The American dream

With the impending PMA certification, the professional standard of US Pilates is set to change. But how will it affect the industry and are we set to follow, asks Elizabeth Anderson

Elizabeth has a background in arts management and special event production and has produced numerous national and international conferences, seminar series, launches, training programmes and special events. Prior to her involvement with Polestar, she ran a London-based consultancy, providing conference production and project management services to a range of clients working in the performing arts.

New Orleans, the famous city in the southern US state of Louisiana, is famous for its French Quarter, Mardi Gras, Cajun cooking and the Blues. I've always wanted to go there, so when I found out that it was the location of the fourth International Educational Conference of the Pilates Method Alliance (PMA) over Halloween, I couldn't wait to dig my passport out of the drawer.

The conference attracted a record number of 700 delegates from all over the US and 15 other countries worldwide, including the UK. A number of first and second generation Pilates teachers presented at the event, including the UK's Pilates master teacher Alan Herdman.

The Pilates Method Alliance is an international, non-profit professional association dedicated to the teachings of Joseph H and Clara Pilates, based in the US. The organisation was founded in 2001 and currently has 2500 members, 500 of whom reside outside the US.

The mission

The PMA's mission is to protect the public by establishing certification and continuing education standards for Pilates professionals. One of their top goals is to set up and maintain a national certification exam in the United States. Although the exam is being created in the US, and will meet the guidelines for the National Commission of Certifying Agencies (NCCA) in the US, it is something that can be used by individuals around the world to gain PMA certification. The certification, although not compulsory in order to teach the method, will give practitioners the opportunity to improve their knowledge and skills. In a country where you can certify as a Pilates instructor over the Internet for $15, the exam will provide a much-needed professional standard.

The PMA has enlisted the help of Castle Worldwide to write the exam. Castle is experienced in developing examinations for professional organisations, particularly among the health

Photography PMA, Multitrax UK

professions. Whilst they are not experts in Pilates, their examination systems have been proven. The secret of their exams lies in psychometrics, a branch of applied psychology dealing with the use and application of mental measurement.

Who's who

An exam committee was established to provide the technical knowledge about Pilates. Comprising 11 people, the list of members reads like a 'who's who' in the Pilates world, with over 200 years of experience collectively. Members include Brent Anderson, President of Polestar Pilates in Miami; Deborah Lessen, founder of Greene Street Studios in New York; Beth Evans from Stott Pilates in Toronto; and Alan Herdman from the UK.

During the three-day meeting, the group found they had many beliefs, practices and values in common. They even agreed that the differences they had in the past were minor and not cause for division within the field.

Following the meeting, a Role Delineation was written, outlining the role of a Pilates teacher and how it differs from that of other mind/body teachers. The document covers assessment and evaluation; teaching; re-assessment and professionalism, including the PMA Code of Ethics and Conduct, insurance, CPR and first aid, fire and safety. Practitioners will be examined on key tasks under each section. Each point of knowledge and skill will have a question on the exam that relates to it, making it 'legally defensible'.

Following the introduction of the exam, performance statistics will be continually collected and reviewed and the questions modified or updated on a continual basis. In order to keep the certification up to date, the exam will be revised in its entirety every two to three years.

Independent

One significant feature of this exam is that it is 'third party accredited'. The PMA is not creating nor administering the exam, they are commissioning it. This serves to make the process objective and neutral — something quite rare in the world of fitness! Of the 75 organisations that offer personal training certifications, only three are independent.

The exam will be administered at online testing sites around the world, either at CompUSA or Berlitz language schools, in a secure computer terminal room. Candidates will apply to Castle Worldwide to sit for the exam and pay an application fee. On acceptance they then pay an additional examination fee. The exam itself will consist of 150 multiple-choice questions, as well as a video portion. Results will be available instantly and there will be procedures for those wishing to re-sit the exam.

Be practical

Although there are plans to develop a practical portion of the exam that can be created and administered in the same objective and impartial manner, this will not be for at least another two years. Until then each Pilates teacher-training companies will continue to train and assess students in movement.

The second exam committee meeting took place in December 2004, tackling item development and validation to develop the questions for the exam. The items were validated using guidelines of importance, criticality, difficulty, whether the answer is 'correct', and whether the question is 'appropriate'. Following this, the exam was tested so that problematic items can be rewritten or rejected and a standard pass mark can be established.

Pre-requisites

The exam, which will be an entry-level certification, is set to be ready by this summer, much sooner than previously anticipated. An advanced exam is also planned for the future.

Prior to sitting the exam, individuals are required to have completed a comprehensive Pilates teacher training programme, comprising a minimum documented 450 hours, in both mat work and equipment-based work. Most teacher-training companies will need to create various 'bridging' courses, to supplement their existing curricula with other material necessary to prepare students for the PMA exam. Polestar and others are already beginning this process, and are already offering a revised and extended curriculum in the United States in order to fit in with PMA requirements — something that Polestar companies outside the US will follow shortly.

Teachers who have a documented five years' teaching experience, and who completed a minimum documented 450 hour comprehensive training programme, will be granted a Transitional Certification. This will give them a period of two years in which to sit the exam. There will also be a special 'grandfathering' status for practitioners who have been teaching for over 20 years, who will not be required to sit for the exam at all in order to gain PMA certification.

Funding

The cost of commissioning the exam is enormous, with the projected bill coming in at approximately US $300,000. In order to fund this, the PMA set up Pilates Day on 15 May 2004, when practitioners and studios around the US and abroad held fundraising events, raising $60,000 in one day. This year, there will be an International Pilates Day on 16 April 2005. This is a great opportunity to set up your own fundraising event for the cause, or to get involved in events around the UK. Polestar Pilates UK is following in Dianne Miller's footsteps to get together 100 Pilates enthusiasts and photograph them all doing The Hundred.

Professional standards

The Pilates industry is growing and changing, working hard to increase professionalism. Work is also underway in the UK to set professional standards. Ben Gittus, Qualifications and Standards Manager at SkillsActive, explains: 'SkillsActive is committed to working toward a UK national standard for a Level 3 matwork qualification for Pilates.'

With the development of these standards, both in the US and the UK, practitioners will gain greater credibility and the knowledge that they are all working at the same level, towards the same goals — something that can only be a good thing! t

Find out more…

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Members of the PMA exam committee

Kevin Bowen, President, PMA, Owner Pilates Miami

Brent Anderson, President, Polestar Pilates Education, Miami

Deborah Lessen, founder of Greene Street Studios, New York

Michele Larsson, founder of Core Dynamics Pilates, Santa Fe, New Mexico

Dianne Miller, Dianne Miller Pilates Centre, Vancouver, Canada

Pat Guyton, Ron Fletcher Master Teacher, Boulder, Colorado

Wendy LeBlanc-Arbuckle, Core Connections Pilates, Austin, Texas

Rachel Taylor-Segal, The Pilates Center, Boulder, Colorado

Phoebe Higgins, Power Pilates, New York

Colleen Glen, Peak Pilates, co-founder of the PMA, Dallas, Texas

Beth Evans, Stott Pilates, Toronto, Ontario

Rael Isacowitz, Body Arts and Science International

Alan Herdman, founder of Alan Herdman Pilates, London, UK