

Strength vs Burn on the Reformer

A practical, evidence-based guide for Pilates instructors

As Pilates instructors, we often equate “feeling the burn” with an effective workout — because it’s familiar, it feels challenging, and clients often expect it. While the burn reflects muscular effort and metabolic stress, it does not automatically lead to strength adaptations. Strength development requires sufficient load and working close to muscular fatigue — not just high repetitions.

This guide is designed to help you recognise what you are currently biasing in your classes, and how small changes in reps, load, rest, and intent can shift your programming toward true strength work.

How to Use This Guide

Use the tables below to identify whether your current programming is biased toward endurance (burn) or strength.

You don’t need to overhaul your classes — simply adjusting rep ranges, spring load, rest, or progression can significantly change the training stimulus.

Training Adaptations Cheat Sheet

Goal	Reps	Sets	Rest	Adaptation
Strength	1–6	3–6	2–3+ min	Max force production
Hypertrophy	6–12	3–5	30–90 sec	Muscle growth + strength
Endurance / Burn	15–30+	2–4	15–45 sec	Muscular endurance

Higher reps with lighter resistance bias endurance, not maximal strength.

The Burn v's Strength Training

	Burn / Endurance Bias	Strength Bias
Load	Light–moderate	Moderate–heavy
Reps	15–30+	6–12
Sensation	Burning, shaking	Last reps feel hard
Can continue?	Yes	No / maybe 1–2 more
Primary outcome	Endurance	Strength & hypertrophy

SELF ASSESSMENT CHECKLIST

There are no right or wrong answers here.

This self-check is simply a way to build awareness of your current programming habits and where strength may be underrepresented.

What Are You Biasing in Your Classes?

Tick the boxes that reflect your classes

RESULTS - More ticks = greater bias toward endurance-based programming

- Most exercises are 15–20+ reps
- Springs stay the same week to week
- Little to no planned rest
- Clients feel the burn but could keep going
- Clients can usually do more reps than programmed

What Next?

If you notice your classes are heavily endurance-biased, the next step isn't adding more exercises — it's learning how to apply strength principles to the reformer with clarity and confidence.

FOR EXAMPLE: Reducing reps from 15 to 8, increasing spring load, and allowing short rest can shift an exercise from endurance to strength.

Want to Teach Strength With Confidence?

Inside Beyond the Burn, I teach Pilates instructors how to:

- Apply strength principles to the reformer
- Use reps, sets, rest and springs with intent
- Progress clients without burning out
- Enhance Pilates — not replace it

Click the button to learn more about my online course
Beyond the Burn: Building Strength in Pilates

LEARN MORE