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Posted: February 15, 2011 02:05 PM



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A Review of 3 Top Barre Workouts

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At the beginning of January, I decided to try barre-based workouts on DVD. The main reason for this is that I loathe how crowded the gym is at the beginning of the year when New Year's resolutions prompt people to work out more. (Good on everyone, but it's annoyingly crowded in my Zumba class and painful to "work in" at the tricep pull-down machine.) And maybe these DVDs will offer an extra dose of motivation to get us through the chocolate-laden Valentine's season and ready for looming spring break trips. So, off to the barre for me -- in my own living room, as opposed to the type of bar I typically prefer.

Barre workouts utilize the ballet barre as a prop (but at-home users can work with a sturdy chair). The

workouts are an isometric strength training method, using your own body weight as resistance, and stretching between segments, utilizing techniques from Pilates, yoga, and ballet. The goal is to create long, lean muscles and a toned bod. (Kelly Ripa, Drew Barrymore and Olivia Wilde are fans.)

The three barre workouts I'd heard the most about are Bar Method, Barre3 and Physique 57. I started with the Bar Method's latest DVD, "Dancer's Body Advanced Workout" (there are seven total), then moved on to Barre3's "Total Body Lift Workout" and finally tried Physique 57's "Classic 57 Minute Full Body Workout -- Second Edition."

Here's what I loved and didn't about each:

"Bar Method Dancer's Body Advanced Workout"

Loved: Marnie Alton, who I found positive and upbeat without being overwhelming, leads the workout, clearly and carefully explaining each move. Our 85 minutes are spent working arms with three-pound free weights, push-ups, planks, and tricep dips. After stretching the arms, it's time for the intense leg-shaking lower-body work. (Even the background exercises on the DVD shake during this section, which is when you know you're really working those muscles.)

There are two exercises targeting the seat (in Bar Method, the toosh is called "seat"), then another set of burning thigh work (a move they call water ski), and then some ab work that had my six-pack-in-the-making quivering. Each section is followed by stretching, which will undoubtedly help with my flexibility (one of my fitness goals). I like the Bar Method's emphasis on safety and alignment, which makes it a good choice for people with any joint issues. Despite the fact that you curse Marine and the others who smile at you, through your pain as you tuck tuck tuck, I felt great after and am looking forward to doing this workout again.

Didn't Love: The seat work is complicated, and my lower back hurt a bit after the workout, I suspect because I wasn't doing the positions quite right. I can see how this workout could get a little boring if done too often; other than the weights and barre, the workout doesn't include props like a playground ball, like the other DVDs I sampled. I hear Bar Method will release another DVD this year which incorporates the playground ball, so perhaps this will be a positive change.

\$20 at barmethod.com