How about some sugar-free pudding on a graham cracker instead?” Sounds funny, but it worked.

As our strength and endurance began to increase, Emily and I tried more new things, like the Nautilus circuit and some other cardio equipment. Eventually we started swimming laps, lifting weights and taking aerobics, step and yoga classes. Emily provided a little friendly competition to spur me into progressing in my fitness.

We would try to make it three times a week, working out between 30 and 60 minutes. Sometimes, though (I look back and laugh at this now), we would get to the front door, see that the cardio room was crowded, say, “To heck with it!” and go get Chinese food instead. But mostly we stuck with it and worked up to going five to six days a week. Over the next two years, I dropped around 150 pounds and Emily lost about 80.

About a year after we started exercis-

ing, Emily and I decided to try a Pilates class the Y offered. Neither of us knew much about it, just that it was done on a mat like yoga.

I actually didn’t like my first class. I felt incredibly awkward and unbalanced the whole time. The next day, however, I experienced that magic I-never-realized-I-had-muscles-there feeling and was immediately hooked. I also became acutely aware of my faulty movement patterns, which had resulted in knee, back and hip problems, which came from lugging around a huge body all those years. Pilates’ focus on precision appealed to my type-A personality. The Y offered only two mat classes a week, but I never missed one.

In fact, about a year into it, the instructor complimented me on how well I was doing and asked if I’d ever considered teaching Pilates. *Um, no!* But then a little voice in my head whispered, “Hey, maybe that’s not such a crazy idea. You know what you’re doing in class—maybe you *should* teach.” But I was always a bit unsure of myself. It took me a few days to mention it to James, but when I did, he was all for it.

I had had no exposure to the wider world of Pilates, and in Owensboro, the only way to become an instructor was to



Jo Ann and Emily (left) at the Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure, Oct. 2007.

take a home-study course—I had no idea there were other kinds of teacher training. I signed up for it and learned a lot from it, but I could tell I was still missing a bunch of information.

By now, James and I were hungry for more culture and activities and had decided to move to Louisville. I started researching Pilates on the Internet and came across the PMA and Core Studios in Louisville. It was owned by Bear Decatur, a former tennis pro who had discovered Pilates to heal his injuries from years of teaching tennis. Core had just added a teacher-training program with Integrated Balance, started by Kristen Veltkamp. I began training at the studio in 2005, and I finally learned all about the equipment, which was nonexistent in my hometown. I studied with Montse Cosin, an amazing instructor who became my mentor.

During my two years of teacher training, I practically lived at the studio. I took as many classes as I could, and Montse gave me a private session once a week. In addition, I would observe classes and private sessions to pick up cueing techniques and watch how different bodies move. I was basically a sponge! I became PMA-certified in 2006 and have been teaching full-time ever since.

Today I work with all shapes and

working with larger clients

When I have a client who’s struggling with Pilates, particularly if she’s overweight, I will often tell her that I was well over 200 pounds when I started doing Pilates. I let her know that I understand that certain Pilates moments are a little more awkward when you’re carrying around extra weight. (Imagine curling for your Hundreds with a large bust resting on your chin.)

Sometimes Pilates instructors who have always been thin don’t realize how challenging certain moves can be for heavy clients because they may have body parts that will not allow them to do the movement correctly. For instance, some folks simply can’t get their arms close to their side. And rounding your lower back is much more challenging in a Roll-down when you have a big butt to get around. I find it helps to say, “This is not easy at first,” when you see someone struggling.

Also, some overweight people are much more sensitive about being touched. In Pilates we do a lot of tactile cueing, but some overweight people are understandably sensitive about being poked in the belly, so I always ask if they’re shy about being touched. Small considerations like this can help heavy practitioners work through obstacles that otherwise might discourage them to the point of quitting. —J.A.M.

sizes of people, both at Core, which I call my home base, and all around town, from a class for moms at a local church to students at the Louisville Ballet School. There I work with dancers at every level, from elementary to the company members to the adults in the community classes. I still get a charge out of making these tall, slender, graceful people work their tails off!

In 2006 I got certified in personal training through AFAA to broaden my knowledge. I like that my personal training certification allows me to help people integrate the fundamentals of Pilates into their cardio and strength-training workouts.

I still do some Pilates five or six days a week, though on a couple of those days I'm lucky to squeeze in 15 or 20 minutes between clients. I make sure to take a private session once a week with one of the instructors at the studio, and whenever I get the chance, I take a mat or Reformer class. I play tennis twice a week, take a weekly step class and occasionally swim laps. Emily, who moved to Louisville around the same time I did, and I have become enthusiastic runners. Along with our sisters, we're training for what will be my second half-marathon, which takes place during the Kentucky Derby Festival in April. (Emily also still does Pilates once in a while, but she's really more of a gym rat.)

Running is just one of the things I wouldn't be able to do without Pilates, as my feet tend to supinate (roll outward). It's also great for preventing me from slipping into the common "runner's posture" of tight hip flexors, low back and chest. But most of all, Pilates has given me a full and healthy life. I am so grateful that I am able to give back and help other people discover what their bodies are capable of doing, whether they're highly trained dancers or, my personal favorite, moms who've never even exercised before. ☺