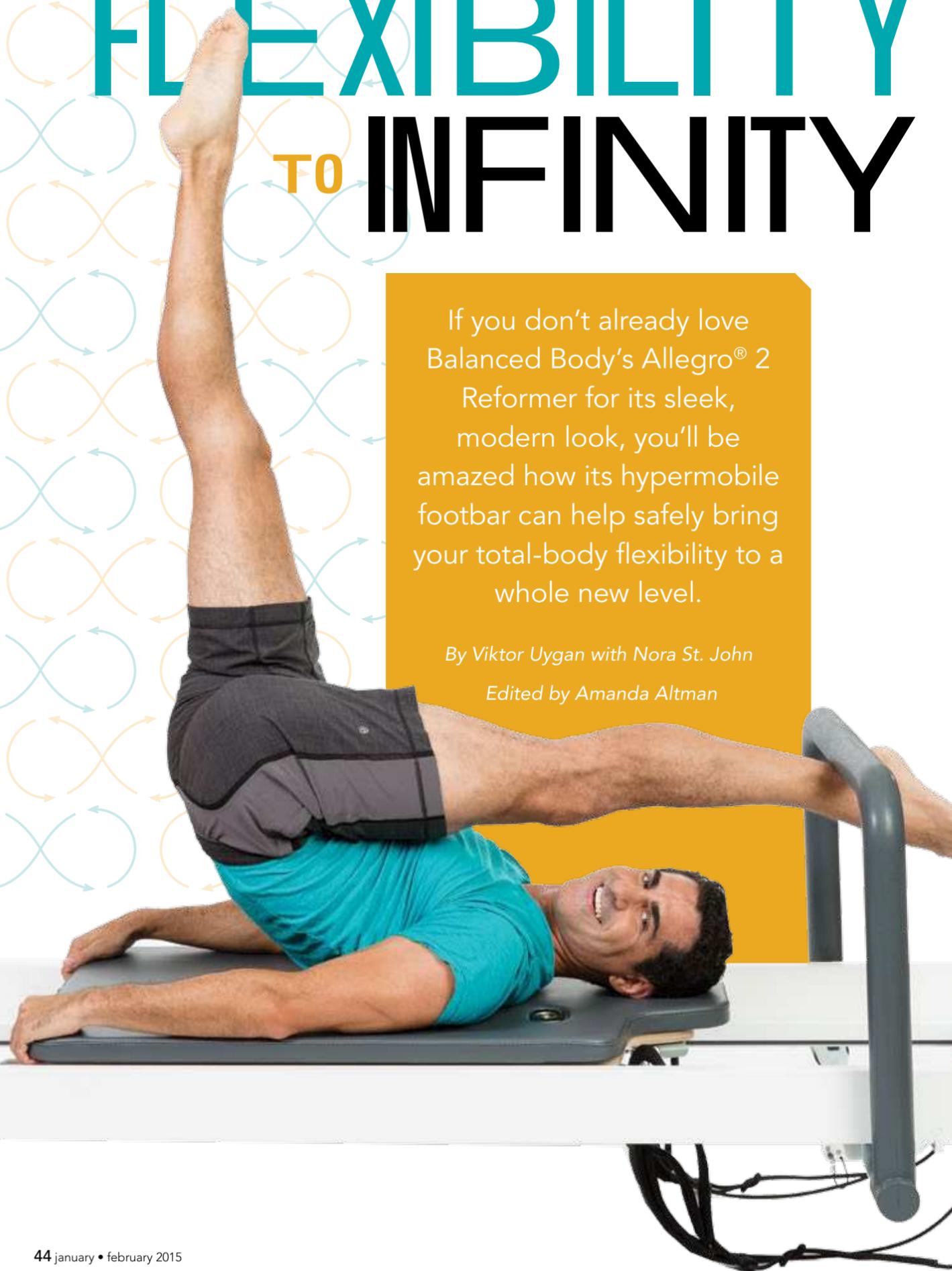


# FLEXIBILITY TO INFINITY

If you don't already love Balanced Body's Allegro® 2 Reformer for its sleek, modern look, you'll be amazed how its hypermobile footbar can help safely bring your total-body flexibility to a whole new level.

By Viktor Uygan with Nora St. John  
Edited by Amanda Altman



Flexibility is a key part of any physical training discipline, and Pilates is no exception. A body that is neither too tight, nor too loose, can move with efficiency, grace and comfort. When the muscles on either side of a joint work in harmony, the body uses the least amount of energy to move and the joints are better supported for a lifetime of healthy movement. Pilates is a particularly good environment for training flexibility because stretching exercises are usually performed with active engagement of the muscular support system at the end ranges of motion. This creates flexibility, along with joint stability, which is critical to good physical functioning.

This full-body routine on the Allegro® 2 focuses on flowing, whole-body stretches to increase the dynamic range of the moving body. This approach to flexibility training can provide faster improvements, less discomfort for the practitioner and add interest to classes or one-on-one sessions. I recommend doing the full routine at least twice per week for the best results, or choose the most useful exercises for a particular client and add them into their Pilates sessions.

I started dancing in Ankara, Turkey, as a young man, and went on to dance professionally for 15 years throughout Europe and the U.S. Early in my career, I trained in Gyrotonic and the BodyCode System with Pino Carbone as well as in Pilates. Through this process, I developed an understanding of how equipment can influence movement, which has led to the creation of several new training concepts and devices, including the new Connector™ from Balanced Body. The Allegro 2, with its infinitely adjustable footbar, inspired me to create these exercises that focus on the eccentric (lengthening) engagement during stretching for maximum support and control.

When performing or teaching these stretches, focus on flowing through the full movement while controlling all phases of the exercise. Work with the support of the springs in both the eccentric and the concentric (shortening) phases of the stretch. Remember that you control the springs—they don't control you. These exercises can be fairly intense, so start small, and gradually increase your range of motion to develop fluid, functional flexibility!

## KNEELING FLEXION AND EXTENSION

**A2 SETTING:** 1 yellow (very light) or blue (light) spring; footbar in the #3 position in the middle; shoulder rests removed

**PURPOSE:** increases spinal mobility; promotes integration of the pelvis with the torso

### THE A2 ADVANTAGE:

- Using the bar against the abdominals helps to increase abdominal engagement and focus the flexion in the lower back, while providing good feedback when moving into extension.
- Moving from flexion into extension is not that common in beginner exercises on the Reformer, so this basic move can provide a useful way to teach clients how to transition with ease and grace.

**SETUP:** Stand in the well between the risers and the carriage, and place one knee and then the other on the carriage, and "walk" your body toward the footbar. Facing the springs, sit tall on your heels with your knees together on the carriage, with the footbar against your abdomen and hands at your sides. Align your toes between the shoulder rest holders.

1. Engage your abdominals—imagining that you are trying to pull them away from the footbar—while posteriorly tilting your pelvis and flexing your spine; the carriage will move toward the springs as you round your back and tilt your pelvis. Reach your arms forward as you round, until you have reached the end of your range.
2. Begin to straighten your spine while lifting your arms toward the ceiling, until your upper back moves into extension; the carriage will move back toward the risers.
3. Continue to circle your arms around as you return your torso back to neutral. Do 4–6 reps.

**TIPS:** Maintain abdominal engagement, and pull your abdominals away from the footbar throughout. It's tempting to push your abdomen out against the footbar when moving into extension—resist the temptation! Focus on the movement coming from your body, not from the machine. Move smoothly through the sequence to develop full range in spinal flexion and extension.



The following exercises can be done as one long stretching sequence, without changing the spring setting or the position of the footbar.

## SPINAL WARM-UP

**A2 SETTING:** 1 yellow or blue spring; footbar in the #5 position closest to the risers; shoulder rests in or out

**PURPOSE:** warms the spine while also working the stability and mobility of the shoulder girdle; engages the abdominals

**THE A2 ADVANTAGE:**

- The opposition created by holding the footbar requires the body to organize and coordinate the action of the shoulder girdle with the movement of the spine.
- Working the two areas together helps to improve posture and strengthen the upper back to eliminate slumping.

**SETUP:** Sit on your heels on the carriage, keeping your knees aligned with the shoulder rests. Lean forward to take hold of the footbar, and place your hands on top as wide as possible. Press down into the footbar, slide your shoulder blades down your ribs, and sit tall with your torso over your sit bones.

1. Engage your abdominals, and roll down one vertebra at a time, beginning with the top of your head, allowing your shoulder blades to upwardly rotate or move away from your spine; the carriage will move away from the footbar. At the end

of the roll-down, reach your sit bones away from your hands and move your pelvis toward neutral to maximize the stretch.

2. Engage your abdominals, anchor your sit bones, slide your shoulder blades down your back and articulate your spine one vertebra at a time, starting from the lowest vertebra, to sit fully upright; the carriage will move toward the footbar as you straighten your torso. Do 4–6 reps.

**TIPS:** Find a breath pattern that enhances the mobility of your spine. Maintain control of the shoulder motion throughout. Control the eccentric as well as the concentric phase of the motion. For clients with limited mobility in the lumbar spine and excessive mobility in the thoracic, use cueing, imagery or tactile feedback to increase the activation of the abdominals and the flexibility of the lumbar spine, while decreasing the lift of the shoulders and rounding in the thorax.

**MODIFICATIONS:** If your knees are uncomfortable in the low-kneeling position, try sitting on a ball. If your hamstrings are flexible enough, your legs can be straight.



## SPINAL WARM-UP WITH A TWIST

**A2 SETTING:** same as in Spinal Warm-Up

**PURPOSE:** stretches the muscles of the back of the torso; creates stability and mobility of the shoulder by working the lats concentrically and eccentrically; decreases lower-back tightness; creates more power for rotational sports like golf and tennis

**THE A2 ADVANTAGE:**

- Because of the rotation of the torso and the position of the arms, the move greatly increases the stretch through the sides of the body and through the diagonal muscles that hold the torso and pelvis together.

**SETUP:** Same as in Spinal Warm-Up, but cross your arms before placing your hands on top of the footbar, keeping as much space between them as possible. Square your shoulders.

1. Engage your abdominals to elongate your spine, and begin rolling down one vertebra at a time, beginning with the top of your head, until it nears your arms.

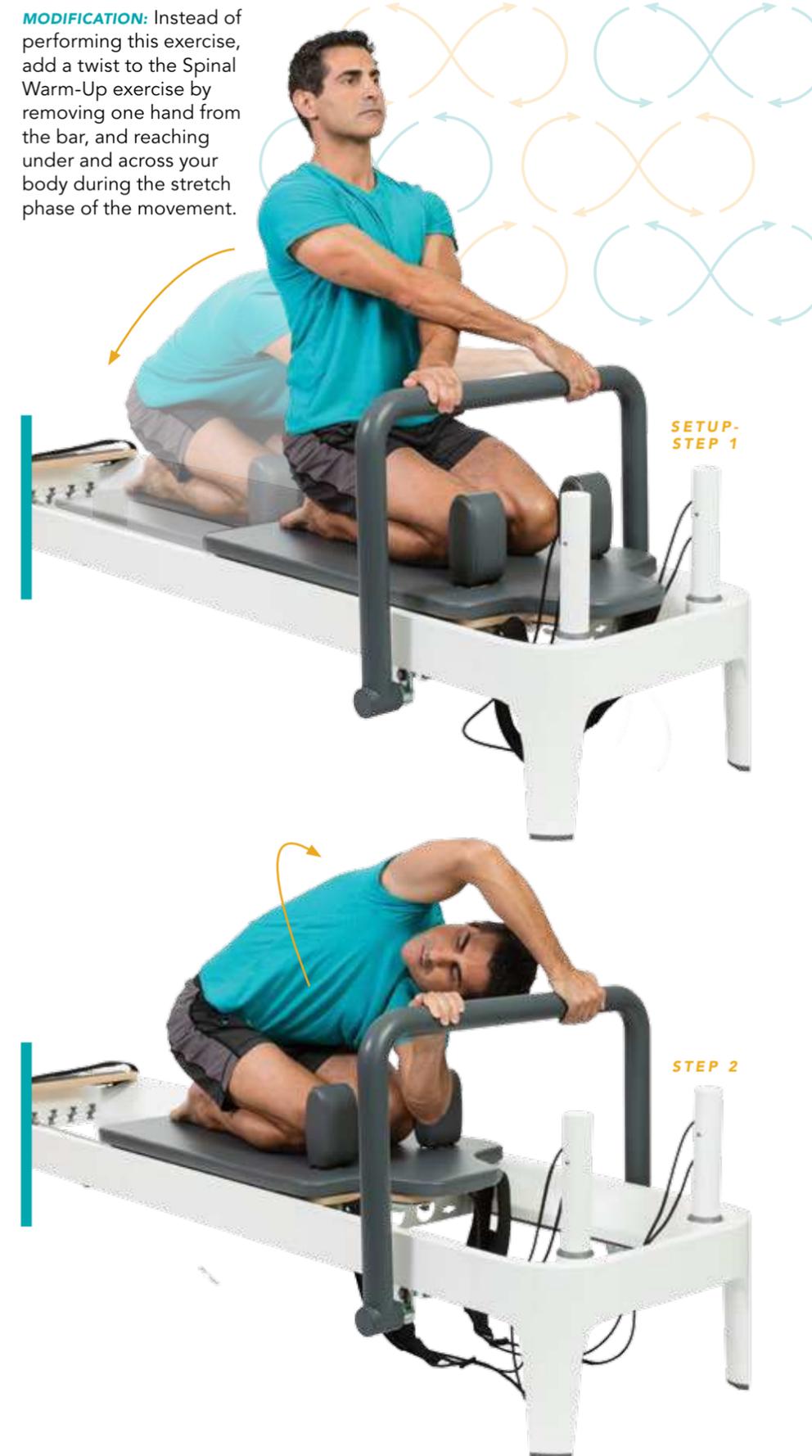
2. As you bring your head even closer toward your arms, rotate your torso to your right in a fluid motion, bending your elbows to pull your head toward the bar; the carriage will move away from the footbar.

3. Straighten and bend your elbows in the rotation to enhance the stretch.

4. Straighten your elbows as you return to center.

5. Roll back up to the starting position by anchoring your sit bones, engaging your abdominals and stacking one vertebra on top of the next, from the bottom of your spine. Do 3–4 reps on each side.

**TIPS:** Focus on making the roll-down and the twist one fluid movement. Notice any differences between your two sides through sensation and observation. Be especially mindful of variations in rotation and where the stretch is felt on each side—it often varies radically. As an instructor, observe the differences first, then use verbal or tactile cueing to bring awareness to the imbalances and help the client create strategies for balance.



## SEATED HIP STRETCH

**A2 SETTING:** same as in Spinal Warm-Up, but remove the shoulder rests

**PURPOSE:** challenges hip, torso and shoulder mobility all at the same time

**THE A2 ADVANTAGE:**

- This simultaneous action greatly expands integrated hip, spine and shoulder mobility, which is useful in any athletic pursuit and for functional movement.

**SETUP:** Stand beside the Reformer with one of your shins on the carriage and both hands on the footbar. Pull the carriage forward, lift your standing leg, and cross it over your other knee. (You will be sitting in a yoga Half-Lotus position, with one foot crossed over your opposite knee.) Lean forward, and take a wide grip on the footbar. Draw your shoulders down your back to pull the carriage toward the footbar, while stacking your spine until your head is directly over your pelvis.

**1.** Engage your abdominals to elongate your spine, and roll down one vertebra at a time, beginning with the top of your head, as far as you can comfortably keep your shoulders square. (Depending on flexibility, the sit bone of your top hip may or may not be on the carriage.) Keep reaching both sit bones toward the carriage to maximize the stretch.

**2.** Return to the starting position by engaging your abdominals, sliding your shoulder blades down and rolling your spine up to vertical. Do 3 reps.

**3.** Add a seated twist: Rotate your torso toward your top leg, opening your arm out to the side.

**4.** Rotate back toward the footbar, and reach your free hand across your midline, while flexing your spine and allowing the carriage to roll back toward the springs.

**5.** Do 3 reps of the entire sequence on each side.

**TIPS:** Focus on engaging your core and keeping your pelvis as level as possible throughout. Watch your shoulders—keep them from lifting up and the movements smooth. Flow seamlessly from one move to the next, and let the range of motion open up gradually.

**MODIFICATIONS:** The hips are a particularly tight area for many clients, so start with a small range of motion first. If the seated position is uncomfortable, try padding your top sit bone, so it has something to rest on and reach into during the stretch phase. This position can be challenging for clients with hip or knee injuries, so be cautious.



### GEAR GUIDE

Balanced Body Pilates Allegro® 2 Reformer, with legs (\$3,190; [www.pilates.com](http://www.pilates.com)).

## DOUBLE HIP STRETCH

**A2 SETTING:** same as in Seated Hip Stretch

**PURPOSE:** focuses on the hip flexors, quadriceps and anterior torso, while also stretching the back of the opposite hip

**THE A2 ADVANTAGE:**

- The footbar setting allows you to loosen up the whole pelvis in one exercise.

**SETUP:** Place one leg on the carriage, with your knee close to the front edge, and externally rotate your opposite leg to cross it in front of your pelvis. Flex your back knee slightly to keep your foot from bumping into the standing platform. Lean forward and hold the top of the footbar, hands wide.

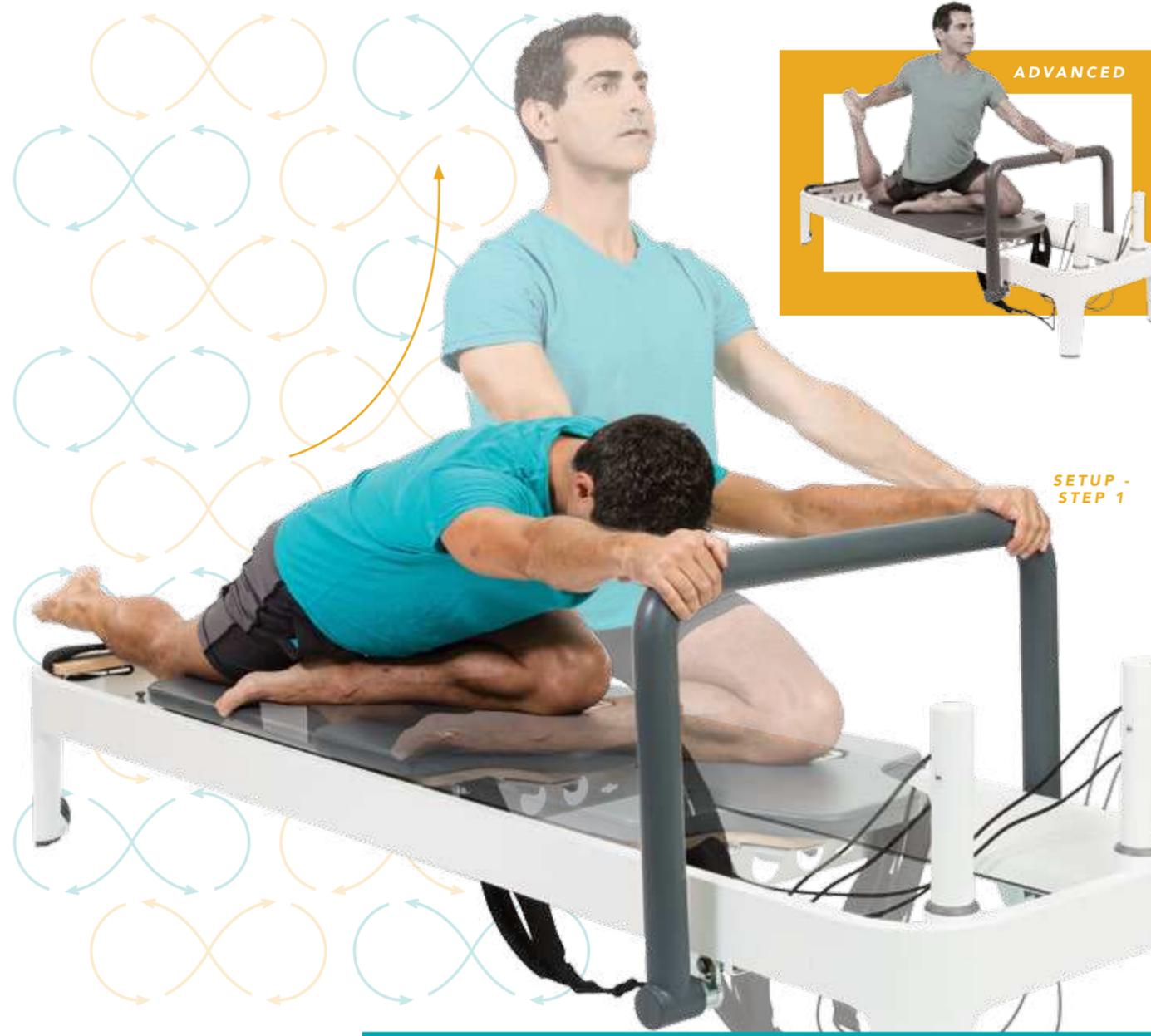
**1.** Press down into the footbar, engage your abdominals and flex your spine to roll up and bring your spine as upright as possible. Press your pelvis forward to increase the stretch.

**2.** Flex your hips and push the bar forward to return to the starting position. Do 3 reps on each side.

**TIPS:** This is a sensitive area to stretch, so move fluidly and with control. Maintain abdominal support throughout to keep your lower back from hyperextending. Find a breath pattern that supports the movement.

**MODIFICATION:** This is another intense stretch, so take it easy the first few times, and be cautious with clients with hip, knee or lower-back issues.

**ADVANCED:** Bend your back knee, and hold your foot with the same side hand, supporting your torso in as upright a position as possible. Bend and straighten your supporting elbow, while engaging your abdominals to support your back and enhance the stretch.



## SEATED TWIST

**A2 SETTING:** same as in Seated Hip Stretch

**PURPOSE:** stretches the back, shoulder and hip in rotation

**THE A2 ADVANTAGE:**

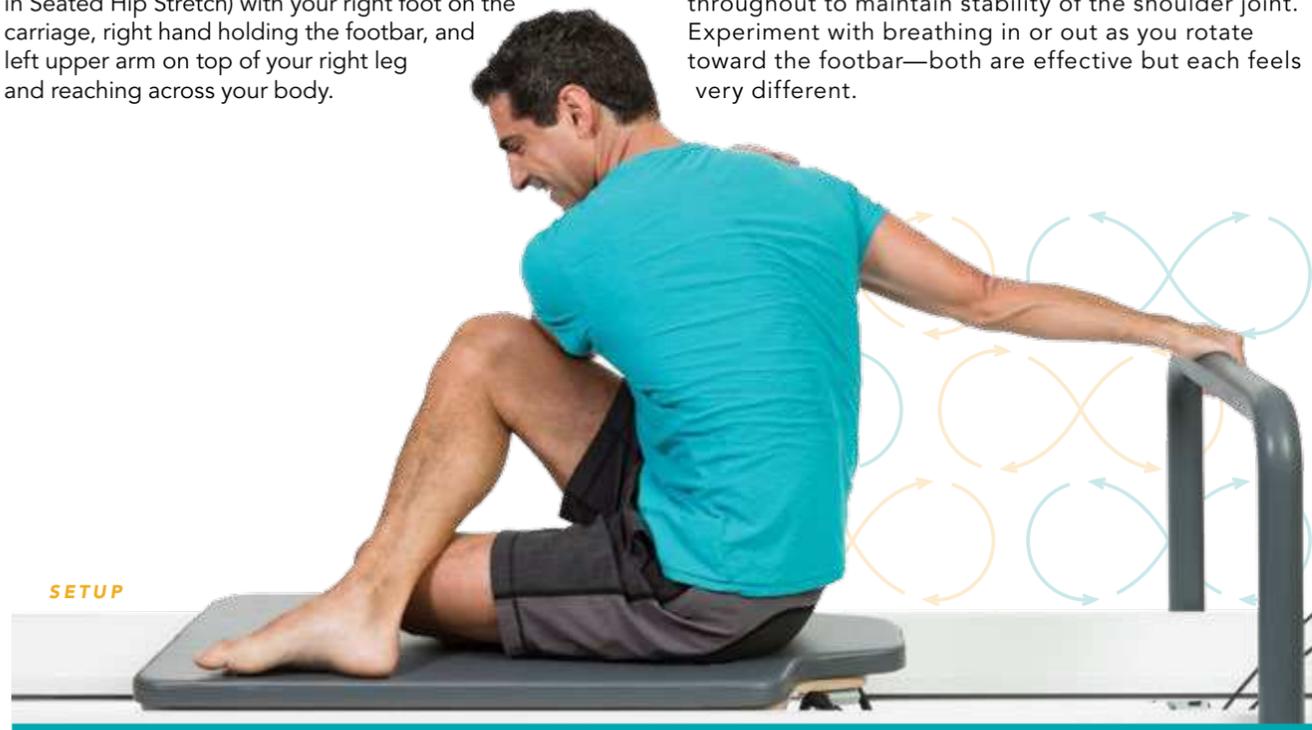
- Using the Allegro 2 and being suspended between the springs and the footbar creates an oppositional pull that allows you to move more deeply into the stretch than when done on the floor.

**SETUP:** Facing the springs, sit in the Half-Lotus position (like in Seated Hip Stretch) with your right foot on the carriage, right hand holding the footbar, and left upper arm on top of your right leg and reaching across your body.

**1.** Rotate your head and torso toward the footbar while extending the elbow of your left arm and pressing it against your thigh.

**2.** Rotate back toward the springs to return to the starting position. Do 3–5 reps on each side.

**TIPS:** Pull the footbar gently toward your torso throughout to maintain stability of the shoulder joint. Experiment with breathing in or out as you rotate toward the footbar—both are effective but each feels very different.



## FOOTBAR STRETCH

**A2 SETTING:** same as in Seated Hip Stretch

**PURPOSE:** stretches the whole back of the body as well as the hip flexors on the standing leg; challenges balance

**THE A2 ADVANTAGE:**

- The position of the footbar allows you to mimic ballet barre stretches.

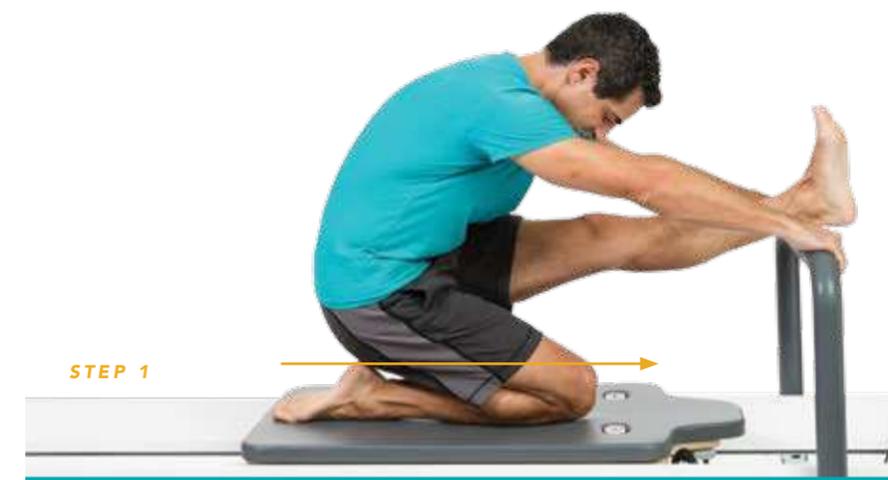
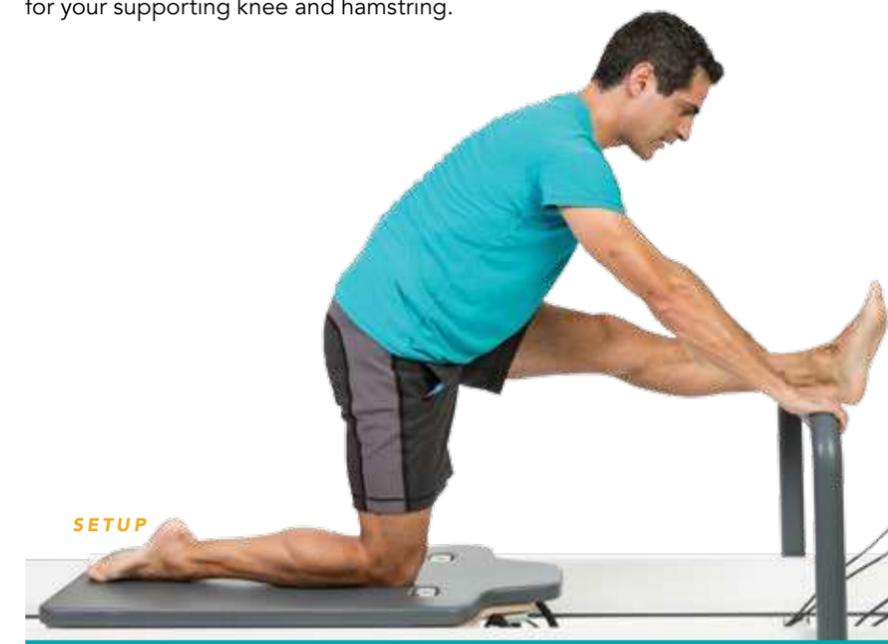
**SETUP:** Kneel on the carriage facing the risers, and place your hands and back of one ankle on top of the footbar. Align your supporting knee with the shoulder rest holder, and lift your hips off your the heels to come into a high kneeling position.

**1.** Engage your abdominals, and bend your supporting knee to bring your hip down toward your heels, flexing your spine; go only as low as is comfortable for your supporting knee and hamstring.

**2.** Engage your abdominals, and press your supporting leg into the carriage to rise back up to the starting position. Repeat on your other side.

**TIPS:** Maintain abdominal engagement throughout to keep your weight off of your supporting knee. This is a balance challenge, so assist your client in getting in and out of the position, until they are comfortable doing it on their own.

**MODIFICATIONS:** Bend your front leg if you can't keep your knee straight due to tightness in your hamstring. The supporting leg is working very hard, so limit the range of motion the first few times, until you know how far you can comfortably go.



## WANT MORE ON THE A2?

If you have a tight upper back or stiff shoulders, you won't want to miss our upcoming e-newsletter for a bonus move from Viktor and Nora. Sign up for free at [www.pilatesstyle.com](http://www.pilatesstyle.com).



**VIKTOR UYGAN** is the co-owner of Konnect® Pilates in Mission Viejo, CA, and a Balanced Body faculty member. A former professional dancer turned Pilates educator with more than two decades of experience, Viktor is an international presenter and trains teachers in Pilates, Anatomy in Three Dimensions™, CoreAlign®, Bodhi Suspension System™ and MOTR™. He is also the inventor of the Konnector™, an innovative single-rope pulley system available from Balanced Body.



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