# How the 1918 Flu Epidemic Created One of Today's Biggest Fitness Crazes

Published April 30, 2020

It was 1918. The Spanish Flu was sweeping the world. It would ultimately kill as many as 50 million people.

On a small island in the Irish Sea, more than 25,000 men—mostly of German descent—had been interned. The British government had rounded them up and put them into camps as part of World War I sweeps targeting foreign nationals. One of the prisoners, trying to relieve boredom and keep his fellow inmates fit, began prescribing a sequence of exercises. The man had been a gymnast and boxing coach in Germany, and now he began to fashion machines, some for exercise and some for rehabilitation, out of what he could find at the camp: wood, old beds, salvaged springs for resistance.

Years later, after immigrating to America, the trainer would recall his days at the Knockaloe Camp on the windswept island. He'd say that, even as influenza marauded across Europe, his comrades, using his routine, stayed healthy. He'd repeat the claim in interviews and to students he taught at his New York studio, one of whom retold the story for an Isle of Man historian: "[He] had the opportunity to work with all these gentlemen who were coming in with different problems and different ailments, and [with] exercises given on a regular basis, they did not get the influenza that was ravaging everyone," recalled Lolita San Miguel, a former ballet dancer who later taught the same exercise method.

The "nobody got sick" assertion became central to the trainer's regimen, and it was repeated over and over. In a 1962 profile, a writer for Sports Illustrated summarized the legend: "No man who exercised his principles came down with influenza during the great epidemic."

Decades later, when I was embracing the method—first as an injured athlete, and then later as I trained to be a teacher—the "no influenza" tale was repeated as canon.

The exercise system was originally called “Contrology,” but after the discipline’s founder passed away, in 1967, it became better known by his last name: Pilates.

In case you weren’t sure—or in case you thought it was something only celebrities with buff bodies do—here’s what Pilates really is: a systematic sequence of exercises designed to bring functional strength and flexibility to the whole body. For example, a classic Pilates exercise is “The Teaser,” which has you raise your upper and lower body into a V-like shape while balancing on your tail. Another one—named after the animal it resembles—is called “The Seal,” which has you articulate your spine and roll as you clap your feet together like flippers. The trick is that everything is done from the core.

Joseph Pilates was born in Germany in 1883. As a youth, the story goes, he became interested in the fluid movements of house cats and children, and he began to mimic them as he built his own strength, becoming a boxer and gymnast.

Pilates moved to England before World War I, and when Germans living there were interned, he was assigned a position as a nurse at the Knockaloe Camp on the Isle of Man. One of his jobs was rehabilitation, and he built custom devices—wheelchairs and bed-mounted exercisers—for the invalids at the camp’s hospital. He was also a boxing coach, and he is given credit for German dominance of the sport (led by men who’d been trained at Knockaloe) in the 1920s.

In 1926, after working with future world heavyweight champion Max Schmeling, Pilates was befriended in New York by legendary sports writer Nat Fleischer. He opened a gymnasium on Eighth Avenue, near Columbus Circle. He also began manufacturing furniture and exercise machines, including a V-shaped bed; a chair that converted into a step resistance device; and one that looked remarkably like a spring-loaded prison cot, which he called the “Reformer.”

Along with his wife, Clara, Pilates always welcomed men and women into his studio, and soon injured dancers began to hear that the method—centered on strengthening what we now call the core, but which Pilates disciples term the “Powerhouse”—could restore them to health. They flocked to his studio.

The principles of Pilates were astonishingly modern. They revolved around what’s known today as “functional fitness,” meaning that the goal wasn’t to look hot or get swole. The aim was to master everyday

life and tasks. The method revolved around a series of 34 mat exercises, performed in sequence, that today remain at the heart of Pilates instruction.

Pilates was also a master marketer. He advertised his studio in newspapers; he opened a second location in a New York department store; he wrote books and pamphlets. He was wildly quotable. Describing the benefits of his method, he said: “Do animals go on diets? Eat what you want, drink what you want. I drink a quart of liquor a day, plus some beer, and smoke maybe fifteen cigars. And what do Americans do? They play golf, they play baseball, they use half their muscles, a quarter of their muscles. They get fat, they go jogging, they go on crazy diets, they jump up and down in crazy exercises, they have bad backs, they have beer bellies, they slouch, they complain.” After Pilates died, in 1967, a few of his students, including San Miguel, opened their own studios. By the 1990s, the method had migrated to the West Coast, where it began to gain a reputation—one that I, as a Pilates teacher, have to add I can’t stand—as an exercise regimen best suited to celebrities. Today, thousands of teachers offer Pilates classes, and like any cult worth the name, the method has sectionalized. The version I teach is called “Classical Pilates,” and it tries to stay as close to Joe’s original methods as possible. Since Classical teachers orient themselves toward history, it isn’t surprising that we hear, and often repeat, the influenza origin myth.

The truth, of course, is more complicated. Sean Gallagher is a New York–based physical therapist and Pilates teacher. He is also one of the linear inheritors of the original Pilates legacy, passed down through Clara Pilates and Romana Kryzanowska—a teacher who is usually seen as Joe’s top protégé—and through Kryzanowska to Gallagher. Gallagher owns and has refurbished some of Pilates’s original studio equipment, and he holds workshops at Pilates’s old country home in the Berkshire Mountains of Massachusetts, near the legendary Jacob’s Pillow dance center, where Pilates frequently taught during the summers of the 1950s and 1960s. “The flu story is possible,” Gallagher says, “but it is also just as possible it isn’t true. Because the island was so isolated, they didn’t have a big outbreak of influenza. So, if nobody got it, nobody died.” Of course Pilates’s exercise regimen isn’t some magic charm against disease. But Pilates

himself was such a believer in his method that he didn't mind a little bending of the truth, Gallagher adds.

Look, exercise is obviously good for you. But no fitness routine—Pilates or anything else—can reliably stop everyone from getting sick, no matter the tall-tale claims of its founder. That said, exercise helps! COVID-19 is often more serious and more fatal to those who aren't in good physical condition. Here's an interesting blog post on COVID-19, exercise, and immunity, published by the American College of Sports Medicine. Here's another study from 2019 on links between immunity and exercise.

I love Pilates because it makes me feel good, and because it is deeply systematic: It challenges the body and the brain in a sequence that allows rapid improvement *and* lifetime progress. Since the world went into quarantine, I've been doing my workouts remotely. I've even taken classes with teachers who've been trained directly by the original Pilates disciples, former students of both San Miguel and Kryzanowska. It really has kept me from going stir crazy, and that's a benefit that was definitely felt a century ago on the Isle of Man.

"What he did for his fellow internees was help them stay healthy and fit," says Pilates biographer Eva Rincke, who has seen letters to Pilates from his former campmates that thank him for his work. "He was somebody who was able to inspire people, to motivate them to stay fit." And, Rincke adds, "he helped them not to freak out during that very long time they spent locked away behind barbed wire."

That's an attribute we all need right now.