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IMAGINE



Carey Macaleer uses creative imagery to help clients visualize the muscles they're supposed to be using. Here, she shows how this technique helped **Kristin McGee** master challenging moves.

“A few well-designed movements, properly performed in a balanced sequence, are worth hours of doing sloppy calisthenics or forced contortion.”

This fabulous quote from Joseph Pilates is one I like to share with my clients. In my seven years as a Pilates instructor, I've come to realize that performing Pilates exercises properly is harder for some people than others. I'm a dancer—I trained as a modern and jazz dancer at the Koresh dance school, the Philadelphia Dance Theater School, the North Carolina School of the Arts and the University of the Arts in Philadelphia, where I graduated with a BA in modern dance. I also danced professionally with Koresh and Philadanco 2 and was an actress in New York and in regional theater.

I was first introduced to Pilates at the age of 12, when I was attending the Governors School for the Arts, a summer scholarship program in Pennsylvania. One of my teachers told me that if I really wanted to be a strong dancer, I should do the Pilates mat workout three to five times per week. So I would wake up early in the morning to do Pilates with her.

Eventually I became a Pilates teacher. I got certified in mat at Power Pilates and received my apparatus training at Core Pilates, both in New York. After having my first child three years ago (my second is due this summer), I began working out of my home studio and at Equinox in Brooklyn. My teaching mission is simple: I want to inspire people to move and to help them find the joy in getting stronger. I focus on teaching the body that is in front of me while staying within the classical system.

Though I had a strong background in dance, most of my clients don't, and they need to be taught to make the mind-body connection. For them, I have found that images are a powerful tool. For example, cueing non-dancers to have resistance in their abs while doing the Hundreds may be meaningless. But if I tell them to imagine a brick sitting on their midsection, suddenly their abs become engaged.

One of my favorite parts about teaching is finding the images that work for each client, and I am constantly brainstorming to come up with new images for different clients. One is a marathon runner who was not able to activate her core because her legs had been worked so hard. Yet as soon as I told her that her legs were “feathers floating off her pelvis,” 50 percent of that tension was

released. This was the jumping-off point for her to initiate the movement from her core and not her legs.

I created this particular workout for one of my clients and good friends, cover girl Kristin McGee. Kristin is extremely strong, but like the rest of us, she holds a lot of stress in her upper back and chest, while her lower abs and lower back are weak from not being engaged in her workouts.

I came up with an image specifically for Kristin inspired by an exercise that I learned in one of my Alexander Technique classes. I had her lie on her back on the floor and focus on her breath. I asked her to imagine her torso was the trunk of a tree and that her arms,

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legs and head were branches floating off her trunk. I had her take a deep inhale and, on the exhale, I had her isolate and release each muscle group starting in her toes, moving all the way up her body to her skull. The tree image helped Kristin become aware of which muscles were tense (in her chest and upper back) and which muscles had been lying dormant. It then enabled her to integrate into her movements the opposition and resistance that are needed to make the exercise effective. I find that once clients become aware of this, they can begin to utilize mind-body control based on Pilates' six fundamental principles: breath, concentration, control, centering, flow and precision.

This workout, which utilizes a foam roller, a Magic Circle and a resistance band, is designed to free your body of tension while infusing you with energy and awakening certain muscles to help you work from a truly organic place. It is great for everyone, from beginners who are finding their connection to the abs for the first time to advanced students who need to release areas of tension and deepen the workout.

These five exercises can be done three to five times per week. Work slowly and use the imagery to help enhance your connection and focus of the movement being initiated from the core. If you don't feel your ab connection in the first two exercises, stop and begin again. ▶

arm reaches

imagery: Imagine you are squeezing a walnut between your shoulder blades to help you draw them down your back.

purpose: strengthens and stretches the lat muscles; connects and strengthens the transverse abdominals (pelvic floor); activates and strengthens the lower to mid back

setup: Sit on a mat with your legs extended in front of you and hip-width apart, feet flexed. Extend your arms out in front of you, shoulder-width apart, fingers long and palms facing down. Sit up as tall as you can and feel your sitz bones directly beneath you.

1. Inhale through your nose and then exhale out of your

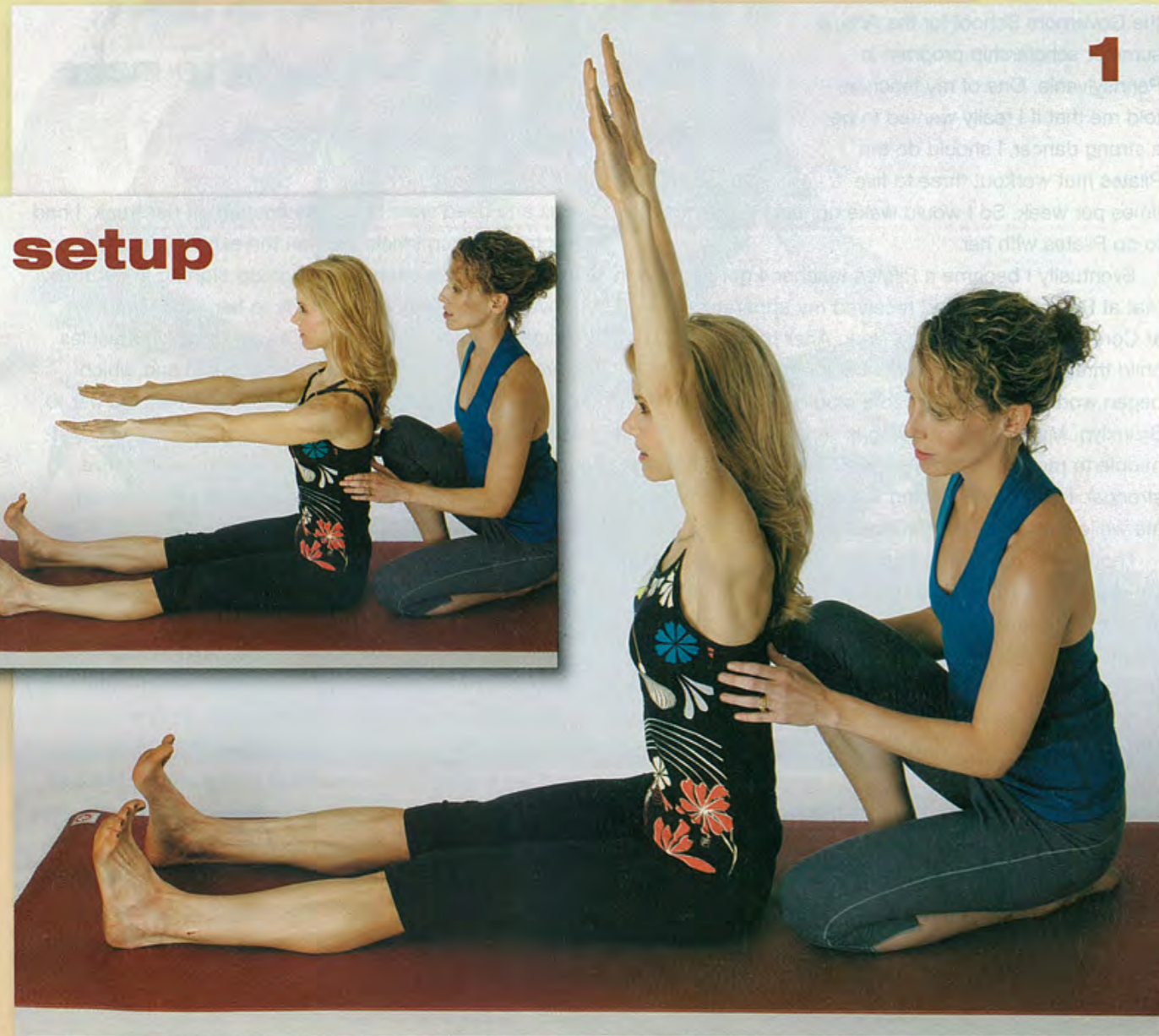
mouth while lifting your arms straight up to the ceiling, palms now facing forward.

2. Keeping your fingers long and your shoulders and lats drawing down your back, keep your arms straight as you bring your arms in toward your ears. Press your arms back out and down to the starting position. Do 8–10 repetitions.

tip: Do this exercise while sitting sideways in front of a mirror to help maintain the length in your spine.

modification: Sit up against a wall to feel your lats and lower abs pressing into the wall.

advanced: Do the exercise while holding a set of 1- to 2-pound weights.



heel dips

imagery: On the exhale, imagine that your lower abs are an elevator door that is closing; the elevator is lifting your abs up from the bottom floor to the middle floor and all the way up to the penthouse.

purpose: activates and strengthens the lower abs and obliques

setup: Place the foam roller lengthwise on the mat. Sit on the roller and then lie down into it (pressing each vertebra into the foam roller), with your head resting comfortably on one end of the roller and your glutes on the other end, neck long and spine straight on the roller. Place your arms at your sides, fingers long and

hands pressed into the floor. Bring your legs to a Tabletop position.

1. Inhale, slowly lowering your heels into your glutes. The area from your knees to your hips remains still.

2. Exhale and slowly lift your heels back up to Tabletop. Do 6–8 repetitions.

tips: Keep your ribs knitting together while your heels lower.

modification: Don't lower heels all the way into the glutes—lower them just one inch.

advanced: Test your balance by doing the exercise up on your fingertips.



rollover with band

imagery: For Rollover, imagine tracing the arc of a rainbow with your feet as your legs go over your head. For Rolldown, imagine there are grapes lined up on the floor from your shoulders down. As you slowly roll down through the spine, crush the grapes one vertebra at a time.

purpose: realigns and stretches the spine; strengthens the abs and triceps; stretches and lengthens the hamstrings

setup: Lie on a mat on your back, legs and feet together, reaching long and out at a 45-degree angle. Place your arms long at your sides and, keeping your fingers long and together, hold on to the band underneath your legs so that it's touching your glutes. Palms should be flat on the mat. Using your thumbs, stretch the band so that it's as wide as your shoulders.

1. Inhale and then exhale and lift your hips straight up toward the ceiling, with your legs reaching out and up toward the ceiling and then back overhead. Then sepa-

rate your feet shoulder-width apart.

2. Keeping your fingers long and legs overhead, press your hands into the floor while pulling the band apart to give it resistance.

3. Inhale and then exhale, keep reaching your legs (which are still over your head) to the back wall as you slowly roll back down one vertebra at a time.

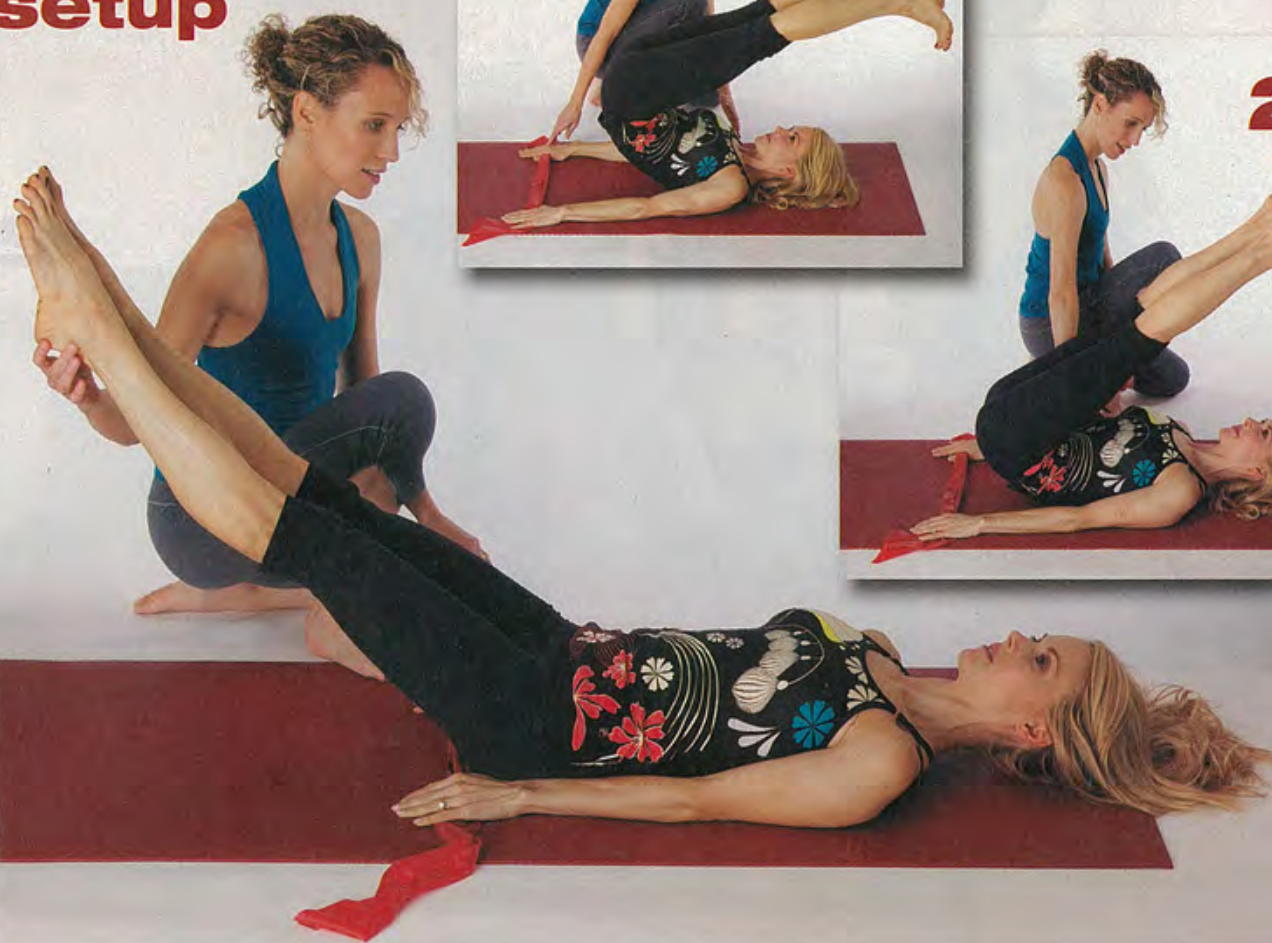
4. Keep tension in the band with your thumbs, keeping fingers long and lats pulling down. Do 5–7 repetitions.

tips: Keep the backs of your arms and your abs fully engaged to help with the resistance of rolling down with control. If you don't feel the stretch in your spine, you have rolled down too quickly.

modification: Keep your knees slightly bent throughout the exercise.

advanced: Place a Magic Circle between your ankles throughout the entire exercise.

setup



rolling like a ball (variations)

imagery: Imagine your pelvis is a ship's anchor and it's hooked into the bottom of the ocean. Your pelvis should remain heavy and rooted as you rock back. Keep that anchored feeling as you rock back up.

purpose: strengthens and stretches the spine; strengthens the deep abdominal muscles

setup: On a mat sit up on your sitz bones with your feet in Pilates stance (heels together, toes apart) and knees shoulder-width apart. Hold a Magic Circle in your hands out in front of your chest with fingers long and together. Be sure not to wrap your hands or thumbs around the Circle. Lift your feet off the floor, tucking your tailbone and making a C curve with the spine. Keep your gaze focused on your belly button and draw your shoulder blades down the back. You are now in a tight ball.

1. Using your lat muscles, press your hands into the

Circle as you pull your abs in deeply.

2. Rock back one inch to your sacrum and hold.

3. Press your arms into the Magic Circle and rock go back another inch and hold.

4. Rock back to the tips of your shoulder blades, making sure not to roll to your neck. Roll back up to your sacrum (not tailbone). Do 6–8 repetitions.

tips: If you pop back up from the rocking back, start again, this time moving slower and making sure you're using your abs and not momentum on the way back up.

modification: Do the exercise without the Magic Circle and place your hands behind your thighs.

advanced: Do the exercise without the Magic Circle and bend your arms, pressing your elbows into the tops of your knees, fingers and forearms long and reaching up to the ceiling.



elephant with foam roller

imagery: As you exhale, imagine that your abs are drawing water up a straw. This will help you feel the scooping of your abs from the deep transverse abdominal muscles.

purpose: strengthens and activates the transverse abdominals; strengthens the arms and lats

setup: Get on all fours (hands under the shoulders, knees under the hips). Place the foam roller horizontally on the floor, and rest your hands on top. Keep your hands underneath your shoulders and your legs shoulder-width apart, with your hips over your knees and your legs and feet behind you on the floor, toes tucked under. Pull your lower abs in so that your spine is in a C curve with your head reaching toward your navel, and draw your shoulder blades down.

1. Inhale and then exhale and lift your knees up and off the floor one inch, initiating the movement from your deep abs.

2. Lower your knees back down half an inch, then lift them back up half an inch.

3. Continue lowering and lifting from your abs. Your knees should never touch the ground, but stay hovering. Do 8–10 repetitions.

tips: Keep your hands slightly cupped to keep the weight out of your wrists. Make sure you are not using your arms to lift your body up or hoisting your hips in the air. Keep the tight C-curve shape and your shoulders over your wrists.

modification: Lift your knees up off the floor an inch and then put them back down so there is no hovering of the knees.

advanced: Lift your knees up off the floor one inch and keep your knees hovering as you straighten your spine into neutral, then go back to the C curve. Slowly go back and forth from straight spine to C curve while your knees remain hovering.

