Pilates has catapulted from obscurity into mainstream popularity, spurred by media coverage and celebrity enthusiasts who tout the benefits of Pilates and its mind-body connection. The method created more than 80 years ago by Joseph Pilates offers extraordinary benefits, including strength without excess bulk, improved flexibility, better posture, balance and coordination. At health clubs nationwide, membership and business operations are flourishing with the addition of Pilates classes.

Why is Pilates growing in clubs?

Pilates has evolved in response to consumer demand. According to the latest SGMA Sports Participation Topline Report, a total of 9,469,000 people practiced Pilates in 2003. The number of clubs currently offering Pilates programs reflects this dramatic growth; a recent IDEA survey reports that 63% now offer Pilates.

Three factors have made it easier for clubs to offer Pilates programs. In 2003, the U.S. District Court ruled that Pilates trademarks were invalid and established the term “Pilates” as generic, a ruling that opened the door for studios and health clubs to offer it to their members. Next came a Reformer that collapsed easily and could be rolled and stacked for storage, allowing clubs to offer equipment classes without dedicating permanent floor space. Lastly, for fitness professionals, new modular training has expedited the certification process and eased some of the financial burden.

Why add Pilates equipment?

Since a Pilates equipment program is fee-based, it creates a new profit center for the club. It also provides an additional opportunity to boost personal training revenues.

Adding equipment may seem like a daunting transition, but the payback on your startup investment can be dramatic. Your club can recoup initial equipment costs in as little as three to six months. Outstanding profit potential then kicks in quickly for clubs that launch well-designed and marketed equipment-based programs. It's a logical progression that furthers two goals: adding value for members plus increasing your club's bottom line.

Offering cutting-edge programs also establishes your club as a front-runner in the eyes of both your current and prospective members. And it doesn't hurt that you'll attract more general media interest as well, which can broadly reach your market area far more rapidly (and less expensively) than your own paid advertising.

In 2000, Bally Total Fitness researched its club demographics – specifically personal training revenues and other non-dues income – and added Pilates equipment classes to 70 facilities nationwide. Since then it has expanded to 100 clubs.

“For Bally, the success of Pilates was a matter of accessibility,” said Norris Tomlinson, national director of group sales for Bally Total Fitness. “We created exposure through privates, semi-privates and small group training. The group training, in particular, broke down barriers for members concerned with the cost of private and semi-private sessions.”

How to plan a successful transition

A commitment to instructor training and innovative programming is integral to creating a high level of interest and advancing your Pilates program. Other points to consider:

• Set specific goals. Outline your program goals. What are your short and long-term goals? Benchmarks for success?
• Select qualified instructors. Key to the ongoing success of your program will be the quality of your instructors. Whether you select current staff and provide training, or hire trained instructors from outside, don't skimp on quality here! Take advantage of the expertise of your educator or equipment supplier to help guide this process.
• Find space. Determine and allocate space for your classes. Dedicated space is preferable, although it may not be
possible. If not, choose equipment that can be either stacked or stored standing on end. (Stackable units need two people to stack; one person can move and store standable units.)

- **Create awareness.** Don’t assume that your members or staff know about Pilates. Educate them about the benefits of Pilates and how it differs from other forms of exercise.

**Invest in continuing education for instructors.**

As your program evolves, you’ll need to offer classes that will require additional training for your instructors. Specialized education continues to evolve. Maintain competitiveness for your club by offering instruction in some of the new programs that now exist for high-level athletes, seniors, dancers, pregnancy, specific injuries or illnesses, etc.

**Designate a Pilates program supervisor**

It’s essential to designate a supervisor to lead and manage all elements of your program. This supervisor should continuously observe the development and skills of instructors, and communicate with both personal trainers and group exercise leaders in developing your instructors for the program.

Tomlinson said that at each Bally location, a separate Pilates director or the club’s group exercise manager selects instructors from both groups. “We got strong participation from both groups,” said Tomlinson. “Our policies helped build participation because we were careful to select instructors based on skill level and qualifications.”

Your program supervisor should foster ongoing dialogue with instructors, evaluate the evolving program, recommend improvements, help monitor progress toward your established goals, and be an overall champion for the program’s success.

**How to market your program**

A multi-faceted marketing plan is essential for the launch and evolution of your program. Opportunities abound that have been proven successful.

One method is to offer free classes. In some markets, Bally offers a free, weekly 30-minute introduction class. “The classes include six exercises and are a great preview of the actual paid programming,” said Tomlinson. “People often sign up for the regular classes as a result of their participation in the introductory course.”

Other ideas for promoting Pilates in your club:

- Thoroughly educate your staff. Make sure they can disseminate accurate information when asked about Pilates in general, as well as the specifics of your program.
- Offer classes to personal trainers, massage therapists, sales staff and other professionals who will cross-market Pilates and help boost member retention.
- Update your closed-circuit television network to highlight Pilates classes and list schedules.
- Ask instructors to contribute articles on the benefits of Pilates for your club newsletter.
- Include a free Pilates class for new members.
- Invite those in your mat classes to attend an Open House and preview the Pilates equipment.
- Offer Pilates outside the club to non-members. This will help draw potential new members to your club.
- Encourage new programs and continuously promote them. This is especially relevant as interest in Pilates continues to grow.

Finally, be sure to take advantage of the marketing expertise of your suppliers. They can help with suggestions regarding promotions, advertising materials, referral programs, frequently asked questions, and more.

**Looking ahead**

Moving your club’s Pilates program to the next level isn’t as difficult as you may think. Invest in a short list of key essentials: well-trained, motivated instructors, a top equipment supplier, and strong marketing and promotion of your program. Competent people are out there to help you so you don’t have to go it alone or “re-invent the wheel.”

Along with equipment innovation, specialized instruction is fueling an increased demand for Pilates. You can now take a Pilates class to improve your golf swing, alleviate post-partum symptoms and reduce levels of work stress, among others. Give your members access to up-and-coming Pilates programs, and at the same time contribute substantially to the growth and financial success of your club.

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