

THE PATHFINDER

Tom McCook's resume includes everything from personal training to meditation to the Franklin Method, all of which enhance his Pilates teaching and personal practice.

by Anne Marie O'Connor



PILATES STYLE

I hear you grew up in a huge family.

TOM MCCOOK Yes, I'm the youngest of 12 kids—I had eight brothers and three sisters. I grew up in Marlborough, in central Massachusetts. There were a lot of big families, with 10, 11, 12 kids in our neighborhood; on my street alone, there were over 30 kids who hung out together. Our parents would say, "Go outside and come back at dinner." So we had to figure it out for ourselves, whereas kids today are much more monitored and spend so much more time on their phones and tablets.

Our family was very physical. I played basketball, football and hockey from the age of five. When I was 11, I began working out in a gym in our cellar and started training some of the neighborhood kids. My brother Dan has owned a karate school for over 40 years, so I got exposed to that when I was very young, too. Over my life, I have always been very curious about movement and the body, and my curiosity has only increased as I've learned more.

PS What did you do after high school?

TOM I wasn't sure what I wanted to do, so I bought a one-way ticket to California. I moved to Mountain View, a town in Silicon Valley, where I knew exactly one person. I had \$500, and I used \$350 of that to buy a 10-speed bike that I used to get around. In the mornings, I took classes at Foothill community college, and then worked doing landscaping in the afternoons.

A couple of years later, I became the night manager of Gold's Gym in Mountain View. I

started to watch how people worked out and realized that there was a lot of room for improvement. This was the early 1980s, and there were only a few personal trainers at that time. So in 1984, I started training people myself, using insights from my own workouts and what I had been reading and learning. It was a natural fit for me, and within three months, I had 30 to 40 appointments a week—and I've been fully booked ever since.

PS How did you start to get into other types of bodywork?

TOM I was a personal trainer from 1984 to 1988, and I was also open to other modalities that would enhance what I did. So in 1988, I went to a shiatsu demonstration, in which I got to be the guinea pig; at the time, I'd never even had a massage before. It was life-changing! So I signed up for a year-long training in shiatsu.

That training was a turning point for me of looking at the body very differently, rather than from a straight exercise perspective. I realized this was a whole new way of helping people feel more balanced, calm and healthy.

PS And you also did some somatic training?

TOM Yes, the very next year I did a year-long program called the Lomi training with Richard Heckler, PhD, who along with Robert Hall, MD, was at the forefront of somatics. It was all about how you live in your body. We did a combination of meditation, group therapy, body work, breath work and movement exercises based on Aikido principles; we also had to write our "emotional

history." It was pretty intense, and it really shifted me.

This was the beginning of being exposed to what's now called life coaching. I continue training with Richard Heckler and the Strozzi Institute, and also studied the Focus Counselor Training with Dennis Stevenson. This forms the basis of a course I developed called Embodying a Balanced Life.

PS Had you encountered Pilates yet?

TOM No, I still hadn't even heard of Pilates. But the next year, I started what was basically an apprenticeship with a man named Randy Cherner, who was an alum of the Lomi school and had trained in Feldenkrais, structural body work and CranioSacral Therapy. It combined awareness through movement training and hands-on bodywork. I went

every Monday to Marin County for four years. I learned techniques for re-educating the nervous system, and how to move with less effort and tension.

An Aikido teacher was in the same training. She was in great shape, so I asked her what she did. She said, "Oh, I do Pilates." I was really intrigued and decided to learn for myself what it was about.

PS When did you take your first Pilates session?

TOM In 1991. I started doing two to three privates a week with a local teacher named Karen Madison. I took to it right away.

PS Where did you do your teacher training?

TOM After two years of training with Karen, who was an educator for PhysicalMind Institute, she offered a small group training. It just felt like a natural transition—integrating Pilates with bodywork.

LEFT: TOM MCCOOK DOING TWISTING CHAIR POSE.

BELOW, TOP TO BOTTOM: THE CELEBRATION FOR CENTER OF BALANCE'S FIRST LOCATION TOOK PLACE IN 1999, TWO YEARS AFTER IT OPENED. TO THE LEFT OF MCCOOK (IN THE STRIPED SHIRT) IS THE THEN-MAYOR OF MOUNTAIN VIEW, MARY LOU ZOGLIN, AND DIRECTLY BEHIND HER IS MCCOOK'S WIFE KAREN DEMOOR; JOHN MCALISTER, THE THEN-MAYOR OF MOUNTAIN VIEW, CUT THE RIBBON AT THE OPENING OF CENTER OF BALANCE'S CURRENT LOCATION IN JANUARY 2016.

LEFT PHOTO BY CHRIS CONROY; STUDIO OPENING PHOTOS COURTESY OF TOM MCCOOK



At this point in my career, my main focus is teaching people how to create better function based on how they're spending their day.



ABOVE: MCCOOK DOING CONTROL FRONT ON THE REFORMER.

BELOW, LEFT TO RIGHT: OLYMPIC TRAINING: DOING AN ACTIVE RESISTANCE STRETCH FOR THE SHOULDER GIRDLE WITH JENNY THOMPSON IN PREPARATION FOR THE 2000 SYDNEY OLYMPICS; WITH MISTY HYMAN DOING A SWAN VARIATION ON THE ROLLER, ALSO FOR THE 2000 SYDNEY OLYMPICS; AND CUEING NATALIE COUGHLIN THROUGH A CRISS CROSS VARIATION IN 2011.

PS Did you keep your home studio once she moved in?

TOM No, her coming out here was the impetus to rent an off-the-beaten-path industrial warehouse space just off Shoreline and 101 in Mountain View. We completely renovated it—with hardwood floors, carpeting, insulation on the ceiling for sound and a couple of treatment rooms. We named it Center of Balance.

PS You were there a long time. Why did you end up moving?

TOM Yes, we were there for 18 years. During that time, it became one of the most sought-after locations in the world; Google set up its international headquarters in town. Karen worked with Google and the city to secure a 5,000-square-foot space one block away. We designed our dream studio and moved in 2015. We have three separate equipment rooms, including a large classroom with a mirrored partition for separate sessions if needed. We've now hosted two Balanced Body Pilates On Tour conferences.

PS How did you get into teacher training?

TOM I was part of PhysicalMind Institute's teacher-training program from 2000 to 2007, and then transitioned to Balanced

Body's teacher-training program. I made a great connection with Nora St. John and Al Harrison and liked their teaching philosophy and the direction in which they were moving as a company. Most of our staff came through our teacher training. I think it's challenging to hire people you don't have a relationship with. When you're training them, you see if people resonate with the way you do things.

PS You also completed the Franklin Method training?

TOM Yes, I had taken a workshop with Eric Franklin, and realized I could improve my teaching through experiential anatomy and imagery. It opened up a completely new window of learning for me. I completed all three years of the Franklin training and am now on the teaching faculty.

PS Do you teach clients Pilates only, or Pilates plus other modalities?

TOM It really depends on the person, and if I'm teaching a private or a group. For a private session, I find it helps if I first teach a Franklin lesson around the area the client is having difficulty with. For example, a lot of people have lower-back issues, and if they understand from an experiential anatomy perspective how that part of their

body is designed, it's so much easier for them to apply exercises to it. Life coaching is also a component of my sessions, helping clients to cultivate a balanced life. At this point in my career, my main focus is teaching people how to create better function based on how they're spending their day.

PS How did you end up working with the U.S. Olympic swim team?

TOM Stanford swimmers Jenny Thompson and Misty Hyman were referred to me by a chiropractor. They then recommended me to the Stanford women's swim coach, Richard Quick, who was also an Olympic coach. I was a conditioning coach for the Stanford team from 1998 to 2003. Because I understand the body, I was able to help them refine their mechanics, enhance their awareness and balance their muscle development.

I got to travel to the 2000 Olympics in Sydney with the team. I went to the Olympic Village every day for a month to work with Jenny and Misty. Twice a day, I would do bodywork, stretching, Pilates and talk about how they were feeling with them. It was awesome.

Misty won the gold medal in the 200-meter butterfly, swimming the fastest she ever had—she never swam that fast again. By the end of the Sydney Olympics, Jenny had become the most

Proust Questionnaire with TOM MCCOOK

What's your idea of perfect happiness?

Being present and feeling grateful that I have a good life.

What do you consider your greatest achievement?

Creating a life where I'm doing something I fully believe in, and that I'm helping people and inspiring others to do the same.

If you could have studied with one person, who would it be and why?

Leonardo da Vinci. He was so out of the box. He had an intense curiosity about how things worked. He was an inventor and an artist, and he really understood the value of practice.

If you could ask Joe one question, what would it be?

"What kept you inspired in your work?" I have an inkling of what it may be, but I'd like to hear from him what inspired him all those years. I think he realized that we're not just a head, we're a mind/body being and

physical fitness is a prerequisite to happiness. And I completely agree with that.

How has your own Pilates practice enhanced your well-being?

Together with my meditation practice, it's the root of my inspiration—the fact that I can practice anywhere, anytime, it helps me be more flexible, strong and have more of a balanced body at age 56. It feels awesome, and I'm forever grateful to Joe Pilates and all of my teachers on this path!



decorated U.S. Olympian. It was a huge experience to be a part of that!

PS You also worked with Natalie Coughlin?

TOM Yes, I trained Natalie for three Olympics (2004, 2008 and 2012), which was really cool. We would always text between races. I'd watch live footage of her race, and then give her feedback. We had this back and forth, so I kind of got to be in the Olympics with her, which was really fun and exciting. By the end of her career, Natalie, along with Jenny and Dara Torres, was the most decorated U.S. female Olympian.

PS How is it working with your wife?

TOM Karen came from a nonprofit background and understood organization and communications, so we bring different skills. I think that's one of the

reasons it's lasted. We support but don't manage each other. We also learned to communicate really well, plus it's nice to have someone you work with that you love and trust. Creating Center of Balance has been a nice way for us to build a community and surround ourselves with good people doing meaningful things in the world. We've always had staff workouts twice a week. It's our sacred time at the studio to share, learn and laugh together, and I think it's something that makes Center of Balance special.

PS I know you've had a long-time daily meditation practice.

TOM Yes, I've practiced Vipassana Meditation and Mindfulness Meditation for 28 years. It's given me a way to get behind a thought and watch the "show" instead of being run by it. In 2000, I started going to 10-day silent meditation

retreats; I've been doing them every year for the past 18 years. I feel that meditation has changed my life as much as my movement practices. It's helped give me perspective and cultivate kindness to self and others. Richard once told me, someone can be really fit and aligned and still be a jerk.

PS Has it helped your Pilates practice?

TOM A lot actually. It helped me get beyond my tendency toward self-judgment, like when you're doing a movement you're not very good at, you learn to see that as part of the practice. So you're noticing the experience, not judging it.

PS When you're not in the studio, what do you like to do?

TOM I love spending time at home. We live on the coast in Moss Beach, an hour from the studio.

Karen and I like to cook together. We have pet chickens—our girls give us great eggs. We also like hiking on the cliffs over the ocean. We love to travel, and when I go places to do workshops, we'll often stay for extra time to explore. **PS**



TOP TO BOTTOM: MCCOOK PERFORMING SWAN ON THE LONG BOX; HIKING WITH DEMOOR ON THE CLIFFS NEAR THEIR HOME IN 2015; AND HIKING ON THE COAST IN POINT REYES, CA, IN 2017.



REFORMER PHOTOS: BY BALANCED BODY; PHOTOS COURTESY OF TOM MCCOOK