

Reaching New Heights

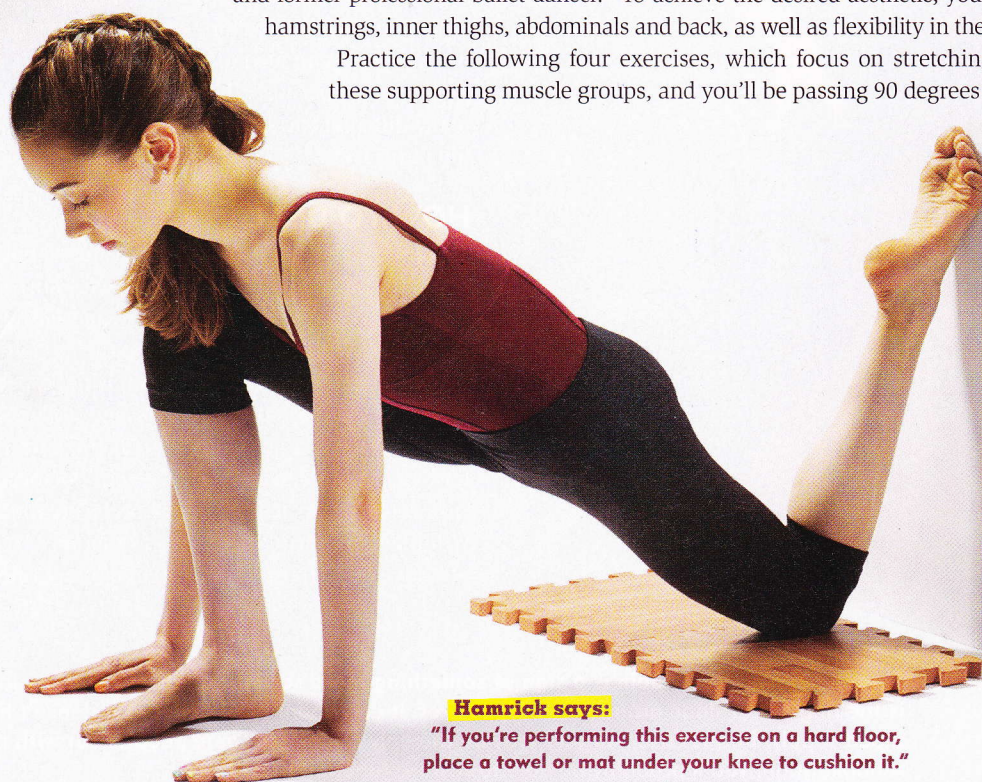
You'll need: an FLX Ball or a medicine ball and a Thera-Band

Do you dream of sky-high arabesques? The secrets to success may surprise you.

By Maggie McNamara • Consultant: Rachel Hamrick • Model: Julia Lipari
Photography by Nathan Sayers

Have you ever seen a ballerina's arabesque and thought, Wow, her back is so flexible—does she even have a spine? Believe it or not, a bendy back isn't the only key to a killer arabesque. "Dancers who focus exclusively on stretching often fall into improper alignment, crunching the lumbar spine and splaying the ribs to maximize arabesque height," says Rachel Hamrick, a conditioning expert and former professional ballet dancer. "To achieve the desired aesthetic, you need strength in the hamstrings, inner thighs, abdominals and back, as well as flexibility in the hip flexors."

Practice the following four exercises, which focus on stretching and strengthening these supporting muscle groups, and you'll be passing 90 degrees in no time!



HIP FLEXOR LUNGE

Plant your left knee in the corner where the wall meets the floor, with the top of your foot pressed against the wall. Step your right leg forward and bend it at a right angle, so your knee is directly above your ankle. Place your hands on either side of your right foot. Keeping both legs parallel, push your hips forward and down. Hold for 10–15 slow breaths. Repeat the stretch twice on each side.

Hamrick says:

"If you're performing this exercise on a hard floor, place a towel or mat under your knee to cushion it."

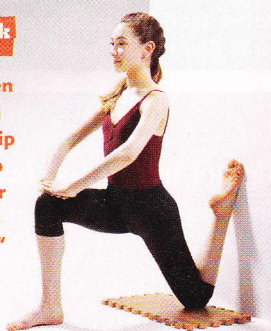
MODIFICATIONS

MODIFICATION 1:

For extra stretch, keep your legs in the same position, but place your hands on top of your right thigh. Push your hands away from your body to lift your chest, keeping your shoulders relaxed as you sink your hips forward.

Hamrick says:

"Lengthen through the left hip flexor so that your pelvis is vertical."

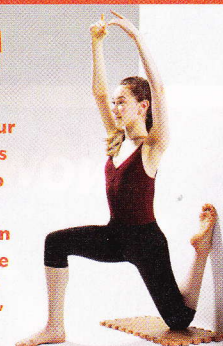


MODIFICATION 2:

For an even more intense stretch, bring your arms up to fifth position. Engage your abs and lift your chest to avoid splaying your ribs.

Hamrick says:

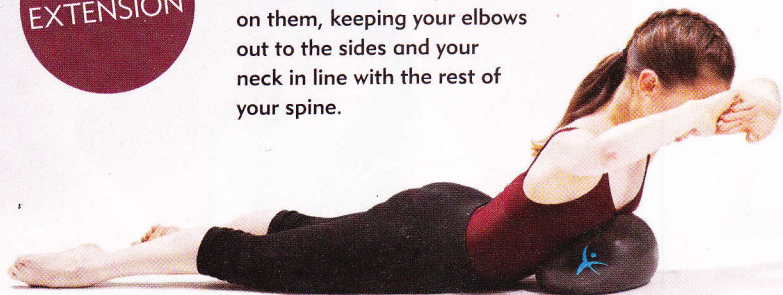
"Imagine stitching your inner thighs together to keep your right knee in line with the midline of your body."



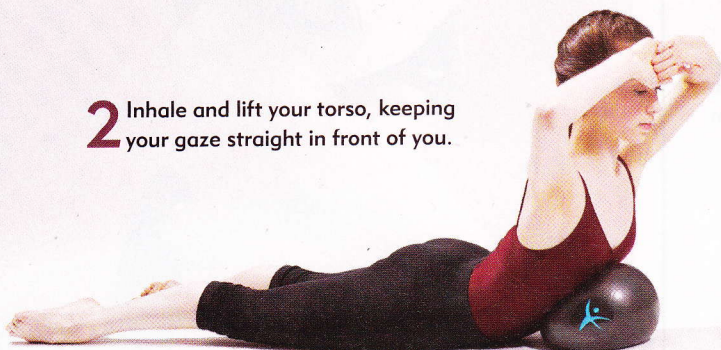
• Rachel Hamrick is a professional ballerina turned conditioning expert and the founder of FLX fitness brand. She is certified in yoga, Pilates and strength conditioning.

SPINAL
EXTENSION

1 Lie on your stomach with your legs turned out and your feet pointed, hips-width apart. Place the ball under your chest. Stack your hands on top of each other and rest your forehead on them, keeping your elbows out to the sides and your neck in line with the rest of your spine.

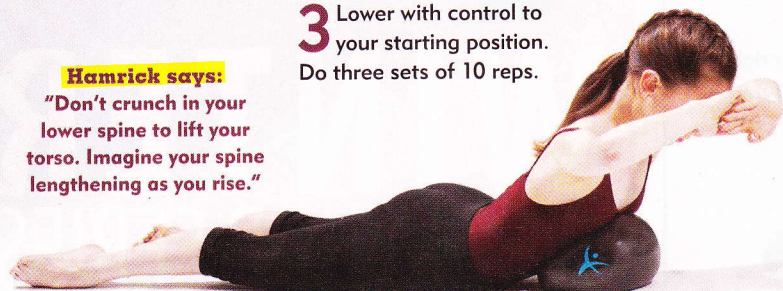


2 Inhale and lift your torso, keeping your gaze straight in front of you.



Hamrick says:
"Don't crunch in your lower spine to lift your torso. Imagine your spine lengthening as you rise."

3 Lower with control to your starting position. Do three sets of 10 reps.



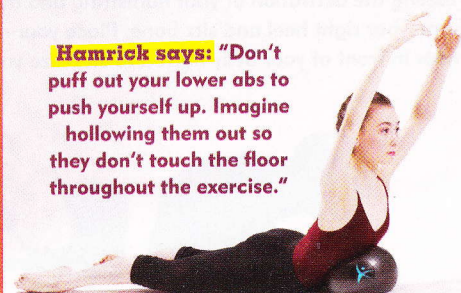
MODIFICATION

1B Start in the same position, but hold your arms out in fifth.



2B Inhale and lift your torso, keeping your shoulders drawn down your back and your neck long.

Hamrick says: "Don't puff out your lower abs to push yourself up. Imagine hollowing them out so they don't touch the floor throughout the exercise."



3B Lower with control to your starting position. Do three sets of 10 reps.



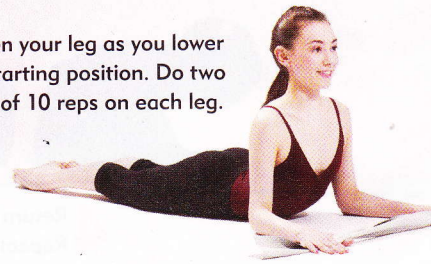
1 Lie on your stomach with your legs hips width apart and turned out, and your feet pointed. Fold the Thera-Band in half lengthwise and hold one end in each hand. Prop yourself up on your elbows, placing them by your sides, underneath your shoulders. Place your forearms at a slight outward angle to create resistance in the Thera-Band. Press down through your arms and feel your chest pulling forward.

SINGLE
LEG LIFT

2 Maintaining your external rotation, lift your left leg about one foot off the floor.



3 Lengthen your leg as you lower to the starting position. Do two to four sets of 10 reps on each leg.



Hamrick says: "Keep your spine long throughout this exercise. Don't allow the lifting of your leg to cause you to crunch in your lower back. Hold your abs, and imagine lengthening to bring your leg up, rather than lifting."

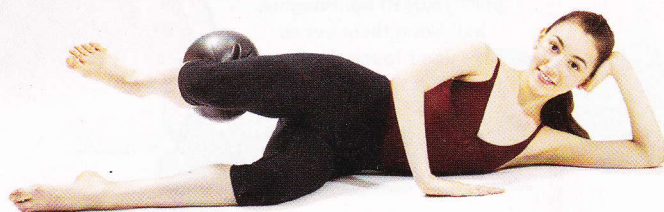
HAMSTRING CURL

1 Lie on your left side, resting your head in your left hand. Place your knees in front of your hips and your ankles directly below your knees, forming two right angles. Lift your right leg slightly so that your legs are hips-width apart, and use your right hand to place the ball behind your right knee.



✿ Julia is using an FLX Ball, which is lighter and squishier than a traditional medicine ball.

2 Flex your right foot and squeeze the ball behind your knee, feeling the activation of your hamstring and the connection between your right heel and sitz bone. Place your right hand on the floor in front of your belly button to stabilize yourself.



3 Initiating from your hamstring, move your right leg back without changing the alignment of your pelvis or spine. Pulse your heel backward five times, keeping your leg parallel.



Hamrick says:

"Engage your abs to keep your torso from arching and activate the inner thigh muscles to keep your legs parallel and hips-width apart."



4 Return to the starting position. Repeat 10 times on each side.

• Julia Lipari currently studies ballet privately with Isabelle Guérin and Karin Averty of Paris Opéra Ballet.