

# a natural-born teacher

her background training aerobics instructors gave phi pilates christine romani-ruby special insight into innovative ways for educating pilates teachers

by Anne Marie O'Connor

**C**hristine Romani-Ruby has been leading the band since her childhood in Indiana, PA, where she was a competitive majorette. When she was only 16, she taught her first aerobics class, and after



graduate school, armed with degrees in athletic training and physical therapy, she became a consultant for the American Fitness and Aerobic Association (AFAA) and spent years helping making low-impact aerobics, step, slide, kickboxing and body sculpting—reservations-needed classes at health clubs around the country. She helped develop group fitness programs and

trained and certified group exercise instructors.

Meanwhile, she and her husband Craig Ruby built a flourishing physical therapy practice, while the boundlessly energetic Chrissy also taught group exercise classes at local health clubs. Difficulties getting pregnant, carrying a baby to term and getting back in shape afterwards led her to Pilates. She fell in love with the method, which was just becoming known in the fitness world.

She did her teacher training on weekends at PhysicalMind Institute in New York City and Washington, D.C. After completing certification, she began teaching Pilates at a local fitness center and using it with her physical therapy patients.

A chance meeting with Balanced Body's Dave Littman in 1999 at an IDEA conference led Chrissy

to the next phase of her career: traveling around the country to train instructors at fitness, wellness and physical therapy centers that had recently purchased Balanced Body equipment.

Though she still travels to teach workshops and seminars around the world, in 2007 Chrissy opened her own studio in Pittsburgh, where she offers teacher training. She is also breaking new ground in online teaching, offering online continuing education to Pilates instructors.

But it all started with a girl and a baton.

**Pilates Style Growing up, were you involved in any sports or other activities?**

**Christine Romani-Ruby** I was a competitive majorette through high school. It's a one-minute routine and you have to do trick after trick after trick as fast as you can to music. Sometimes you have a baton, sometimes fire. I was a tri-state champion of Ohio, West Virginia and Pennsylvania. It required strength, poise and attention to detail, which is why I think Pilates was so attractive to me later.

**PS After high school, what did you do?**

**CRR** I went to Indiana University of Pennsylvania. I graduated with a double major in exercise science and in natural science.

**PS Did you do any sports in college?**

**CRR** No, but I started working with the teams as a student trainer and decided I wanted to become an athletic trainer. But then one day, Victor Liscinski who was the head athletic trainer at IUP and a physical therapist said to me, "You shouldn't be an athletic trainer! You need to be a physical therapist." Because of him, I ended up going into physical therapy.

**PS When he said you should be a physical therapist, did a light bulb go off for you?**

**CRR** I was already accepted to the athletic trainer program at West Chester University in Pennsylvania. I figured I might as well finish that certification, then I went on to complete my master's in physical therapy at Slippery Rock University.

**PS So how did you end up becoming an aerobics instructor?**

**CRR** When I was 16, I would wait for my mother while she took aerobic dance classes. One night the teacher didn't show up, so my mother, who knew I liked

exercise and could move to music, looked at me and was like “Why don’t you teach us?” and I said “sure!” So I taught a class just off the top of my head and they loved it! And I enjoyed it so much, I started training through Aerobics and Fitness Association of America (AFAA) to become certified as an aerobics instructor. I always joke that I supported myself through college by working at McDonald’s and teaching aerobics.

**PS And then you started developing programming for AFAA?**

**CRR** After college, I worked full-time as a physical therapist. My husband and his father were also PTs, and we worked together in a practice. I was also working as a consultant for AFAA, traveling on weekends to train other aerobic instructors over a weekend. Then as the trends changed, I would change with them. I did aerobic low-impact dance to start with, and then step, then slide and finally kickboxing.

I also wrote some of the programs for them, like I wrote part of their mat science program. It’s really where I got the background to create my Pilates training company, PHI Pilates.

**PS Was that your introduction to Pilates?**

**CRR** I had had several miscarriages, so when I got pregnant with my first daughter, Cassandra, in 1997, I was told not to exercise for fear of having a miscarriage. I ended up gaining 40 pounds; I am 5'1", so that was a lot of weight. Afterwards, it was really difficult for me to get back in shape. I had read that Pilates was good after pregnancy. I tried a private session on the equipment in near me. First it was to get in shape, but when I saw the potential of Pilates, I knew it would be a part of my career, I wanted to learn all of the concepts and methods.

I went to New York and did a lesson with Romana Kryzanowska, Then I decided I wanted to train with a physical therapist, because I was a physical therapist, so Romana had a physical therapist named Matilda Klein. For whatever reason, though, it didn’t click with me. So I ended up training with Liz Gillies at PhysicalMind Institute, starting in 1997. She was more of a fitness person so it was a better match for me.

**PS How did you end up getting into Pilates full time?**

**CRR** In 1999, I got pregnant with my second daughter. I decided I was not going to let myself get completely out of shape again. So I continued my same schedule, which was teaching roughly 15 aerobics classes and two Pilates classes a week and working as a physical therapist. The pregnancy went great. The night that I had Chloe, I taught a kickboxing class, then went straight to the hospital for her delivery. In my mind, the pregnancy went so well because of the Pilates. I was back to kickboxing and all my athletics in just three weeks. I really felt it was because I trained my core

so well. It just sold me 100 percent on the whole method.

Also, my physical therapy patients were doing awesome with Pilates. I started thinking, *I don’t think Pilates has done enough in the rehab world and I need to teach other physical therapists how to do this.*

That was when it started to become something I was really passionate about and wanted to share.

**PS And how did you get into teacher training yourself?**

**CRR** In 1999, I was at IDEA Health & Fitness Association conference and I ran into Dave Littman at the Balanced Body exhibit. He kept mentioning how they needed education because all these people were buying equipment but no one knew how to use it.

That night, I couldn’t get what Dave had said about the education thing out of my head. I kept thinking in my mind about how AFAA did things—which was to go to gyms and fitness centers and train their instructors on site. There was nothing like that in Pilates at the time. The basic format was come work for us for free and we’ll give you a Pilates certificate.

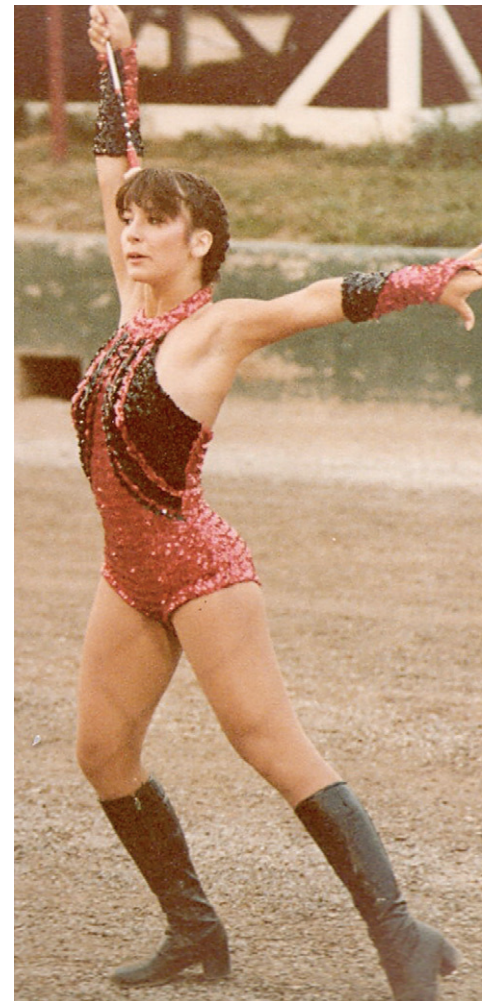
**PS So what happened next?**

**CRR** I came up with this plan of going to a site for a weekend and training people. I wrote it all down on napkins—I didn’t even have paper!—and I called Dave the next day and asked him if we could meet for just five minutes.

I sat down with him and showed him my ideas and it just took off. From that point forward, Balanced Body would call me and say, this fitness center just bought equipment, we need you to go in a train them.

I knew from training aerobics instructors for so many years that I needed to break the training down into small pieces. Instead of saying you know you have to do 450 hours all at once, we cut it down and said, you have learned the first 200 of your 450 hours, so you can do teach mat classes, but you can’t do teach on the Reformer.

So almost every weekend, I was training people at



**Chrissy shows off her major moves as a senior in high school.**



I started thinking, *I don't think Pilates has done enough in the rehab world and I need to teach other physical therapists how to do this.*

gyms and fitness centers around the country. It got busier and busier to the point that I started hiring teachers to go out for me. We now have 20 teachers. If it's for training at a fitness center, I'll send a fitness person, if it's for a physical therapy clinic, I send a physical therapist.



Teaching a class at her Pittsburgh-based studio in 2010

**PS** How did you make sure the training was standardized?

**CRR** I wrote a manual for the teachers for each course. So in teacher training certain things would always be covered, so that each instructor met the requirements to pass our written and practical exams. We went through a couple of name changes, but eventually I decided on PHI Pilates.

**PS** Has this new way of training teachers had any downsides?

**CRR** I know that participants in Pilates mat classes at many of these fitness centers are not getting the true feeling of Pilates. I don't think people are getting hurt, but they're not getting the experience that they could get from a Pilates studio. The classes are too big, there's no regulation for teacher training; at some places, you can get just training in a one-day online course.

By compartmentalizing the training into weekends, I never intended for it to become any shorter or simpler,

just more convenient. We have never watered things down, we just made it more feasible. These fitness centers were desperate for teachers so they were happy that we could come to their facility. They could get all of their teachers trained for a lot less than sending them to New York.

**PS** How do you certify students?

**CRR** When the PMA formed, we changed our process so that teachers do their final testing and certification with the PMA, not with us. I'm really happy to say we have a 100 percent pass rate on the PMA exam. I really attribute it the fact that we have online testing throughout the course, so people know how to take an online test. One of the major reasons people fail is that they're not comfortable with online testing.

We also do a lot of practical testing too. In every course, PHI students have to get up in front of the class and teach and they are evaluated. I think that is what makes us very different from some of the other contemporary trainings.

**PS** How many people have you trained so far?

**CRR** It's a little hard to give an exact number, but I would estimate about 7,500 people over the years.

**PS** Is that the most rewarding part of your career right now?

**CRR** The most rewarding thing still—as it was initially—is hearing someone say that this changed their life. I have a client right now who has cerebral palsy. She's in her 30s and is fully functional, she works full time, she has three children and a husband. She started Pilates and her body began to change, first in good ways and then in bad ways: Her foot started to become so spastic that she couldn't walk well and she ended up having to have Botox injections to calm her foot down. She was referred to me by her first Pilates instructor. What I discovered was that she was creating muscle balance in her pelvis and this was decreasing the need for the lift in her shoe; in fact, the lift was actually creating a stimulus for spasticity in her foot because of her new alignment.

I did two sessions with her and her foot “calmed” down. We discovered that she doesn't have to wear a lift in her shoe anymore. And it was just amazing that the Pilates movements could balance her pelvis so effectively. I was in the airport and my phone rings and I answer and she said, “I just had to call you and tell you that you have changed my life.” And I was like “Wow!”

ps