

Keeping brides on their toes

Ballet-style classes raise the fitness barre

BY BROOKE SHOWELL
Special to Newsday

Pre-wedding workouts seem to change faster than each season's gowns. For several years, brides flocked to boot camp-style Buff Brides programs, hoping that the intense, high-energy cardio sessions would help them slip into a smaller dress size. Now, brides, bridesmaids and wedding guests are turning to ballet barre-inspired classes to get delicately toned for the big day.

Like pole dancing or Bikram yoga before it, the buzzed-about barre programs are the latest to promise a slimmer, sexier silhouette. "Right now barre classes are big, especially for those looking for a low-impact workout," says New York fitness expert and personal trainer Natasha Linton. She says the allure for brides may be that "classes consist of total body workouts, which are better for those short on time." Though it's popular with dancers, celebrities and the otherwise nimble, you don't need actual ballet experience to survive a session — though if you haven't seen the inside of a gym since high school, be prepared for sore muscles.

A modern take on the Lotte Berk Method — the original barre-based exercise regimen that rose to popularity in the 1970s — these classes are a combination of balance, strengthening and stretching movements that fuse core conditioning, isometrics, Pilates and yoga. The hourlong group sessions claim benefits like washboard abs, a lifted seat, long lean thighs, chiseled arms, increased flexibility and improved posture — all ideal to help brides show off curves in a form-fitting gown, stand up straight in photos and withstand hours in heels.

"Brides want to look toned, but not bulky," says Elisabeth Halfpapp, who, with husband Fred DeVito, co-founded the Core Fusion classes at Exhale Spa, with locations in Manhat-



At the The Bar Method studio in Port Washington, women get a leg up on toning their seat, and the rest of the body.

tan and Bridgehampton. "It changes the body in terms of inches. We're not into skinny-skinny. It's about having the best body you can have and feeling confident."

Classes are fast-paced, combining cardio, strengthening and stretching into 60 minutes, which means instructors go straight to the most challenging positions to fit it all in. "It's focused around conscious movement and awareness that when you're doing the exercise, you're paying attention," says Carol Espel, senior national director of group fitness and Pilates at Equinox, which offers a Barre Burn class at its Great Neck, Roslyn and Woodbury locations. "You're not lifting your leg and reading the newspaper."

The method itself is fairly

bare bones: Most classes are done in nonskid socks, in a stark studio with props like light weights, resistance balls, and, of course, a ballet barre. But those push-ups, pliés, lunges, leg lifts, curls and crunches can yield fast results. "We've had a number of brides and mothers of the bride who have really changed their bodies pretty quickly," says Molly Mulholland, co-owner of The Bar Method Port Washington. Of course, you have to work at it. But consistent attendance — three to four times a week for three to six months — is enough to transform your physique, Mulholland says.

"I've seen amazing results," says Maggie Connolly, 29, a teacher who has been taking classes at Mulholland's studio

in the months leading up to her wedding next month at St. Mary's Church in Manhasset and reception at the Plandome Country Club. Pointing and flexing three to four times a week, Connolly says, have helped tone her arms and back, two areas she plans to show off in a fit-and-flare Paloma Blanca wedding gown with an open back. An added bonus: "My thighs have slimmed down, and I slowly see my muscles getting more defined." Then there's her honeymoon in Hawaii. "It'll definitely help putting my bikini on."

At up to \$35 a class, this bod doesn't come cheap. Some Long Island studios offer special bridal packages, including unlimited sessions at a discount (a 3-month commit-

ment at The Bar Method works out to about \$150 a month) or a combination with other pre-wedding services (say, nutrition counseling and massage). And if you can't make it to an in-person class, Core Fusion, The Bar Method and Physique 57 (which has studios in New York and Bridgehampton) sell DVDs, which can give you an effective, at-home workout with their star instructors and tried-and-true methods. Price: about \$15, though you'll need light weights, too.

But like other wedding trends — remember chocolate fountains and bird cage veils? — try not to get too obsessed. Halfpapp notes: "The brides get so addicted they take the DVDs on their honeymoon."