

Collegiate Pilates

By Jennifer Sheppard

The University of Oklahoma offered its first Pilates course in 1996. At that time, this Matwork class was a largely unnoticed addition among the numerous dance department listings in ballet, jazz and contemporary movement.

Fast-forward to today and Certified Pilates Teacher, Jennifer Sheppard, must gingerly step through a maze of over 30 blue foam mats just to instruct her introductory class. The mirrored room on the second floor of the University's Dance Department is typically large enough to host classes of any level in OU's fine arts department. However, the popularity of TheMethod® Pilates means that this room is filled to capacity and requires another classroom just to contain the attendees.

Today OU students can choose from ten Pilates Mat classes beginning with the introductory level and progressing to an advanced level offering. Even so, many students are unable to gain entrance to these courses since space considerations and class size limits enrollment.

Sheppard herself is no stranger to the wooden floors of OU's Fine Arts Building. With 15 years of professional dancing, she was also a student at Oklahoma University in the School of Dance. Later, she became a Pilates instructor, eventually coming full circle and returning to the Norman campus to teach.

"Coming back to teach here at the university is like coming home," said Sheppard whose introductory courses are conducted in a linear learning format. Students begin by performing each exercise in the Pilates Matwork repertoire to build familiarity. They then progress to taking apart three or four Pilates exercises each session. Once the students understand the exercise sequence, Sheppard introduces choreography *variations* to increase intensity level. Of course, she also teaches students the Institute's copyrighted method of exercise *modification* which allows a teacher to simplify each Pilates exercise, whether on the floor or the apparatus—so necessary for today's aged, injured and often obese population. By the conclusion of the 15-week course, students not only perform these exercises correctly but are also engaged with the logic of this Method.

"I want to challenge each student, gently pushing them to use their bodies—and their minds!" Sheppard said. Sheppard said the Pilates program—despite classes of 35 students—is individualized for each participant.



Jennifer Sheppard teaching Elephant to Candace Cindell. Candace is an OU Gymnast majoring in Sports Broadcasting.

"We want students to take a different approach, breaking away from typical workouts to understand that there are really only nine spinal movements and the rest is just choreography," Sheppard said. *"The progress they make improves the fitness of their bodies and minds thereby enhancing daily activities with bio-mechanically correct movements."*

The advanced Pilates course is capped at 30 students. It is divided into four students at a time, twice a week. These students are hand picked from the large number who take Matwork. The intimate setting allows for access to the Pilates apparatus: the Reformer, the Cadillac, and the Chair.

At the end of the recent spring semester, the department found another way to help those passionate about Pilates continue their training. The University of Oklahoma hosted instructor certification courses through the PhysicalMind Institute®. Several of the department's own students completed the program and were certified. These included: Kim Burgoon and Aleyse Bradford, modern dance seniors; Cheyla Clawson, modern dance graduate assistant; Ming Yuan "Sherry" Tay, ballet senior; Victoria Kay, College of Arts and Science; and Candice Jones, Journalism and Mass Communications.

Although Pilates and dance are well acquainted, another University population is now accessing its benefits. OU has a national reputation for producing exceptional student-athletes, especially in high-profile sports such as football, basketball and wrestling. With a growing appreciation of what TheMethodPilates adds to athletic performance, more students are integrating the concepts of stability and core conditioning provided through the system.

Barby Spates, the first OU Pilates instructor, is also the wife of the Sooners' head wrestling coach. While Spates initially worked solo in bringing TheMethod to both student athletes and the entire OU community, Sheppard now oversees four Pilates instructors. All five are certified through the PhysicalMind Institute.

"I do push the athletes a little more than the others," Sheppard said. While some of these athletes take advantage of private Pilates sessions with Certified Teachers from the dance department, others enroll in the classes for academic credit alongside the rest of the student body. The University Pilates courses give two credits for successful completion.



Jennifer Sheppard teaching Tree to Candace Cindell.

Kristi Cook, a business management senior, was a varsity athlete with OU's track and field and cross-country programs. She took Pilates for course credit in the spring of 2007 while red-shirting her junior track season. "It offered me a different way to work on my flexibility and core strength," Cook said. "And our coach really enjoyed us taking Pilates because it did make us stronger.

Cook also said the individual attention that Pilates teachers gave to students helped her to make sure she was not overextending herself, which was her concern when she made the decision to enroll in the course. *"Our teacher worked with us, and she made Pilates what we needed it to be."*

After receiving her early ballet training in the school of Ballet Oklahoma, Ms. Sheppard received a contract with the company at the age of 15. She continued as a professional dancer with Ballet Oklahoma for 10 years and then came to the University of Oklahoma, School of Dance as a BFA student in 1992. She is PhysicalMind certified and has been teaching Pilates in the School of Dance for the last 8 years. She also serves as the Pilates Coordinator for the Dance Department.