

Exercise Innovator

Joseph Pilates

His Determination To Heal Helped Millions Achieve Better Health

By Kathryn Linderman
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Joseph Hubertus Pilates watched wistfully as other children played outside, running and laughing. A frail child plagued by rickets, asthma and rheumatic fever, the boy yearned for a healthy, strong, physically attractive body.

There had to be a way to overcome his weaknesses, thought Pilates (pronounced Puh-lah-tes), a native of Dusseldorf, Germany. The more he thought, the more determined he grew. He'd already survived diseases fatal to thousands each year; he could find a way to get stronger.

That determination spurred Pilates (1880-1967) to devise a movement therapy that has helped numerous people achieve better health. Known as the Pilates Method, the series of more than 500 exercises was designed by the once sickly boy to strengthen and elongate muscles without adding bulk.

Dancers, athletes, physical therapy patients and fitness buffs have relied on the method for more than 50 years to attain and stay in top form.

Not yet a teen, Pilates began researching many types of exercise to aid in his strength-training program. He sent for books and haunted the university libraries in Dusseldorf.

He studied yoga, Zen meditation and several ancient Greek and Roman exercise regimens. He studied anatomy, hoping to find a way to combine these disciplines to improve his health. He took copious notes.

At home, Pilates tried each exercise he read about. He kept records of the effect of each movement to chart his progress.

By the time he was 14 years old, Pilates had strengthened himself enough to become an accomplished skin diver, gymnast and skier. He believed fervently in the Roman motto "Mens sana in corpore sano," or, "A sound mind in a sound body."

Reveling in his strength, he sought a career that would let him use his body. In 1912, he left Germany to train as a boxer in England. While there, he trained detectives in the art of self-defense, and he worked in a circus.

But as a German national in England at the outbreak of World War I, Pilates was incarcerated as an "enemy alien" in Lancaster.

Even prison didn't stem his enthusiasm for good health. Wanting others to feel as great as he did, Pilates taught his fellow inmates his exercises.

His efforts were credited with helping many of them maintain their health through the deadly influenza epidemic of 1918.

Seeing his passion for health, authorities sent Pilates to the Isle of Man to work as a nurse and care for patients immobilized by war injuries.

Pilates knew exercise had helped him and believed it would help his new patients. But most couldn't stand or even sit up to do the exercises.

Still, many could move their arms or legs. So Pilates removed bedsprings from beneath the beds and attached them to the walls at or above bed level. Using straps on their arms or legs, patients could lie in bed and push or pull the springs, exercising against the coils' resistance. Doctors noticed that Pilates' efforts with the patients improved their recovery considerably.

Fueled by hope, Pilates began fitting all the hospital beds to help rehabilitate as many wounded soldiers as he could.

Pilates had noticed that as more people moved into cities to take factory jobs, they became less accustomed to fresh air and regular exercise. They seemed to become fatigued and stressed more quickly.

He felt his method could help people revitalize themselves. Experimenting with his patients and on his own, Pilates devised a series of controlled exercises that engaged both mind and body.

The resulting 500 exercises focused on developing "core" muscles of the abdomen and increasing flexibility in the arms, legs, and supporting muscle groups. Watching patients carefully, Pilates saw them become more active and alert.

He called his new regimen "Contrology." In the 1945 book he wrote with William John Miller, "Return to Life Through Contrology," Pilates defines the term as "complete coordination of body, mind and spirit."

Pilates believed firmly in the power of positive thought.

"Ideally, our muscles should obey our will," he said.

"Reasonably, our will should not be dominated by the reflex actions of our muscles."

He also believed in moderation. "Never do 10 pounds of effort for a 5-pound movement," he said.

His regimen stressed quality of movement over quantity of repetitions and resulted in a body that was strong and sleek with a natural grace.

Shortly after World War I, Pilates returned home to Germany to perfect his regimen. But the German government wanted him to train the new German army.

Pilates wanted to heal, not train others to harm. So in 1926, he packed his bags and left for the U.S. On the ship, he met Clara, a nurse, who later became his wife and life-long professional partner.

He had a clear goal—to share his method and help others. Although he didn't know how to find clients, Pilates knew who they were—people who had a similarly strong interest in strength and good health. In New York, he'd have ready-made clients—dancers.

He and Clara looked for a small space near the dance district in which to teach his method. Using his savings, Pilates opened the first Pilates Studio at 939 Eighth Ave. in New York.

To garner those first clients, he went to dance classes and left cards. He'd start talking to dancers on the street.

Pilates' commitment got him noticed. He began working with the dancers of the New York City Ballet under George Balanchine. Dance legends Hanya Holm and Martha Graham became devotees. Athletes and performers followed.

Dance magazine in its February 1956 issue reported: "At some time or other virtually every dancer in New York...has meekly submitted to the spirited instruction of Joe Pilates."

To show the effects of the training, Pilates became one of the first to use outcome studies. He'd take pictures of clients when they began a training program. Then several weeks later, he'd take "after" photographs to show results.

Pilates continued to develop his technique and teach in his studio until his death in 1967.

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