

# higher education

Polestar Pilates' Brent Anderson, PhD, has been in the forefront of developing teacher-training programs for the past 20 years.

by Anne Marie O'Connor

**T**hough he would grow up to be the founder of a rehabilitation-based Pilates education company, Brent Anderson's first experience with physical therapy was not a good one. Injured while playing

Brent Anderson, who has a PhD in physical therapy, has helped make Pilates standard practice in the rehab world.

decided to switch his major from political science to physical therapy.

After spending two years in Spain as a Mormon missionary, Brent returned briefly to Brigham Young before transferring to California State University at Northridge, where he earned his BS in Health Science with an emphasis in Health Education in 1987. He continued his physical therapy studies at University of California at San Francisco. It was while studying there that he was first introduced to Pilates.

## Pilate Style So how did you first hear about Pilates?

**Brent Anderson** My ballet teacher and friend told me, you should go try this “py-lates” stuff, you’ll really like it. So I went to St. Francis Hospital, which had just opened a dance-medicine center under the direction of Dr. James Garrick. (I quickly learned it was pronounced “pah-lah-tays.”) My first session was with Elizabeth Larkam. I remember the very first exercise she gave me: Swan with pubic bone on the box. I think she wanted to see if I had what it took—but I did it! Our relationship started there, in late 1987.

## PS Were you interested in Pilates because of its rehab possibilities?

**BA** No, at that time I was just looking at it as an exercise system. I didn't think of physical therapy and Pilates as being synergistic. I was using Pilates to rehab dancers, a very narrow focus; it was pretty much all Pilates was being used for in the '80s. At that time, I was mostly interested in working with dancers. I'd performed in a local dance troupe called Galena Street East while in high school. (Leroy from *Fame* was my hero: I had the afro, the rolled-up dungarees and the Converse Hi Tops with different colored laces.) All of my dance training up to that point had been in the street. As a new member of the troupe I was required to take two to three classes a week—I loved it!

## PS Did you get certified in Pilates through St. Francis?

**BA** Yes, in 1989. I still have the certificate on the wall. That same year, I graduated from University of California at San Francisco with my degree in physical therapy.

- My ballet teacher and friend told me, you should
- go try this “py-lates” stuff, you’ll really like it.

## PS What did you do after graduation?

**BA** I moved back home to Sacramento to complete my final internship at a local physical therapy practice owned by Larry Bertolucci. I began working with the local dancers—there were many dance companies in Sacramento at that time. Within a year, I had talked Larry into buying Pilates equipment. Shortly thereafter, he gave me his blessing and told me I'd be happier on my own and gave me a really nice bonus so I could open my first physical therapy and Pilates center. That was 1990.

## PS How did you end up getting into Pilates education?

**BA** Elizabeth Larkam and I were being invited to present at many physical therapy and exercise conferences. At that time, Balanced Body was called Current Concepts and was based near me in Sacramento. Ken Endelman (owner of Current Concepts), Elizabeth and I had this symbiotic relationship and would attend these conferences together.

## PS How did Polestar come about?

**BA** In 1991, Elizabeth and I began traveling around the world teaching weekend workshops and week-long intensive teacher-training sessions. In 1992, we formally organized Polestar with our first education and certification program (we did our own certification then; now Polestar graduates are certified by the PMA).

## PS How did you come up with the name?

**BA** At that time, the Pilates community was involved in the Pilates Trademark Lawsuit and people were being sued for using the name Pilates. We wanted to find another name that began with a P and contained similar letters as Pilates. Ken Endelman came up with the name Polestar. The guiding star has served us well as a name and logo.

## PS Why did you decide to get your PhD?

**BA** It was definitely a case of “the more you know, the more you realize you don't know.” I felt like there was so much more I needed to learn about curriculum development, research fundamentals and education. At that time, there were only four places that had PhD programs in physical therapy. So in 1995, I sold my practice and in 1997 moved to Florida to attend the University of Miami.

## PS Did you retire from training people personally?

**BA** No, because about a month later, someone spread the word that I was a good practitioner in both physical therapy and Pilates, so I opened a small studio. In 2000, we moved to a 5,600 square foot

studio, which I thought was huge at the time. Still, we were missing certain components; so in 2005, we expanded to approximately 11,000 square feet. Now our physical therapists are trained in Pilates, and we have about 15 Pilates specialists. Our goal is to move people from physical therapy into the wellness

Brent's wife, Lizette, and daughter, Alina, are also Pilates devotees.



ARTHUR COHEN

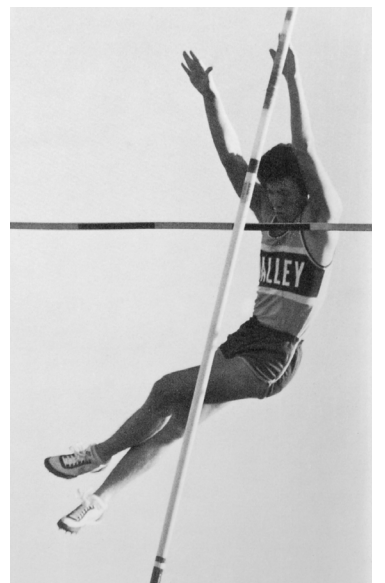
(Pilates) side.

## PS So you received your PhD in physical therapy from the University of Miami in 2005. What did your doctoral research about?

**BA** My PhD research looked at chronic pain. People with chronic pain often come in with the perception that movement equals pain. Research in behavioral psychology shows that perception is the greatest predictor of well-being and of the future. So if you believe you're not going to get better, the likelihood of getting better is not very good. We hypothesized that if people with chronic pain had a movement experience without pain, their belief model would have to shift. Pilates is a very good modality to make that shift happen, which is why I focused on that.

## PS Were you surprised by the results?

**BA** I was not surprised at the relationship of



Brent's pole-vaulting prowess won him a scholarship to Brigham Young University.

MICHAEL F. SUSTENDAL

high school football in Sacramento, where he grew up, he had shoulder surgery. The physical therapy that followed “was horrible!” he recalls. “I had never experienced so much pain before in my life.” Despite this, he quickly recovered and returned to high school sports, including pole vaulting in track and field. He came in fourth place in the Northern California Championship, which earned him a scholarship to Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah.

His second experience with physical therapy—after breaking his ankle pole-vaulting his freshman year in college—was much more positive, so much so that he



The question is how we get our ‘sick’ population, which is 80 to 90 percent of people, to the point where they can do the classical work.

perception to function, just the strength of that correlation. At Polestar, it’s been our motto for years to provide a positive movement experience without pain.

**PS Does the mind-body element of Pilates help make that shift?**

**BA** That’s exactly what shifts it. It’s not just the physical movement; it’s the increased consciousness of your body, your posture and your mind.

**PS How did that affect your work with clients?**

**BA** It confirmed what we had been seeing all along: We can create positive movement experiences that shift people’s perception and restore them to vitality through Pilates. To us, that goes back to the

### celebrating 20 years of polestar

This year is Polestar’s 20th Anniversary, and to celebrate, the company is sponsoring a conference in San Diego. “It’s our seventh world conference,” explains Polestar founder Brent Anderson, PhD. “At the conference, we’re launching a new Pilates lifestyle we’ve developed. It’s built around Joe’s guiding principals, which is about development of body, mind and spirit. He talks about plenty of fresh air, good food, play, work, rest and vigorous exercise. So we created an environment at the conference where all the food is organic, there is fresh air from the ocean, plenty of sunshine and mind-, body- and spirit-stimulating workshops, lectures and classes.”

Speakers will include Dr. James Oschman, who will talk about energy medicine and healing; Dr. Carol Davis will discuss the fascial fabric; Dr. Libby Weaver will talk about nutrition for optimal health; and Sherri Betz PT, GCS, will speak about the future of Pilates.

There will be many workshops and movement classes as well as a research forum. The cost of the conference is \$750; for more information, check out [polestarpilates.com](http://polestarpilates.com).

original philosophical roots of Joseph Pilates’ work, whole-body health, whole-body commitment and breath.

People get so uptight about whether this or that is an original exercise rather than asking if this exercise has the spirit of Joe’s work. Joe worked with people and he created, modified and simplified movement to create change in posture, awareness, strength and function. He did demand a lot from his clients, but rarely more than they could handle.

I really love the classical repertoire. The more we dissect it, the more we realize its genius. There’s an inherent balance of strength, mobility and alignment exercises. The apparatus offers both spring resistance and assistance. If we do Pilates, our bodies are going to be supple and healthy, we’ll feel and look better and be able to avoid harmful positions. We know all those benefits.

The question is how we get our ‘sick’ population, which is 80 to 90 percent of people, to the point where they can do the classical work. An individual who is obese or is drastically de-conditioned isn’t able to do the full repertoire but can definitely benefit from modified versions of the original work. And an individual who has a complete paralysis of the legs may not be able to do Footwork, but can I give them something that stimulates movement in the knees, the muscles, the lymphatic and circulatory systems, the skin and ligaments? Yes. Will that improve the quality of their life? Yes, it will.

**PS Anything else that you discovered?**

**BA** I realized how important communication is. To help someone move more efficiently, we need to be able to figure out what type of learner they are—kinesthetic, visual or auditory—and remember their style might be different than ours. So when we’re teaching someone who we think is incapable of learning a movement, we need to step back and make sure we are teaching to their style. When we do, their ability will often increase. Often we have selected the wrong movement, set up the equipment poorly, or not given the right cues and information. Polestar puts a lot of emphasis on communication skills.

**PS At some point, you and Elizabeth went your separate ways?**

**BA** In 1999, Elizabeth and I dissolved our partnership. Professionally, we respect each other a lot, we just had different ideas about the direction of the company. She started her company Pilates & Beyond and continues to be a leader in the Pilates and movement world and

We joke that the kids were born and raised on the equipment. Can you think of a better playground to grow up in than a Pilates gym?

I continued with Polestar Pilates.

**PS How big is Polestar now?**

**BA** We offer teacher training programs in cities across the U.S. and through licensee arrangements in over 28 countries. Our graduates work in medical facilities, universities, studios and fitness centers in over 50 countries.

**PS Do you still find yourself on the road a lot?**

**BA** Yes, I work with Polestar educators and licensees around the world. I also travel to meet with my fellow professionals and bring more knowledge about the benefits of Pilates to the medical and healthcare profession. I recently had a meeting in Bolivia with 60 physicians, hospital directors and therapists and lectured on how to prescribe Pilates safely to the community at large. I also travel to teach a lot of Polestar’s Advanced Pilates Teacher courses.

**PS Anything else?**

**BA** I currently sit as the vice chair of the PMA’s certification board, and I’m an adjunct professor of physical therapy at the University of Miami. I also sit on a few doctoral committees and I do a lot of consulting on research pertaining to Pilates.

**PS What are the major trends you see in continuing education?**

**BA** In the next ten years, I think more advanced, specialized education is going to be required. In order to become a proficient Pilates practitioner, the basic training is not enough.

We are working on structuring the training better. Our advanced teacher program can take anywhere from 18 months to five years to complete. Courses include advanced assessment skills, patho-kinesiology (which is anything that impairs the quality of movement, including osteoporosis, spine pathology, upper- and lower-extremity problems, chronic pain and rheumatology) and performance kinesiology (how to work with special populations, such as elite athletes, dancers, children and aging adults). Students must take communication skills courses, and we have a business forum and an educator forum.

**PS How often do you do Pilates?**

**BA** I still do Pilates two to three times a week, and I try to live Pilates every day of my life. There’s a joke around here that every exercise and every piece of equipment is my favorite! I feel we can find joy in all the exercises. If I was going to show off, my favorite exercise would be the Tendon Stretch on the Reformer or Dolphin on the Trapeze Table or Lunges on the Chair.

**PS Can you tell us a little about your personal life?**

**BA** I’ve been married to my beautiful wife, Lizette, for 25 years. We have three kids: Nichole is 23 and just got engaged. She attends the University of Utah and is a Pilates teacher at Pinnacle Performance in Salt Lake City. My son Gabriel is 19 and is a percussionist attending University of Central Florida; he recently started teaching Pilates. Alina is 16, a sophomore in high school and a nationally ranked pole vaulter. (We sometimes pole-vault together, though it takes me a few days to recuperate.) She will begin her formal Pilates training this summer.

I’ve let my children start Pilates teacher training in their junior year of high school so when they graduate from high school, they’ll have a tool to support themselves. I love that I can give them a means whereby they can eventually teach Pilates anywhere in the world.

**PS Is the whole family into Pilates?**

**BA** Yes, the whole family has grown up practicing Pilates. Lizette does not teach, but works in the business. When you enter our house, the first thing you see is our Pilates equipment. We joke that the kids were born and raised on the equipment. Can you think of a better playground to grow up in than a Pilates gym?

**PS What’s the most rewarding part of your job?**

I love to see personal transformation, whether it is a 70-year-old patient who is able to return to golf, or a 38-year-old father who discovers that his behavior and actions influence the people around him, or a young Pilates teacher whose eyes are opened to the potential she has to influence the world to be a better place. I love to find the beauty in the diversity of my work, treat patients, travel around the world, speak multiple languages, teach professionals and work with some of the greatest people in the world in the Polestar family. I am a blessed man!

