

History of Joseph H. Pilates

Joseph Pilates was born in 1880, in a small town near Dusseldorf, Germany. His mother was a naturopath, and his father a prize-winning gymnast. Joseph was sickly as a child suffering from asthma, rickets, and rheumatic fever. A physician family friend gave him an anatomy book when he was still a child, and he began to study the human anatomy. Often, he would observe animals, watching how they moved and taught their young. Inspired by nature, and his study of the human body, he trained in both Eastern and Western forms of exercise, including yoga. By the age of 14, his study had helped him develop a body that was good enough to be used for model in anatomy books.

He continued to train, and became successful as a boxer, gymnast, skier, and diver. In 1912, he went to England to continue training as a boxer, and found employment as a circus performer.

In 1914, he was interned with other German nationals in a camp for enemy “aliens” in Lancaster, England. He taught self defense, and it was here that he began devising his system of original exercises, later to be known as “Contrology.” From his original camp, he was transferred to The Isle of Man, where he began working more as a “nurse”, and developed equipment to help rehabilitate the injured and sick internees. The equipment he created turned the beds into exercise apparatus, possibly becoming the precursor to the Reformer we know today.

When he returned to Germany after the war, he continued to develop his equipment, to aid in exercising rheumatic patients. The resistance apparatus was developed to, “...resist the movement in the right way so those inner muscles really have to work against it. That way you can concentrate on movement”. (Joseph Pilates)

In 1925, after declining an invitation to train the New German Army, Joseph immigrated to the United States. It was en route that he met his future wife Clara, a kindergarten teacher who was suffering from arthritic pain. Joe worked with her on the boat to help heal the arthritis. When Joe and Clara arrived in New York City in 1926, they opened a gym, to begin teaching “Contrology”. They were located in a building adjacent to many dance studios and rehearsal spaces. George Balanchine, a famous dancer and choreographer, studied with Joe, and in turn sent many of his dancers for strengthening and rehabilitation. Thus began the association of the Pilates Method with dance.

Although Pilates was a known health guru, he believed in fitness supporting life’s riches. He was renowned for partaking of whiskey and cigars, and was known to run in a Speedo, in the dead of winter, in Manhattan.

In 1966, there was a fire at Pilates studio. Joe entered the building to try and save some of the equipment. It is felt that his injuries from this fire lead directly to his death in 1967. His wife Clara, regarded as the more patient teacher, continued to teach until her death in 1977. (Power Pilates Training Manual, 2006)

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