
The History of Pilates

Joseph Hubertus Pilates – Early Years

Joseph Hubertus Pilates began his career as a proponent and teacher of “physical culture” – a broad-based movement advocating physical education through exercise, athletic excellence, and mental discipline. Through his own experience and teaching, he created a system of corrective exercise that he introduced to the American market in the late 1920’s.

Pilates was born in Mönchengladbach, Germany on December 9, 1883. In 1913, he traveled to England, finding work as a circus tumbler. When World War I broke out in the summer of 1914, Pilates and his circus troupe were taken into custody as enemy aliens and interned for the duration of the war on the Isle of Man, located off the west coast of England. He was one of several physical culturists who led the camp’s daily exercise routines for the more than 24,000 inmates housed there. During this period, Pilates developed his ideas on fitness and gained experience as a teacher.

After the war, in early 1919, Pilates was repatriated to Germany. In Hamburg and Berlin, he learned from medical practitioners while formulating his ideas on fitness and conditioning.

Pilates’ thinking was shaped by his work with injured soldiers during the war, his father’s involvement in fitness and sport, and the post-war intellectual era in Germany in which science, literature, philosophy and the arts flourished. European holistic therapies such as hydrotherapy, trigger point therapy and breath work influenced Pilates’ development, as did meditation and modern dance. He invented an apparatus, improving upon the standard equipment of the time, which could both address physical dysfunction or injury and condition the body. Pilates’ prototype apparatus eventually became the Universal Reformer.

The 1920’s

Pilates worked in Berlin as a trainer with famed boxing manager Arthur Buelow. In 1924, American publisher Nat Fleisher came to Germany looking for new boxing talent to write about in his popular *Ring* magazine. He encouraged Pilates to contact him if he found anyone who showed real professional promise. A year later, Fleisher returned to Germany at Pilates’ and Buelow’s request to watch Max Schmeling fight. Their hunch was correct, as Schmeling became the heavyweight champion of the world in 1930.

Pilates was asked to train the German military police but became aware that the government was covertly attempting to rebuild its military. Opposed to the prospect of another war, Pilates immigrated to America in April of 1926. His brother Fred, who already lived in St. Louis, Missouri, helped him to make several improvements to his original apparatus, which included placing the frame closer to the ground and replacing the original weight stack with coiled springs. Pilates also added leather straps, which could be used to imitate rowing movements, a popular exercise at the time. He developed an extensive repertoire of exercises to be performed on the apparatus, which he named the Universal Reformer, calling his program “Corrective Exercise,” and later branding it “Contrology.”



It is not clear when Pilates met Anna Clara Zeuner, a nursery school teacher. Clara became an integral partner in developing and teaching his method, as well as managing the studio business. She dedicated herself to teaching his work and was regarded by many as a superb and perhaps more approachable teacher than Pilates himself.

Pilates first listed his Pilates Universal Gymnasium in the New York City telephone directory in the fall of 1929, the same year that he filed his petition for United States citizenship.

The 1930's – 50's

By the late 30's, New York City had become a mecca for dancers. During this era, Pilates developed a reputation for his ability to "fix" dancers' injuries. Many dancers, including luminaries such as George Balanchine, Martha Graham, and Hanya Holm, studied with "Uncle Joe" and referred injured colleagues to him. Among those who came to the Pilates Studio were two famed modern dancers, Ruth St. Dennis and Ted Shawn. Shawn invited Pilates to develop an exercise program for his dance camp in the Berkshire Mountains, Jacob's Pillow, where Pilates taught between 1942 and 1947. Pilates' signature mat exercises developed during this period.

Pilates first published his ideas in his book *Your Health*,¹ in 1934. His second book, *Return To Life Through Contrology*,² published in 1945, better defined his credo for total well-being. He passionately believed that if his methods were universally adopted and taught in America's educational institutions, every facet of life – from the individual to the societal – would be improved. His vision was that a systematic, disciplined approach to physical and mental mastery would raise the individual to a place of higher personal awareness and would positively impact the



world by eliminating human suffering and reducing the need for hospitals, sanitariums, mental institutions, and even prisons.

"Contrology" became a core element of many dancers' training and rehabilitation. A number of such dancers became "first generation"

Pilates teachers (teachers trained by Pilates himself). Among them were Carola Trier, Eve Gentry, Ron Fletcher, Kathleen Stanford Grant, Bruce King, and Lolita San Miguel. Many aspiring Pilates teachers worked in the gym in exchange for exercise sessions. Other first generation teachers included Hannah Sakmirda, Jerome Andrews, Bob Seed, Naja Cory, and Mary Bowen. Other clients of Pilates later became teachers, such as Robert Fitzgerald and Jay Grimes. The Pilates' closest students and assistants were their nieces, Mary Pilates and Irene Zeuner Zelonka. Romana Kryzanowska, a young dancer referred by George Balanchine, studied under Joseph and Clara from 1941 to 1944, when she married and moved to Peru. Upon her return from Peru in 1959, Kryzanowska became a teaching assistant at the studio.

Pilates continued to design exercise equipment, adding a line of corrective chairs and beds, though he owned very few patents for his inventions. In addition to his most famous invention, the Universal Reformer, his other innovations included the Trapeze Table, Wunda Chair, Magic Circle, Foot Corrector, Ped-O-Pull, Head Harness, Toe and Finger Correctors, Spine Corrector, Ladder Barrel, Guillotine, Catapult, and a variety of devices that he used to correct and improve posture and breath control. Artists, celebrities, and socialites became ardent followers of Pilates, who held to his belief that healthy living and sport activity required a strong foundation of physical development.

Pilates worked assiduously, teaching his ideas about the body, health, and well-being. He was profiled in magazines, newspapers and on television throughout his career, yet his work remained confined to an elite group of loyal followers.

One strong advocate was his good friend, Dr. Henry Jordan, Chief of Orthopedics at Lenox Hill Hospital. Dr. Jordan referred many patients to Pilates, including Carola Trier, who Pilates took under his wing. Some of Dr. Jordan's

students became prominent orthopedists as well, and they continued referring patients to Pilates, to Carola, and to some of the younger teachers.

In the 1950's, Pilates increased his efforts to see his work embraced by the medical and educational systems, a goal that was largely unsuccessful. Pilates was embittered by what he saw as the medical community's passive definition of normal health, narrow vision for preventive medicine and poor standards for proper physical conditioning. After 1959, the condition of the studio building deteriorated, the neighborhood became more dangerous, and the studio's business declined.

The 1960's – 80's

Despite its lack of acceptance by the medical community, the method quietly took root in a number of Manhattan institutions, including New York University, Dance Theatre of Harlem, the 92nd Street Y, and the Katherine Dunham School. By the mid 60's, modern dance choreographers were adding Pilates Mat exercises to their dance warm-ups. In addition, the Pilates method had begun to travel far from New York. Jerome Andrews moved to Paris, Eve Gentry to New Mexico, and Ron Fletcher to California. The first generation of Pilates disciples continued practicing and taught his philosophy and techniques to a growing population of students and teachers.



After a long and productive life, Joseph Pilates died in October 1967 at the age of 83. Clara continued to teach and run the studio until her retirement in 1970. Student, attorney, and friend John Steel formed limited partnerships to assist Clara, first in managing the studio business, and after her

retirement to bring in investors who wished to keep the studio open. During this period, Romana Kryzanowska agreed to take over the responsibilities of running the studio. Around 1972, the studio moved from its original location at 939 Eighth Avenue to 29 West 56th Street in New York City. After the move, the studio's business increased. Kryzanowska became a 50% shareholder of the first Pilates Studio, Inc. Clara passed away in 1976.

In the 1980's, second generation teachers built their practices across the country and formalized teacher training programs began to appear. The Pilates Studio, Inc. experienced financial hardship and was purchased twice in the mid 1980's by dedicated students, to ensure the future of the gym. The studio was known as Isotoner Fitness Center from 1984 to 1986. Subsequently, it was sold to Healite Corporation. When Healite declared bankruptcy in 1989, the studio abruptly closed. Clients and teachers eventually moved to The Gym, later to become known as Drago's. The Pilates Studio continues to operate from this location to this day.

Medical Acceptance and Wider Appeal

Dr. James Garrick, Director of Orthopedics at St. Francis Hospital in San Francisco, California, created one of the first dance medicine clinics in 1983. Recognizing the value in Pilates training, Garrick engaged Ron Fletcher to assist with the establishment of the first medically-affiliated Pilates program. At the same time, prominent orthopedists in New York City began referring patients to Pilates exercise for post-rehabilitation.

By 1995, media interest in Pilates, group mat classes, mind-body health club programming and curiosity within the medical community began to propel the method forward. The word "Pilates" became an entry in Webster's Dictionary – another indication of the method's broad acceptance.

An historic turning point in the method's public profile was the Pilates trademark lawsuit,³ which took place in October 2000. The decision in the case denied the use of the word "Pilates" as a trademark. The court ruled that "Pilates" is a generic designation for a method of exercise; the word had become commonly associated with this special type of exercise, utilizing unique apparatus, an exercise system and pedagogy that cannot be owned or called by another name.

The New Pilates Era

Following the trademark ruling, growing interest in mind-body disciplines and intelligent exercise options finally catapulted Joseph Pilates' vision into a global phenomenon, known simply as "Pilates." Studios and health clubs, teacher training programs, celebrity endorsements, and extensive media coverage now regularly extol the benefits of studying Pilates.

Joseph Pilates' intuitive understanding of the body and innovative equipment design were elements of a larger vision of a universal paradigm for living, based on daily intentional practice towards one's overall health. On the bodily level, practice of the method leads to physical improvements, enlarging one's options in work and play. At a deeper psychological level, it enhances emotional well-being and the ability to cope with stresses and conflict. The rewards of mindful, regular practice of the Pilates method are self-healing and ultimately character development.

Pilates' vision remains a powerful force nearly 50 years after his death. His message is as relevant today as it was in the 1940's. With his work now taught in countries around the world, influencing millions of students, Joseph Pilates' dream is now being realized.

Resources

1. Pilates, Joseph H., *Your Health*, Incline Village NV: Presentation Dynamics; 1998.
2. Pilates, Joseph H., *Return to Life Through Contrology*, Miami, Florida: Pilates Method Alliance, Inc; 2010.
3. Pilates, Inc. v. Current Concepts, Inc., 120 F. Supp.2d 286, 57 U.S.P.Q.2d 1174 (S.D.N.Y.2000)

NOTE: Contributions by Stacey Redfield.

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