

Pilates At Home: Can A DVD Get The Job Done?



Even though Pilates is becoming as ubiquitous as the treadmill in fitness circles, that doesn't mean the method is being practiced as it was intended. Google "Pilates" and you'll find a dizzying array of videos, mats and other equipment. Private instruction is not an inexpensive pursuit. The question is...can you find quality Pilates instruction on a DVD?

The answer is complex. On the one hand, there is no substitute for private instruction from a well-educated trainer. On the other, not everyone has access to such training. Videos can fulfill many needs. "I think some movement and some learning from a DVD is far better than nothing," says Peter Fiasca, founder of Classical Pilates, Inc. and creator of a set of six Pilates DVDs. "However, it's far from ideal." Videos definitely should *not* be a jumping off point for any novice Pilates enthusiast, because without a solid foundation and regular evaluation, you won't know if you're performing Pilates correctly or not. "It's very important to have that objectivity of someone seeing your blind spots," emphasizes Fiasca. "Our bodies will take the easy way out when they get a chance!"

Fiasca created the Classical Pilates DVDs initially as a way to record Joseph Pilates' work. He studied in the original New York studio under Romana Kryzanowska, who is widely regarded as one of the most well-known pupils of the so-called "first-generation" teachers, meaning teachers who studied with Joseph Pilates himself.

The videos have a "documentary" feel to them, and the exercises are performed wholly as Pilates himself intended, without pausing to break down each exercise, as is customary

in many mat classes today. "That was the main reason we made that whole series—to show people what true classical Pilates is all about," says Bob Liekens, a director at Power Pilates who also studied under Kryzanowska in the New York studio. It is Liekens' voice you hear on most of the Classical Pilates DVDs, guiding the students through the workout.

Another reason to eschew practicing Pilates exclusively via electronics is probably precisely why some people crave them: privacy. "It's important for Pilates to be in a more public sphere," says Fiasca. "By watching other people, you learn. By other people watching you, you bring things out of yourself just to be present in the moment that you probably wouldn't otherwise do." In other words, it's easier to fake it at home. No one will be able to give you crucial feedback. "An instructor can check if you're really correctly aligned doing the exercises," says Liekens. "If you have a video, nobody will supervise you and you might think you're doing it correctly when actually, you're working into an injury."

That being said, the Classical Pilates videos can play a vital role in your Pilates education. Being able to see the exercises done in the dynamic, robust way that Joseph Pilates intended can be an epiphany for students of the method. "By watching someone do it, it really helps people identify with the teacher and gives the viewer a visual goal," says Fiasca, who often suggests that his students, once properly introduced to the method, view his DVDs. "Once they see it, they go, 'Yes! That's it—now I understand how to get my body from point A to point B.'"

Fiasca contends that those students make exponentially

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faster progress once they have studied the DVDs, and are more apt to make the mind-body connection that is required to take Pilates to the next level. The subtleties involved rarely become apparent to students until they are three, five or even eight years into Pilates, according to Fiasca. The DVDs can speed that process along.

Telling the general public that you will spend five years before truly understanding an exercise seems counterintuitive, marketing-wise. This is one reason for the rise in weekend "certifications" and the watering down of the original method. However, Liekens and Fiasca both hope for a gradual tightening of standards, similar to those that existed before Pilates' popularity exploded. "This was a period of expanding— five, seven years ago...nobody knew about Pilates. Now, everybody knows the name and the concept. So that's good. We spread out, it's there," says Liekens. "Now what we have to do is pull up the quality and be more and more demanding."

Liekens, originally from Belgium, began studying Pilates in 1983 at The Pilates Studio. Kryzanowska invited him to teach Pilates in 1986, which was, at that time, the only way to become certified. There was no structured program in place for apprentices— when Kryzanowska decided you were ready to leave her tutelage, she told you. Typically that took three years— far longer than any certification program that exists today.

"As far as I'm concerned, we could go back to three years," says Liekens, who is troubled by how easy it is for instructors to become "certified" in Pilates today. "But I don't think that would run in the marketplace right now." Fiasca is even more zealous in his quest to preserve traditional Pilates, citing that as the principal reason for the creation of Classical Pilates videos. "I think people gain the most beneficial results from the method if they keep the work intact as Mr. Pilates intended," he says carefully. "I just have a passion and devotion to keeping Mr. Pilates' original ideas with their intended integrity."

However, Liekens contends that Pilates, like any living thing, must evolve. "It has to be true to its roots and respect them and continue where it came from, but at the same time, in order to be alive, it has to evolve and there has to be that creative aspect," he points out. "We take all the beauty and all the strength and enthusiasm from Romana, but now we take it a step further into 2007."

While there is probably endless debate over the details, there is little debate that the Classical Pilates series of DVDs are good guardians of traditional Pilates and are the most accurate documentations of the original Pilates method. "Joe really had a very clear philosophy— a very clear syllabus, vocabulary, a dynamic way of working," says Liekens. "Videos and DVDs are good as information and as an illustration of what [Pilates] could be and that's one of the reasons that Peter and I made these DVDs; there's not much like it on the market."

Videos can be an essential part of any Pilates program; most of us can only afford one private lesson per week (if that). But, in order to really see the benefits, Pilates must be practiced multiple times each week. "Once a week, that's really...that's nothing. If it's something where you really want to change your body, once a week is not going to do it," says Liekens. "Gravity never takes a day off."

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