

The Future Awaits for Pilates

On a clear morning in San Francisco, the driver of a truck jumped a red and rammed the volkswagon crossing Fifth and Mission. George Orbellian left the scene not clear at all—in fact, with a concussion and visual difficulties. Soon after, his vision returned, but the reality hit him again: his body no longer reacted to what he saw.

A zealous motorcycle racer, weight lifter and surfer, Orbellian was deeply dismayed by this physical loss. He received special care for two years from dedicated professionals, and though, at first, he would feel okay, his problems with balance kept resurfacing. Each result dampened his desire either to return to regular athletic activity or surfing. So he sought additional help. Knowing little about its rehabilitative aspects, he took the name of a pilates specialist, hoping that there would be another level to reach.

Pilates? Orbellian is not alone in knowing little about pilates, a series of movements often performed on specialized machines with springs and pulleys that teaches people how to use their muscles to support their body instead of using unconscious compensations that cumulatively can hurt it.

The medical and general community often doesn't know either. There's limited comparative research available. Few public materials detail how it can support specific medical conditions, because even the word "rehab" is reserved for use by the medically-licensed, which pilates practitioners are not. And third party-approved national certification has only just become available to practitioners to define the practice more uniformly and discriminately. Nevertheless, its usefulness, especially in terms of rehabilitative exercise, impresses nearly all who practice.

It isn't surprising. Pilates had its roots in rehabilitative work. Joseph Pilates, its founder suffering his own childhood ailments, was determined to find a way to overcome them. Ingeniously, he took advantage of hospital bed springs to create the flexible reformer system that serves as its foundation. A move to New York led him to the demanding physical world of dancers, including Martha Graham, and to market it accordingly.

After a few decades, pilates evolved as a tool for those seeking greater flexibility and strength. Interest exploded.

Indeed, as a fitness tool, interest is substantial. 60 percent of U.S. clubs have pilates in their curriculum, according to the International Health, Racquet and Sports Association (IHRSA); across the country, there are now 9,000 who train. According to the SGMA, a sports and fitness association, the total number practicing pilates has reached 10.5 million. One could say pilates is successfully selling itself as fitness.

Most recently however, many leaders in the field want to make sure the practice doesn't get trivialized as "ab work" or stray too far from its rehabilitative roots. According to

member survey results gathered in October 2004 by the Pilates Method Alliance (PMA), an organization that trains pilates professionals, it may very well be they no longer have to worry. 87 percent reported that a portion of their clients now utilize pilates to help relieve symptoms of some kind of medical condition or injury. 40 percent have said that between 25 and 49 percent of their clients participate in pilates to help with a medical condition while 20 percent claim that those seeking help with a medical condition falls between 80 and 100 percent.

All in all, no small numbers for a workout that's identified by medical and insurance professionals as just exercise.

"The medical view is related to a lack of opportunity to directly observe the benefits," explains Jennifer Stacey, an early teacher of the practice, and clinic owner. "The lack of exposure, and sometimes documentation, leaves the contribution of pilates abstract to physicians and insurers." And yet, Stacey remains confident that the burgeoning number of success stories from patients will eventually bring positive results to the field.

The Practice

The name Orbellian was originally given to help him was Jennifer Bury, a pilates professional affiliated with St. Francis, who gained a wealth of knowledge through a twenty year involvement in private practice. Her specialty is known as proprioceptor training or understanding the muscles and coordination necessary to return someone to balance. This integration turned out to be a pivotal piece. It brought Orbellian to an entirely different level and gave him back control of his body.

"For once a week, every month for a year, my body got re-educated. Everything had to be done with a different consciousness. Staying focused on where a movement originates or engaging the right muscles requires awareness."

For outsiders, it often doesn't seem like much. Clients sit or stand or lie on cumbersome-looking, though comfortably padded gym equipment in rows, and in a highly structured way, work out. They push and pull against springs, move fluidly through a series of extensions and controlled releases and concentrate on their breath while they achieve the movements. The teacher then guides each client toward greater awareness, making constant corrections. Those engaged know right away there's more to it than what one sees.

"You have to do it to realize how powerful moving consciously really is" Orbellian insists. I learned that paying attention in new ways was the way to get truly excellent performance from my body. I was almost immediately rewarded and I consistently improved."

The Evidence Problem

It is sometimes cumbersome for a medical staff to share the reins of rehabilitation with fellow professionals whose disciplines are unknown to them. Christine Egan, a private practice physical therapist who specializes in working with kids who have neuro-

degenerative disorders, notes, “I work with the pediatric community, and they really aren’t all that up on pilates, the way it gets integrated. Often, pilates is considered in last resort situations, since they don’t know much about it. It’s not what they do.”

From his position as PMA president, Kevin Bowen understands the information challenge quite well, both the need for public education as well as to bring on more medical proponents through research. “There have been studies, but unfortunately, they are either minor in scope or, if the investigators have performed a valuable comparative review, the results have yet to be released. Lacking the studies, the usefulness of pilates practice appears unproven.” In effect, pilates, the industry, is still a bit on hold.

In spite of the slow crawl toward medical acceptance, more and more clinics on the web are quietly advertising pilates help for conditions. Typical uses can be anything from neuromuscular re-education to osteoporosis to overall body strengthening after a back injury, pregnancy, heart attack or stroke. As health insurance providers like Kaiser Permanente get into the picture too to explore the viability of alternative care coverage, the two trends may trump the current confusions wrought by either the lack of evidence or information.

The Hoped-For Future

Carol Appel, Director of Pilates at the Mill Valley Health Club and a board member of the PMA is excited about the upcoming, voluntary certification in May 2005. “The industry has taken the problem of a variably-defined practice and made it uniform, taking a significant step toward improving its own credibility.” She added that with certification clients are more likely to receive skilled care.

And perhaps that is just what pilates, the practice, needs. Going the way of physical therapy and standardizing its contributions, the field can directly address the concerns of skeptics. No doubt those who are looking to manage their own care will appreciate knowing how this now well-articulated, customized practice works.

Another factor influencing the future is likely to be the communication of results. If pilates, introduced earlier on, can point to faster recovery times, and the community can learn about it, interest will likely increase.

An IHSA 2004 marketing study already underscores this idea. Baby boomers, in line with their respective needs to negate the myth of older folks as feeble and remain society’s free agents, are already seeking out options to take charge of their own health. On the heels of a steady decrease in many people’s access to health care insurance – The U.S. Health and Insurance Statistics notes forty seven million adult Americans were without health insurance coverage in 2003 – pilates as a self-managing preventative tool can hardly have come too soon.

In the meantime, Orbellian’s future looks good. He is now back in action, surfing the waves at Ocean Beach, and ready to tackle Hawaii. When asked how he views things, he

insists it has all made great sense to him. And that he never cared much about the lack of current research or how pilates compared but only that it worked.

Pilates professionals, like Jennifer Bury, are similarly guided. “The biggest problems of aging are the atrophying of muscles from disuse and unhealthy compensations. Pilates is great for that, for whole body health and problem prevention. And why argue with something that can help all of us as we age?”