

# The Pilates and Yoga Training Debate

## What type of training creates competent teachers?

By Shirley Archer,  
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With classes ranging from “Disco Yoga” to “Aquatic Pilates,” today’s consumers can find some version of yoga or Pilates, whether they live in small, quiet towns or giant urban centers. Participation is expected to increase, owing to consumer appeal and mounting medical evidence that mind-body exercise can promote health. Pilates and yoga are among the fastest-growing activities, according to the IDEA Trendwatch. >

ILLUSTRATION: PETER HOBBS

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Fast Growing

It's no surprise that yoga and Pilates are topping growth charts for fitness facility activities. According to American Sports Data (ASD) Inc., most participants are females aged 35 and above, the same demographic group with the most growth for health club memberships (IHSA/ASD Health Club Trends Report). It's reasonable to project that this group will push future demand for mind-body programs.

For consumers, however, the prevailing environment is "Buyer, beware" when seeking a qualified yoga or Pilates trainer. Inexperienced consumers have little guidance for evaluating an instructor's competence. Neither do fitness managers trying to decide how to hire or train staff. Can fitness staff be adequately trained during a weekend course? Is it necessary to hire a yogi or Pilates veteran with 10 years in the ashram or studio? What level of training is appropriate for instructors in the fitness setting?

While confusion reigns, compelling reasons require that we focus on the issues. Yoga- and Pilates-related injuries and insurance claims are on the rise among the IDEA members he insures, observes Jeff Frick, program manager and CEO, Fitness & Wellness Insurance Agency. An increase in reported injuries is natural as any activity grows in popularity, simply because of the greater volume of participation.

At the same time, injuries need to be minimized to ensure consumer participation and to protect businesses from costly lawsuits. Further, if the industry fails to regulate itself adequately, it runs the risk of government regulation.

"It is important for the industry to step back and think about a long-term approach," believes Peter Davis, CEO of IDEA Health & Fitness Association. "It is a real risk if consumers are getting injured or having bad experiences. It's important for the growth of the fitness industry that customers have high-quality experiences and that fitness professionals come up with self-regulating standards."

This article explores the issues so you are adequately informed about the debate.

### HOW TO DEFINE COMPETENCIES ACROSS DISCIPLINES?

Some tension in the debate regarding uniform standards of teacher training and certification arises because neither yoga nor Pilates comes from the fitness industry, but both are popular in club settings. Consumers, looking to fitness facilities to serve all their interests, request mind-body programs. Clubs want to increase member satisfaction and enhance retention. Many health and fitness facilities find that adding successful programs also attracts new members. Regardless of whether people think these programs belong in fitness or not, health club yoga and Pilates programs have arrived.

Although yoga and Pilates represent divergent movement styles with different philosophies and training objectives,

they are both mind-body exercise disciplines that require specialized training. Pilates is a modern mind-body discipline created to improve physical conditioning. Yoga is an ancient practice designed to prepare the body for meditation and the practitioner for enlightenment. Both disciplines originally involved teachers who provided individualized training by observing students' movement patterns and redirecting these through very small changes in posture.

Fitness training is rooted in the Western sciences of anatomy, biomechanics and exercise physiology. Fitness traditionally focuses on specific exercises to improve cardiovascular endurance or to condition major muscle groups. Teaching fitness does not necessarily require an understanding of subtle movement.

According to Hansa Knox, president of Yoga Alliance and owner of a yoga teacher training school, "A lot of the differences between yoga and fitness come from differences in how yoga approaches anatomy and how fitness approaches anatomy. For example, in a forward bend, a fitness person typically focuses on the hamstrings, whereas a yoga teacher will look at lengthening the spine through releasing the

**In 2002, an estimated  
11.1 million Americans  
practiced yoga  
4.7 million practiced Pilates  
85% of IDEA businesses  
offered yoga  
63% of IDEA businesses  
offered Pilates**

Sources: "Superstudy" of Sports Participation by American Sports Data Inc. 2002 IDEA Fitness Programs and Equipment Survey.

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poas and the piriformis. Yoga focuses on doing movements using intrinsic muscles, stimulating internal glands and organs, and balancing physical and mental awareness.

"This is a completely different approach than just working the physical body, and this approach cannot be learned in a weekend training."

These critical, essential differences in how to train the body and the mind fuel the debate. Some fitness leaders believe that all movement programs in fitness facilities should concentrate on physical development and the basic principles of biomechanics, which result in "safe" exercise. Pilates and yoga instructors may feel that fitness-based principles of physical training are irrelevant to their disciplines. They may also believe that yoga and Pilates movements should be taught exactly as these were first created.

Others approach the "classical" disciplines as repertoires of postures or movements to be learned without analyzing their internal dynamics. This can result in knowing how to reproduce specific positions but not how to adapt them to different bodies.

Another view is that it is appropriate to add up-to-date principles of safe biomechanics to the mind-body traditions of yoga and Pilates and create an adapted format that blends old and new. "All instructors must provide exercises, exercise sequences and cues in accordance with sound biomechanics and the field of motor learning to provide safe and effective movement training," says Elizabeth Larkam, director of Pilates and Beyond programs for Western Athletic Clubs.

### IS ANYONE WORKING ON NATIONAL STANDARDS?

Several organizations recognize the importance of establishing teacher-training standards for yoga and Pilates. The ultimate purpose of each organization is slightly different, reflecting the nature of the constituency it represents. All the organizations, however, share a commitment to protecting consumer safety.

**Yoga Alliance.** Yoga Alliance, a national nonprofit alliance of diverse yoga organizations, states its mission is to provide support for yoga professionals in the United

States, to uphold the integrity of yoga and to establish voluntary national standards for yoga teachers. Yoga Alliance does not provide teacher training. Instead, it provides a registry of yoga instructors and teacher-training organizations that meet minimum standards established by the organization's founding members. Their two levels of recognition are based on 200 and 500 hours of training. The requirements include a minimum number of "contact" hours, excluding distance learning courses.

Knox explains, "Yoga Alliance standards are written . . . to ensure that the different aspects of yoga are addressed. A registered instructor has a combination of techniques—such as how to demonstrate, how to observe, how to assist and correct, and how to adapt anatomy and physiology from both yogic and Western perspectives—and an understanding of the spiritual foundation of yoga."

These standards apply to anyone who teaches yoga, whether in a yoga studio or fitness facility. >

### Can Fitness Blend With Mind-Body Disciplines?

Some practitioners are concerned that the mind-body aspect of yoga and Pilates can be lost or compromised by trainings that focus solely on physical movements.

"Part of the reason the 'fitness revolution' has failed to reach the majority of people is that exercise became all about numbers—fat burning and calorie burning," feels Joan Breibart, president of the Physicalmind Institute. "Many people approached fitness by turning off their brains and sweating it out. Most people did not want to pay attention to their bodies. The challenge in Pilates, however, is mental, not physical."

Seven McDonald, a certified Sivananda yoga instructor who teaches at the Downtown Standard Hotel in Los Angeles adds, "I am not a yoga master, but consider myself a student of yoga, as well as a teacher. The ancient science of yoga has a holistic view and changes the way we look at our body. The main thing to understand, in a very simplified way, is that yoga is a form of exercise to quiet the mind and prepare the body to sit in meditation. I think it's great if you want to get in shape and have this hot body, but I really don't know if that would be the main [reason for practicing yoga]."

The bottom line is that core training is not Pilates, although Pilates practice can enhance core training; stretching is not yoga, although yoga practice can enhance flexibility and strength. If we lose the holistic, integrated approach to training the mind and body, can we still call these disciplines Pilates and yoga? Or have they simply become physical exercises?

## The challenge for these disciplines Pilates studio, a

Knox says, "One reason yoga is moving into [developing national standards] is because of legislation in certain states by people who don't know about yoga. People in the yoga field decided they should come together and set some guidelines, because they began to realize that if they don't do it, others will legislate for them."

**Pilates Method Alliance.**™ The Pilates Method Alliance is an international nonprofit organization whose purpose is to preserve the legacy of Joseph H. and Clara Pilates. The PMA™ goals include establishing a national certification exam; encouraging continuing education; defining the parameters of Pilates teaching and expertise; and maintaining standards. The PMA maintains a registry of both Pilates teachers and Pilates training organizations that members of the public can access.

Kevin Bowen, president of the Pilates Method Alliance, says, "We are working with a national company to create a national certification exam. Basically, it will be a practical and a written test such as you would take with the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM). . . . There will also be CEC requirements."

"What we're really trying to do is preserve the original teachings of Pilates. What the elder teachers tell us is that as long as the principles remain intact during the teaching, the choreography is not as important. If you are not teaching according to the principles, then what you are teaching is not Pilates. We don't want to do

training or to manufacture equipment. We want the training providers to still provide training. We simply want to provide the minimum guidelines for the training and bring back the

deeper understanding of what Pilates is about and why it requires more than a weekend training," says Bowen.

**American Council on Exercise.** The American Council on Exercise [ACE], a nonprofit organization that certifies fitness professionals, states it is committed to promoting active, healthy lifestyles and their positive effects on the mind, body and spirit. ACE pledges to protect the public against unsafe and ineffective fitness products and instruction.

"Neither discipline was intended to be part of a traditional fitness regime," says Cedric Bryant, PhD, vice president of educational services and chief exercise physiologist. "If you are a fitness professional who is trying to supplement your skill set with yoga or Pilates training, it is very important that you respect your personal limitations when it comes to those disciplines. The other responsibility is to [apply] the knowledge of exercise science and biomechanics. Where I think we will see injuries is from the uncontrolled application of yoga or Pilates."

"At ACE, we are assembling two separate task forces to address the disciplines of yoga and Pilates. We will come up with two position papers to edu-

### How Do You Select a Training Provider?

Although debate continues about minimum standards for teacher training, selecting an education provider does not need to be a shot in the dark.

**CHECK CREDENTIALS.** "Ask how long providers have been teaching instructors in that particular field, in addition to providing training for individuals. Ask for references from other clubs or organizations they have worked with," advises Cathleen Murakami, owner and director of Synergy Systems® Fitness Studio.

**MATCH YOUR BUSINESS'S NEEDS WITH THE TRAINER'S GOALS.** "Make sure that the educator's philosophy fits with your [fitness] center's goals and mission," recommends Marci Clark, cofounder and CFO of PowerHouse Pilates™. "Decide how much support you will need, and [evaluate] if the educational company is able to meet this demand."

Request a training proposal, suggests Carrico. "Business owners need to investigate what the content of the training is and who [the provider has] trained as teachers. [Ask them to] explain the training program . . . how does it work? detailed outline? materials we would cover? Make sure you have a good personality fit as well." The training proposal should include ongoing consultation and observation of the program.

**MATCH TEACHING STYLE TO LEARNING STYLE.** According to Merrithew, "People should ask themselves how they learn best. Some educators teach in a lecture and demonstration style. Other training styles are more interactive."

**MATCH CURRICULUM TO CLIENT NEEDS.** Larkam advises evaluating whether the curriculum is presented from a sound scientific basis. Ask to review the manuals or textbooks used in the training. "Pilates education providers have organized information in various ways. Some trainings provide more of a choreographic or repertoire approach. Others seek to apply Pilates to what the client is capable of in terms of spinal movement and control."

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cate and inform the consumer about what to look for when trying to select one of these classes. We also want to create a piece for club operators and fitness directors about how to go about implementing these disciplines in their environment.”

### WHAT SHOULD BE THE BREADTH OF TRAINING?

A yoga or Pilates studio is dedicated to a single discipline and probably provides a whole range of services for beginners to highly advanced practitioners. Health clubs and personal trainers may only offer introductory classes or incorporate a few movement sequences “borrowed” from the disciplines. The challenge for the industry lies in knowing how to adapt standards for these disciplines as they flow from one venue to another—be it a yoga or Pilates studio, a fitness club or even a hospital wellness center.

The debate reflects the lack of consensus regarding what yoga is and what Pilates is. Which viewpoint you submit depends on what you believe. For example, if you believe that the practice of yoga or Pilates consists of learning particular exercises without adopting a mind-body “cognitive-mindful” approach or training the internal body, then a few hours to learn some new exercises is all you will need.

If you believe that yoga or Pilates requires mindfulness as well as a different physical approach to training the body, then you will need more than a weekend of training. In addition, if you believe that a competent instructor has the knowledge to adapt the form of the exercises to people of different abilities and body types, then you will need more hours.

Reflected in the debate are the training providers’ perspectives, which vary depending on the market the trainers are aiming to serve. Originally, yoga and Pilates were taught via apprenticeship. As demand for training increased, formal education providers emerged to provide in-depth instructor training for professionals who typically taught in specialized studio environments.

Today’s market offers a variety of new education providers. Some teach special skills only to those who teach in fitness. Others teach anyone who wants to be an instructor, regardless of background or future plans. The assortment of training programs ranges from a single weekend to 700 hours or more. Some providers even offer online certification courses.

## What should training be?

“Right now, one of the problems is that certification means different things in the Pilates world and in the fitness world,” points out Christine Romani-Raby, MPT, ATC, PowerHouse Pilates’ cofounder and CEO. “In the fitness world, certification means that minimum standards are met for the instructor to teach safely and effectively. In the Pilates world, certification has meant you knew all there was to know about all the Pilates apparatus and techniques. In the fitness industry, this needs to be redefined and broken down into levels, as a full-spectrum training is not always needed. Many fitness professionals will never just specialize in Pilates.”

Moira Merrithew, program director of STOTT PILATES, agrees. “In the early days, the breadth of the training presented a barrier to entry. For example, trainings required proficiency in the mat, reformer, cadillac and barrel—all the apparatus. We had to ask the question, How to make it easier to enter the fitness industry? We developed a training system that begins by teaching the mat, then [teaches] the reformer and cadillac separately. In this way, people can take their training over time and they are not required to invest as much up front.”

Adds Lar’sam, “The education and practical experience required to be competent to deliver a service is different depending on what service is being delivered. For example, teaching a group mat class or teaching a mat class with roller and ring is different from teaching a Pilates group reformer class. . . . I think it is important for instructors to be clear about what they are competent to provide.”

Some individuals in the yoga community also perceive the need for a variety of training options. Mara Carrico, owner and director of YogaLink™ International, says, “I agree that the ideal teacher training is on-site, one-on-one. But some people who are successful personal trainers and are wives and mothers can’t get away for a month or more of intensive training.”

Carrico has developed a 200-hour yoga teacher training program that blends a correspondence course with one-on-one training with her. She requires videotaped practical and written assessments of competency before issuing a certificate of completion. “I realize that there is the view that home study could be fluff, but I don’t think mine is. In a way, correspondence courses take more discipline. It is more intellectual work to write a 700-word essay and really demonstrate that they know the subject. And to do a video—organize it and tape it—is also a discipline.” >

Beth Shaw, president and founder of YogaFit Training Systems, states, "Our philosophy when we go to health clubs is to let them know that our goal is to bring yoga to the masses and the fitness club is our channel of distribution. We provide a training program that allows teachers to train for instruction in a location near them in an effective time frame."

YogaFit provides a progressive system of training with three levels, along with specialty training. Shaw explained that a Level 4 training is currently being developed. "Once Level 4 is available, YogaFit will be offering all requirements to meet the 200-hour Yoga Alliance teaching standards. While our first level of teacher training requires 26 hours of

integrative and practical learning, our support for our trainees does not end after the first level of training."

Merrithew also believes in follow-up resources for students. "In the fitness industry, people are used to 1-day trainings. Two-year trainings are simply not feasible for most people. The question then becomes, What is the best possible way and the quickest way to train instructors without letting the standards fall? Some people who have taken 2-day trainings that don't offer any follow-up . . . are frustrated because they don't know how to work with different body types or how to modify exercises.

"To be able to teach Pilates over the long term, instructors need to know how to add variety, how to add more exercises, how to create a program for an individual. If you look at the amount of information there is to know, there is no way to learn it in a weekend."

The number of hours spent training is not a reliable measure of accomplishment, believes Joan Breibart, president of the Physically-minded Institute. "Many instructors waste time and energy because they don't understand what it is that they are learning. The problem with many people in the fitness world is that they want something quick and easy, rather than really trying to understand how Pilates is a completely different approach to training the body and mind. And there really is no point to just learning a 'few' things for your body. It's not about the number of hours that you train to become a teacher. It's about understanding this fundamental difference in approach."

Romani-Ruby agrees that the number of hours is not necessarily a measure of thorough training. "I have difficulty basing education on hours alone. Any teacher knows that a focused, organized program can get more

## How Do You Make a Program Successful?

Professionals in all fields agree that before purchasing equipment or initiating a yoga or Pilates program, owners and managers should slow down, step back and take a long-term approach.

**BEGIN WITH A STRATEGIC PLAN.** "One of the biggest mistakes fitness centers make is to hastily begin a Pilates program without thinking it through. Management should make a business plan so that the Pilates program can act as an independent business within the [fitness] center," advises Marci Clark.

A first step in writing that plan, according to Moira Merrithew, is to talk with others. "We put clubs who are considering adding programs in touch with other successful clubs. Then they can evaluate how to proceed. It is not necessary to begin with buying lots of equipment. They can start small and grow the program."

**HIRE A DIRECTOR.** Linda Sparrowe, yoga director for Western Athletic Clubs and contributing editor for *Yoga Journal* in San Francisco, says, "In many health clubs, yoga is treated simply as a form of exercise. Many participants who want to go deeper may start in the club but then leave and go to a studio. If a health club feels that yoga is a lucrative thing to get into, then it makes sense not to just have two or three classes a week. The club needs to make a commitment to a yoga program. I am a big proponent of hiring a yoga director and making yoga its own department, separate from group exercise.

"It's the same in Pilates," Sparrowe continues. "For the San Francisco Bay Club to have Elizabeth Larkam as its Pilates director is huge. We have mat classes [and] group reformer classes that health club participants pay extra for. As far as value-added for yoga, besides the increase in overall members, we are instituting fee-based workshops that are put together or hosted by senior yoga teachers that I bring in from the outside. These workshops represent another revenue stream."

**ASSESS MEMBER DEMOGRAPHICS AND OVERALL PROGRAM NEEDS.** "The manager or director at the health club needs to go down a decision tree," Larkam recommends. "Who are our members? What approaches to Pilates will best serve our members in improving their functional movement? One approach could serve adults in their 60s and above. Another approach could serve adults in their 40s who want cross training for basketball and other leisure sports. And postpartum moms might benefit from a modified approach."

Shaw has experience in both yoga studio and fitness club settings. "People join health clubs for totally different reasons than they join yoga studios. In health clubs, members are typically social and enjoy camaraderie. They also like variety and diversity. A typical club member is looking for a buffet, whereas a person who goes to a yoga studio is typically looking for a deeper, more spiritual experience."

done in less time. [Progress] also depends highly on the abilities of the trainees and their prior training. Some instructors will never be the cream of the crop, no matter how many hours they are trained. Others need very little training to excel. I see Pilates training going to more of a minimum requirement for base knowledge, just as for group exercise or personal trainer certification. Then there will be continuing education similar to the way it is in fitness certification."

On the yoga side, Knox also sees the need to adapt training to serve people who cannot go live in an ashram and who have prior training in other movement disciplines. "Many yoga schools are now providing progressive training on the weekends or on one night a week." Knox suggests there are future opportunities for fitness training providers who want to create cooperative training programs with established yoga schools.

### **DO FITNESS INDUSTRY STANDARDS APPLY?**

Regardless of the disciplines they teach, instructors working in the fitness environment must meet fitness industry standards for safety and liability. To safeguard the well-being of clients and to manage the risk of liability, instructors in health and fitness facilities should meet the minimum standards embraced by ACSM, the American Heart Association and other leading organizations. These standards require that clients undergo a prescreening assessment (primarily to rule out the risk of heart disease) and that instructors be certified in CPR.

As a practical matter, yoga and Pilates instructors should also maintain health history records, particularly of preexisting musculoskeletal conditions, so that exercises can be appropriately adapted. Documentation of preexisting

conditions also protects an instructor if a client tries to blame a trainer later for a condition that was already present.

How do these standards translate to the mind-body disciplines? Ralph La Forge, MS, endocrine division, Duke University Medical Center, has recommendations for meeting the standards, based on his knowledge of both yoga and fitness.

"First, I would be particularly congruent with the Yoga Alliance standards, especially for clubs at the '200-hour minimum' level. Second, I strongly advise an individualized client assessment, including a health history and at least a PAR-Q, commensurate with minimal ACSM 2000 screening standards and the standards set by Yoga Alliance for musculoskeletal assessment. The primary risk in hatha yoga is musculoskeletal, and this should be the hallmark of the assessment.

"Third, all yoga teachers should develop their own written policy and procedures on general hatha yoga asana progression and client assessment, including asana contraindications and when to defer yoga. This document should be updated annually and well referenced from consensus papers and research reports or an applicable facsimile."

### **HOW WILL THE DEBATE END?**

As the debate continues, both Pilates and yoga continue to grow and evolve. As Laikam observes, "Now, more than ever, the consumer has more options in the delivery of Pilates exercises. The diversity of methods presented is enriched by the philosophy and movement backgrounds of the many people contributing to the growth of this discipline. Yet, we're still using the general term *Pilates* because the movement subcomponents have not yet evolved sufficiently to be differentiated by name." Knox agrees that yoga is also in a very dynamic state and says,

How will it end? Will it end?

"The Yoga Alliance wants to embrace all the different styles of yoga. There is simply more than one way."

How yoga and Pilates in the fitness setting will be defined and how competency in teaching from a mind-body perspective will be measured remain difficult questions to answer. These are "qualitative" issues more than safety questions. In a health and fitness facility environment, which is already governed by widely accepted safety standards and guidelines, instructors will be expected to follow minimal safety standards.

Achieving a win-win-win for the consumer, the fitness industry and the spirit of the disciplines is a worthy goal. As these mind-body disciplines grow, more choices are available for people to be active. One key to success is to understand the motivation of your own clients. Many people pursue these practices because they offer relief from pain, improved mobility, enhanced breathing, greater inner awareness, feelings of relaxation and stress relief. At the same time, it is fair to say that many participate in yoga and Pilates for purely aesthetic reasons, to achieve a "yoga butt" or a "Pilates body."

The emerging popularity of yoga and Pilates is a tremendous opportunity to increase the ways in which we all serve consumers. Importantly, it is not simply a financial opportunity, but rather a chance to balance hearts, minds and bodies in a spirit that promotes responsible training and places an ultimate focus on the client's well-being. ♦

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