

My time with Kobe
by
Darien Gold

I opened the door on a quiet weekday morning and was met by a study in contrast: one young very tall athletic guy, and effortlessly handsome; the other, shorter and more solidly built. I wasn't keeping up with America's professional sports teams then, basketball included. I had heard of Kobe Bryant who'd just began his professional career with the Los Angeles Lakers, I'd never seen him and I knew nothing of the attention already gathering around him.

It was 1998. I was deep in my Pilates studies while simultaneously preparing for my role as a stuntwoman in the Robin Williams film, *What Dreams May Come*. Referred to me by my neuromuscular therapist, I welcomed the opportunity to teach Pilates to an athlete — especially a professional one. So as Kobe and his coach, Joey C. walked into my small dining room, my mind began to race. What do I teach this athletic body for his first lesson? Do I stay basic or jump right into the advanced repertoire?

While we made polite conversation, I was already mentally designing his class. I led them into my large living room filled with Pilates apparatus. The Method was still in its infancy then, long before it had entered the athletic mainstream, and I imagined how strange the collection of unfamiliar equipment must have looked inside an ordinary home.

At the time, I owned a Cadillac, a Reformer, a Wunda Chair, an Electric Chair, and a Spine Corrector. I introduced each piece, explaining how Joseph Pilates had designed the apparatus and why the Method offered such profound benefits — especially for athletes whose careers depended on injury prevention and longevity. Joey settled down on the Cadillac, while Kobe and I moved toward the Reformer.

At 6'7, he was a beautiful, intriguing vision to behold — long, muscular arms and legs, and a torso that, for the most part, appeared symmetrical and balanced. He listened intently to my initial instructions.

As per my training, we began with Footwork, the first series on the Reformer, designed specifically to assess the body's alignment. According to Joseph Pilates, his Method began at the feet, and by working in a supine position, movement

patterns could be observed without the interference of gravity. Kobe adapted quickly to my style of cueing.

His first lesson was a revelation for us both. First, we genuinely liked each other. Both Virgos, Kobe seemed to appreciate my thoughtful, methodical way of teaching, and I was drawn to his curiosity, which showed itself in the intelligent questions he asked throughout the hour. The time passed quickly, and before I knew it, Kobe asked if he could return as often as three times a week.

Wow. This was going to be fun.

And it was.

One day, Joey — who drove both himself and Kobe from Pacific Palisades to my home in Glendale — arrived late. There was no professional courtesy call, no warning, and I was clearly annoyed. They both knew it.

We began with stretches, including a yoga posture called Downward Facing Dog. I stood in front of Kobe's head and shoulders, his legs extended long behind him. My hands moved to his pelvis, gently guiding his hips away from his ribcage. His hamstrings were notoriously tight, and I gradually increased the pressure.

An audible grunt filled the studio.

"Are you ever going to be late again for your lesson?" I asked, sternly — but with a smile.

"No!" Kobe answered breathlessly.

From that day forward, they were never late again.

As the weeks passed, Kobe clearly began to understand the layered cueing in my teaching. He once told me he wanted to be "a sponge," absorbing everything he could.

During one particular session, Joey watched from the Cadillac while I assisted Kobe with one of Joseph Pilates' signature exercises — the Teaser — practiced on the Long Box.

"Hey, I bet I can do that!" Joey said excitedly. "Let me try!"

Joey insisted on attempting the exercise on his own — a decision he quickly discovered was not a wise one. No sooner had he positioned himself on the Long Box, handles in hand, than he tried to roll his body forward and up. He immediately lost his balance and fell backward into the “well” of the Reformer.

Laughter erupted instantly. Kobe, standing to the side, doubled over in hysterics, while I lunged forward, barely missing Joey’s feet before he disappeared completely. Suspended somewhere between a laugh and a gasp, it wasn’t until Joey stood up, unharmed and laughed, did I begin to relax. Then I joined the moment of shared levity.

Kobe continued to improve, deepening his understanding of the technique and the discipline it required. Our time together was brief — only a few months — as his season began and travel made it impossible to keep regular appointments. Still, I often hoped that something I had shared with him stayed with him throughout his career.

When we lost Kobe, the world lost more than an extraordinary athlete. We lost a husband, a father, a humanitarian, and a deeply generous spirit. His passing was a shock that rippled far beyond the game of basketball.

I choose to remember him not as the legend the world knew, but as the student who wanted to be a sponge — open, humble, and endlessly curious.

Kobe Bryant will never be forgotten.