

fit to be bride

with a goal of getting in shape for her wedding, our own **amanda altman** puts **joe pilates** to the ultimate test



At left: Amanda in April '08.
Right: with Menachem, at
their July wedding, two
sizes smaller

“In 10 sessions, you will feel the difference, in 20 you will see the difference, and in 30 you’ll have a whole new body.”

—Joseph H. Pilates

The first time I heard that famous quote of Joseph Pilates’, I remember thinking, *Yeah, right*. As associate editor of *Pilates Style*, I’ve seen the results of the method time and time again: Brooke Siler getting her six-pack back just three months after giving birth; Rainy Wright-Legg baring her “Before” and 116-pounds-lighter “After” photos; Yamuna Zake, with a better body at 50+ than most have at 20. But I was still skeptical. It’s one thing to lose weight but quite another to obtain a “whole new body.” Little did I know then that I would soon get the chance to find out for myself.

On November 1, 2007, I became engaged to the perfect man. I had the perfect ring (a 100-year-old family heirloom),

the perfect location (a light-filled synagogue), the most impressive florist, and, best of all, I snagged the perfect dress (a cap-sleeved mermaid gown fit for my petite 5'1" frame). If you’re thinking, *That’s an awful lot of perfection*, you should know there was one important missing piece from the puzzle: yep, the perfect body.

For the past five years I’ve been a total gym rat. I always worked out at least five days a week—running, doing the elliptical, kick-boxing and lifting weights—which allowed me to maintain my size-6 figure. I also attended a weekly Pilates mat class. I say *attended* because, in hindsight, I realized I had no clue what I was doing. Possibly the least coordinated person I know, in class I could barely hold my legs in Tabletop, and I refused to even attempt a Rollover.

But lucky me, my editor recognized this, and because she wanted me to feel confident on my wedding day, asked me if I'd be interested in testing out Joe's 30-session theory and writing about it. (I think she also realized it would make me better at my job.) Either way, who wouldn't jump at an offer like that?

Wasting no time, I called the conveniently located Reebok Sports Club/NY (thesportsclubla.com) to see if they'd be willing to take on this challenge. (I thought of them first because I knew they had recently opened a gorgeous new Pilates studio, and I was hoping they'd want to show it off.) More good luck: They said yes! I set out to work with master trainer Sara Sessions three times a week for three months. I was grateful for this amazing opportunity, but to be honest, even after my first private, I was still harboring some serious doubts.

Session 1, April 8

As I enter Reebok's brand-new Mind/Body wing, I note how much it resembles a spa: There's a receptionist just for the Pilates and yoga studios, lemon water, bamboo plants, renovated bathrooms and dimmed lights. Plus there's a large-group exercise room with windows overlooking the city, a private yoga space and a spacious Pilates studio stocked with four Reformers, two Cadillacs, two Towers, multiple chairs and a Ladder Barrel. I tuck my sneakers into a cubby and breeze off to the studio. I'll admit it: I'm nervous.

I meet Sara, and right away she starts me doing breathwork on the Cadillac. She tells me to do 5 million things at once: soften my breastbone, open my collarbones, keep my shoulders down and back, breathe through my pelvis, inhale and then exhale making a "haaa" sound, focus on lengthening through my neck and pulling the other way with my sitz bones. Is she kidding me?

We move to a Reformer, and Sara explains how to center myself on the Balanced Body apparatus—the red spring should be in the middle of my body, she says. We do footwork followed by Pulling Straps on the Long Box and Leg Circles. She notices that my right leg is weaker, probably from a car accident two years ago.

After the hour-long workout—which flew by—Sara tells me to look in the mirror. She points out how much more open I look and how much taller I'm standing. I feel really relaxed yet invigorated and empowered. I think, *I could get used to this.*



The Pilates studio at Reebok Sports Club/NY. inset: miracle-worker Sessions

Session 2, April 10

Sara is noticing more stuff about my body: Apparently I have a leg discrepancy: The right is longer than the left. So she slides a small pad under my left foot during all exercises to even me out. I also have slight scoliosis and hypermobile joints. I make a mental note that everyone should take Pilates, if only to learn more about their bodies.

Session 3, April 14

I'm making progress on the Reformer, except for the Hundred, which is still a beast. I'm starting to get the hang of imprinting my spine, lifting my tailbone and creating space between my side and the mat in side-lying work. I'm advancing, but I'm impatient. I still don't get alignment. Sara gives me homework to strengthen my low abs and ankles.

Session 4, April 16

My introduction to the Ladder Barrel! Sara spots another discrepancy, this one in my shoulders. She says that to tone those muscles, we must first loosen them up. She gives me a little massage and then takes me to the mirror, where I can see how much lower my right shoulder is as a result.

Session 5, April 18

Sara brings me to the Avalon Arm Chair by Balanced Body and Rael Isacowitz. We do some triceps work, and I love feeling my back mold to the Chair—it means muscles are firing. We finish on the Reformer,

where, Sara explains, we can tone the back, which in turn will yield toned arms. My first revelation that I'll take with me to the gym forever: Arm movement should originate from the back muscles. Sara excitedly busts out her anatomy textbook to show me this connection.

As I'm leaving, she calls out to me, "Your posture—wow!" and it's then that I realize I am starting to really feel connected. It's beginning to feel natural to wrap up from the back of my legs and "lace up" my rib cage.

Session 7, April 23

I do Oblique Twists on the Reformer. Lacking requisite stability, I find it difficult to stay aligned and not twist my hips. FYI, Mermaid on the Reformer is way harder than it looks!

Session 9, April 28

Working in a Pilates V is much easier than it used to be, but I'm still struggling with foot alignment. It's a huge challenge to press down with my big toe and ground with my heel since I'm a runner and it hurts my knee. Sara explains that

this is the result of running on the side of my foot. From this day forward, I will be more conscious of running on my whole foot and stepping down from heel to toe.

I do my first standing work on the Reformer. Sara says I'm progressing so fast, I'm ready to try the Long Stretch Series. I catch a glimpse of myself in the studio's mirrored walls and notice that my collarbones look more defined. Yay! My hard work is starting to pay off.

We finish on the Tower. Sara tells me this is a traditional way of ending a workout. My inner thighs are burning, but I realize I'm learning something new every day.

Session 10, May 5

Time to evaluate the first part of Joe's prediction: Do I feel a difference? Well, guess what I was able to do on the Reformer today? Extend my legs to a 90-degree angle! See ya later, Tabletop.

We do Short Box and arm work with straps. I can't believe how I can actually stabilize my shoulders. I never thought this day would come. So do I feel a difference? Heck, yeah! I am less stressed throughout the day, and my body feels more open, flexible and stronger than ever before. On top of that, I'm already starting to look leaner.

Session 12, May 16

We do Tower exercises, including Pull-down and Push-through, and Mermaid on Ladder Barrel is a breeze. I'm finally able to engage my abs, spine, legs and hips at the same time, but I'm still waiting—with bated breath—to see that six-pack.

Session 16, May 23

Breakthrough! It feels like I woke up with some newfound serious strength. Exercises are flowing more quickly, and I'm on my game. Sara notices it, too. From now on, she says, she is going to kick my butt. I guess I have all the fundamentals down—finally—and am ready for some challenging work.

Session 18, May 28

Today I almost do a full Teaser—with no help from Sara! She switches me to a Gratz Reformer and ups the resistance, big-time. I do Step-ups and Pull-ups on the Wunda Chair. We end with matwork, which I find more challenging than apparatus work because it's just me and the floor.

Session 20, June 2

My 20th session, the one where I'm supposed to notice the difference. So, do I? Well, others clearly do. I attended a wedding over the weekend and saw friends I hadn't seen in over a month. Every one of them commented that I had lost weight and asked how I did it. I smiled, blushed and told them it's the Pilates.

In today's session we do only matwork. I'm getting

stronger, so the work is (a bit) easier. I can keep my legs straight in the air. I do Fletcher Towelwork™ today. When I first see the red braided towel, I think, *piece of cake!*

I couldn't be more wrong. That towel forces me to use and engage the correct muscles and allows for absolutely no cheating.

Session 21, June 6

I do the Series of Five for the first time. (I've done each exercise individually, even two in succession, but until now I haven't had the stamina to do the entire series without losing my form or straining my neck.) Now we're moving at a much faster pace and I'm working up a good sweat.

Session 22, June 11

When Sara tells me, "You're there," I understand that to mean I've officially become adept at Pilates. On top of that, Menachem, my fiancé, tells me that I look skinnier. This from a man who has never before made a single comment on my weight.

Session 24, June 16

A super-intense mat session leads to a bunch of aha moments: The first time I stabilize my shoulders onto my back, learn to keep my rib cage in place and bolt my hips and inner thighs together, and above all, use my abs to do moves like Leg Circles and Criss-Cross. Awesome!

Session 29, June 27

My 29th session! Not only do I have the hard evidence (how I look), but I have steady energy all day. I'm not drinking my usual two cups of coffee, because I feel more awake and alert than ever. I can do exercises I had never thought possible. I've learned so much about myself—it's scary to think how many people go through life not actually knowing anything about their own body. I've come to believe that my body craves Pilates.

Session 30, June 30

I went shopping over the weekend and bought size-2 clothing for the first time since middle school. At my last gown fitting, the seamstress couldn't believe how much more she had to take in. I feel like a different person: healthier, more confident—and even taller! I am overcome with gratitude for Sara, who, in addition to being an amazing instructor, is also one of the most thoughtful, intelligent and coolest people in my life. I also feel a huge debt of gratitude to Joseph Pilates, the genius behind this revolutionary method. My motivation was toning and weight loss, but over the past 10 weeks I've discovered that those goals have a powerful ripple effect, and that at its core, Pilates is about knowing your body and achieving the kind of physical and mental strength that will last a lifetime. ☺



Here comes the buff bride!