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PLUS

RUNNING LIKE A GIRL
AUTHOR ALEXANDRA HEMINSLEY
ON FINDING HER FEET

RUGBY & REFORMERS

IRELAND INTERNATIONAL **GORDON D'ARCY** HAS
FOUND A PASSION FOR PILATES - SO MUCH SO,
HE'S MADE IT HIS LATEST BUSINESS VENTURE

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WALKING TO RUNNING STEPS UP A GEAR

WHY PILATES HAS BEEN A REAL BOON FOR OUR MR D'ARCY

TANYA SWEENEY TALKS TO THE LEINSTER RUGBY CENTRE WHO, TOGETHER WITH HIS WIFE AOIFE COGAN, HAS OPENED A REFORMER PILATES STUDIO IN CENTRAL DUBLIN — A LOFT-STYLE OASIS OF CALM THAT WILL PARK ALL YOUR TROUBLES

It takes a rather brave man to go into business with his new wife, not least in this harsh economic climate. But after a 15-year international rugby career that's seen its fair share of slings and arrows, Gordon D'Arcy is better braced than most for the choppy waters of owning his own business.

D'Arcy and his model wife Aoife have recently made public the passion project that has taken up most of their past year. Form School on Dublin's Grattan Street is the couple's Reformer Pilates studio, where the public can access Pilates, yoga and ballet barre classes.

"The first thing (about opening a business) is that you have to be passionate about what you're getting involved in," says Gordon.

"If you're interested, you'll want to succeed with it. Aoife has done Pilates for a number of years, even though she would be a person that wouldn't enjoy the gym. It was healthy, it offered toning and so it ticked all the right boxes for her."

Midway through his 16-year career, Gordon suffered an injury-plagued season in 2004-5. Yet he attributes Pilates with his hip and back injury recovery, enabling him to make the Lions squad for their 2005 tour to New Zealand.

"I was able to keep playing, and (Pilates) was so important for injury prevention and injury maintenance," he explains. "When I don't do it, my back will tighten up



somewhere down the line."

Gordon and Aoife are clearly aware that their profile as a celebrity couple will get curious types through the door of Form School... but they're confident that the service they're offering will ultimately speak for itself.

"My wife is in the exact same headspace (as me) on this," says Gordon. "We can promote it a little more than most people starting out in business, but that only takes you so far. You get people through the



Clockwise from left: Gordon D'Arcy being helped from the field by doctor John Ryan and masseur Mike Thompson; at the Pilates studio he owns with wife Aoife Cogan; getting a kiss from Aoife.

SPORTS ILLUSTRATED IRELAND

door, but you only get one chance to make a first impression. We won't be giving the classes, but we've hired the best teachers, and I'm blown away by what we're offering."

Certainly, no detail has been spared as the couple sought to create an oasis of calm in Dublin's city centre. Wanting to offer something different to other fitness studios, Aoife and Gordon designed a loft-style studio with plenty of hipster flourishes.

The studio décor — largely overseen by Aoife, and thanks to Kilkenny design duo Gild

'Aoife and me have a similar outlook on life... I think sometimes people use marriage as an excuse not to get into business!'



& Cage — features subway tiles, bison heads, reclaimed church paraphernalia and antique cinema seats. A first for a Dublin fitness studio, surely... yet escapism and aspiration are clearly part of the package.

"We wanted to offer something different in the marketplace, and the whole thing about Pilates is that it's a mind and body workout," explains Gordon.

"It's a place to switch off your mind, park everything in your life for a good

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half-hour or hour and focus on the workout."

Pilates has doubtless been popular in Dublin in recent years, but in the hierarchy of workouts, Pilates and yoga can sometimes fall quite far down the totem pole. Given that they are workouts based on strength, control and stretching as opposed to kinetic, dynamic exertion, plenty of people simply dismiss them as a less 'serious' and effective workout than others; something that Gordon is happy to dismiss out of hand.

"People who make sweeping statements like that often haven't done the exercise before," he smiles. "It's a very male thing to think, 'I'll go in there and blow it out the door'. The first few times I did it I certainly went too hard, not realising that you need to build up your endurance."

"With the reformer machine, I get as much out of that workout as I do from lifting weights. In fact with Pilates, you're lifting your own body weight half the time. You have to be quite focused on what you're doing. Anybody who doesn't think of Pilates as a 'proper' exercise, I'd challenge them to come in and try the basic training... I guarantee they'll come away thinking differently."

The same goes for the ballet barre classes, which Gordon admits are infinitely more hardcore than first meets the eye.

"I probably would have thought that the ballet classes might have been easy," he says.

"I did look in on a class, and the faces of the people coming out were priceless. Like, 'woah, that's gonna hurt tomorrow'."

For the uninitiated, Reformer Pilates is the practice of 500 controlled exercises using a reformer machine, which is like a bed frame with a foot bar and arm/foot straps. Though it may look a bit like a medieval torture device, the idea is to improve posture, build flexibility and core strength and promote long, lean muscles. As it happens, there are two reformer beds at Leinster Rugby Club's training ground... and according to Gordon, they always have a queue in front of them.

"As with any exercise, Pilates needs to be done alongside a balanced diet and good lifestyle to help you achieve your goals," says Gordon. "Joseph Pilates, who invented the exercise, recommended three sessions a week to get the maximum benefit. But it works well alongside other workouts, too."

With Gordon facing into the Heineken Cup and Six Nations ("it's going to be an intense few months, from here on in it's a race to the silverware at the end of the season"), Aoife will take over the front-of-house duties at Form School. And so far, creating the business together has only served to strengthen their union.

Being tackled by Glenn Dickson; with Brian O'Driscoll; and in the Reformer Pilates studio in Dublin.

SPORTSFILE: EL KEEDAN



"It's been perfect," smiles Gordon. "We've brought a different skill set each to the table and they have dovetailed seamlessly."

"We have a similar outlook on life... we're kindred spirits. I think sometimes people use marriage as an excuse not to get into business!"

Speaking about their respective strengths, he adds: "Aoife was very passionate about the design, and she's better than me at getting out there and meeting the teachers and getting the word out there. The business side, setting up the accounts and all that, has been better for me."

After getting involved recently in the running of the Exchequer Bar in Dublin, Gordon is certainly no greenhorn when it comes to business. Like many other rugby players, he is keenly aware that while he has already enjoyed a lengthy playing career, nothing lasts forever.

"I think we all know that our careers can be cut short at any moment through injury," he muses. "Being sensible about having something happening in the background is just one of those things that's part of being a player. If you're given opportunities, you have



to take them, and they might not necessarily be there when you finish up. This generation (of rugby players) in particular have been thinking about their post-rugby careers up to five years before it happened. Fortunately, our players' association provide the tools for people to think about what they'll do after rugby."

Though the paint is barely dry on the walls, Gordon and Aoife already have plans to expand Form School. Once the class schedule is up and running, Form School members will in the future be able to avail of workshops and

talks from some of the biggest names in sport and fashion. And, to complement the training classes, talks on nutrition and even motivation will also be offered down the line. In short, Form School appears on course to become a popular wellbeing hub.

"We don't want people to just walk in and out to the classes, it's about giving them the tools to be healthy," he explains.

"I think there has definitely been an upturn in Irish people wanting to look after themselves."

What advice might Gordon have for anybody curious about Reformer Pilates but daunted by those intimidating-looking machines? "The fear of the unknown is a terrible thing, but overcoming it can possibly change your life," he says. Spoken like a man who has seen the fruits of his business labours finally come to bloom.

For more information on Form School, 24A Grattan Street, see www.formschool.ie.