

## Is Your Pilates Instructor a Health Hazard?

*Popular Exercise Method Lacks Trained Teachers; The Risks of the 'Swan Dive'*

By SALLY BEATTY

**P**ILATES, THE popular form of resistance training, is facing a problem: The number of people signing up for classes is outstripping the pool of people qualified to teach them. Because a number of Pilates exercises engage the neck and spine, the quality of the instruction is more critical than with many other forms of exercise.

While some Pilates instructor-accreditation organizations require months of training, others hand out licenses in as short as a weekend. Pilates isn't the only fitness business wrestling with whether standards are too lax. Personal trainers and yoga instructors have also been the subject of complaints by clients who have sustained injuries. (For a look at the pros and cons of some popular fitness routines, see page D4.)

Aging fitness enthusiasts—from professional golfers to suburban housewives—have embraced Pilates, a form of resistance training that strengthens muscles and reduces tightness through precise, demanding exercises and movements performed on mats and elaborate pieces of equipment.

Fueled in part by a reputation for easing lower



A Pilates instructor doing a "bridging" exercise on a trapeze table.

year for which figures are available, up from 2.4 million in 2001, according to the Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association.

But a growing chorus of Pilates instructors and gym owners say the industry is growing in some unsafe directions. Kevin Bowen, chief executive officer of the Pilates Method Alliance, a nonprofit group of instructors, equipment makers and studios, argues that only about one-quarter to one-third of the Pilates instructors have been properly trained. Lindsay Merrithew, president of Stott Pilates, a big maker of Pilates equipment, which also runs a teaching training program, claims the figure may be even lower.

Some so-called classical Pilates moves, such as the "roll-over," can cause neck injuries when done incorrectly, says Michele R. Scharff-Olson, a physiologist and director of research in the human-performance laboratory of Auburn University in Montgomery, Ala.

Other classic Pilates moves can strain the back. The "swan dive," for example, involves arching the body into a bow and rocking on your belly with your

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## Pilates Lacks Trained Instructors

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arms and legs outstretched about six inches off the floor.

"There are some technique issues that can get you into trouble," says William O. Roberts, president of the American College of Sports Medicine.

Proponents of classic Pilates who believe that the fitness discipline is falling prey to marketing gimmicks also point to some newfangled classes. To burn more calories, for example, some gyms promote "cardio" Pilates, which calls for performing certain moves very quickly multiple times. But Pilates, as developed between 1912 and 1926 by German boxer and gymnast Joseph Pilates, involves a series of controlled movements executed slowly with very few repetitions.

Another more recent invention is "aqua" Pilates, which makes moves easier to execute. But doing Pilates in a pool violates the basic principal of the discipline: using gravity to work muscles.

Meanwhile, Pilates videotapes have become a big hit. "There are a lot of subtleties involved in Pilates, such as maintaining control and alignment of your body," says Ken Endelman, president and chief executive of **Balanced Body Inc.**, a Pilates-equipment maker in Sacramento, Calif. "It's hard to look at a TV while you are doing Pilates exercises."

As Pilates has taken off, the ranks of instructors have swelled—to more than 15,000, from around 200 in 1991, according to the PMA.

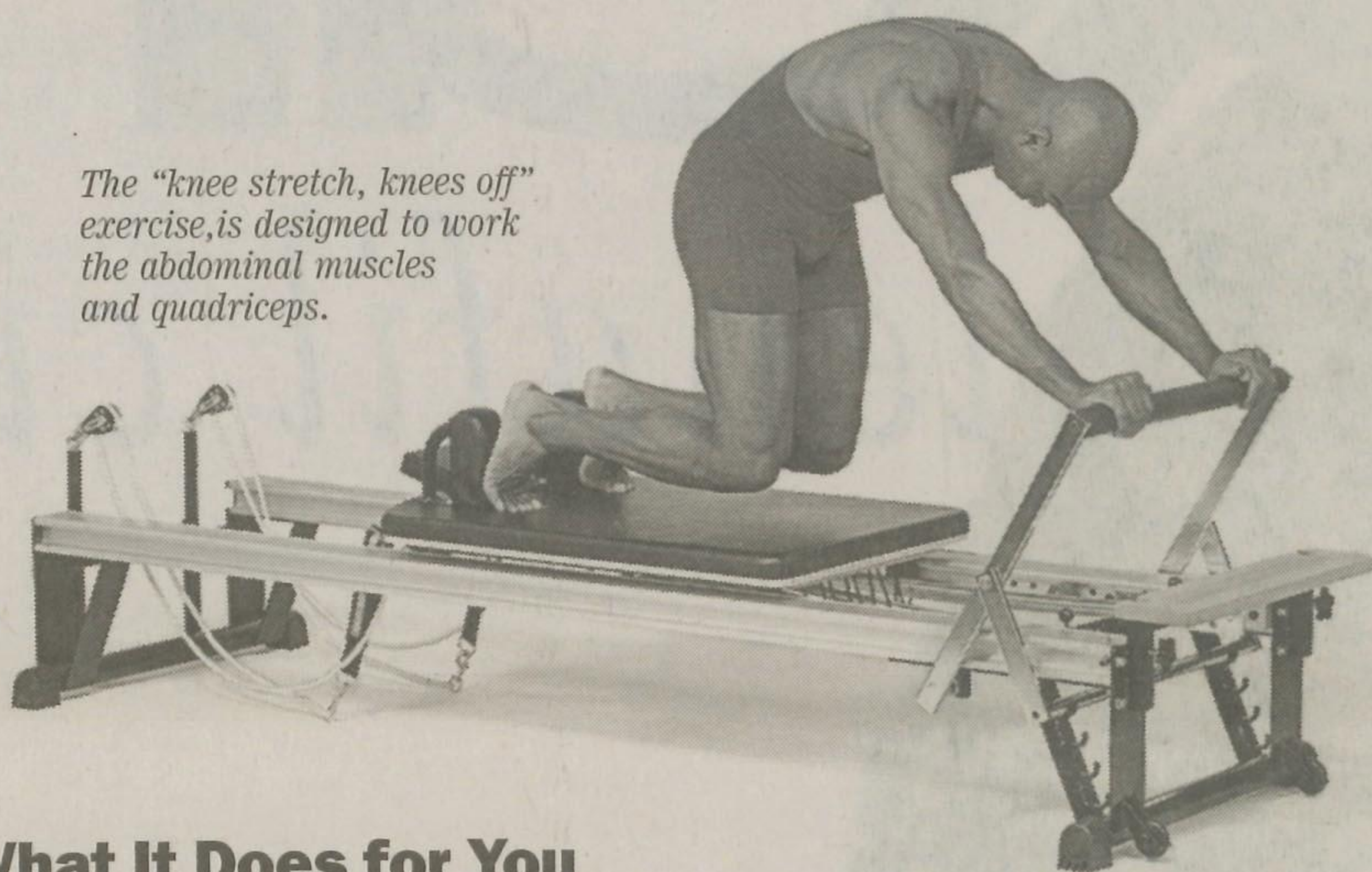
The PMA recommends that Pilates instructors be trained to teach exercises on both a mat and equipment, and log more than 450 hours of training. **Power Pilates** in New York, which includes a network of Pilates studios and a large teacher-training program, offers certification that costs \$3,750 and requires about 600 hours of training. It also offers beginner mat-certification courses for \$450, involving 16 hours of training, plus attendance at 10 to 15 Pilates mat classes.

Other training programs often have far less stringent requirements. **SCW Fitness Education Inc.** in Evanston, Ill., offers one- and two-day Pilates certification courses for \$99. The **National Exercise Trainers Association**, based in Minneapolis, Minn., offers a two-day, 14-hour certification for personal trainers or group fitness instructors for \$299. Prospective teachers must pass a written exam and demonstrate that they can teach the exercises safely. Of the more than 10,000 certifications SCW issued last year, about 2,000 were for Pilates instructors, it says.

The PMA is working with the National Organization for Competency Assurance, which accredits people in fields ranging from acupuncture to financial planning, to design the first national accreditation test for Pilates instructors administered by a third party. The test will be rolled out in May, the PMA says.

Both SCW and the National Exercise

The "knee stretch, knees off" exercise is designed to work the abdominal muscles and quadriceps.



STOTT Pilates photography

### What It Does for You

How some popular exercise routines stack up:

EXERCISE	PRO	CON
<b>Pilates</b>	Slightly more rigorous than yoga for people who want to burn more calories.	For greatest effect, requires some special equipment. Lower cardiovascular conditioning than other exercise routines.
<b>Yoga</b>	Promotes core strength and flexibility. Low injury rate.	Less effective for weight loss. Not a great calorie burn on its own, and has lower cardiovascular improvement than other disciplines.
<b>Kick Boxing</b>	Burns calories and can be good for aerobic conditioning.	Higher risk of muscle pulls and other injuries—particularly if there is sparring or other live contact.
<b>Spinning</b>	If done aggressively, burns a lot of calories and improves cardiovascular conditioning.	Leaves you with a sore backside, and does little for the upper body.
<b>Tae Bo</b>	Good all-around workout.	Increased risk of muscle pulls and tears

Source: William O. Roberts, M.D., fellow of the American College of Sports Medicine; president of ACSM; associate professor in the Department of Family Medicine at University of Minnesota Phalen Village Clinic, St. Paul, Minn.

Trainers Association defend their approach, saying more-rigorous programs are too costly and time-consuming for many trainers. "It might not be a pure, unadulterated program," says Sara Kooperman, chief executive of SCW, but "we need to draw more people into the field."

This debate comes as the Pilates industry is growing robustly, even outside the U.S., from South Korea to Spain. Pilates has also become a potent marketing tool, used to sell everything from vitamins to clothes. **Puma** recently introduced a Pilates shoe (although most purists prefer bare feet or, for hygiene reasons, socks).

Once confined to a small clutch of specialized studios, Pilates classes have since spilled into suburban gyms and fitness centers across the country. Last year, 63% of gyms offered Pilates classes, up from 19% in 1999, according to Kathie Davis, executive director of the IDEA Health & Fitness Association, a for-profit group of fitness professionals based in San Diego, Calif.

The market for commercial Pilates

equipment has more than quadrupled since 1999, hitting an estimated \$28 to \$30 million in 2004 from around \$6.5 million in 1999, according to **Balanced Body**, a leading Pilates-equipment maker.

Unlike weight machines, which focus movement on one or two muscle groups, Pilates involves different parts of the body all moving at once. Exercises performed on Pilates equipment can also be daunting. More than 75 different exercises, for example, can be done on the Pilates "reformer," a sliding table with pulleys that attach to the arms and legs.

Some seasoned Pilates teachers say novices should begin by using Pilates equipment, rather than mat exercises. And they say it is better to learn Pilates one-on-one or in small groups. To broaden Pilates appeal, though, many gyms emphasize large group instruction done on mats. "The apparatus can be intimidating," says Cheryl Mueller Jones, vice president of programs and services at **Town Sports International**, which operates the New York Sports Clubs.