

The 96% Solution

For profitable space utilization,
the Almaden Valley Athletic Club relies on Pilates

By Jon Feld

JOE SHANK AND JIM THEIRING, the co-owners of the Almaden Valley Athletic Club (AVAC), in San Jose, California, have accomplished a great deal since they founded the club in 1976. Today, the handsome, multipurpose facility has a total of 3,700 members, representing more than 11,000 people, and, last year, had gross revenues of \$6.9 million and an EBITDA margin that, Shank confides, is “one of the highest among IHRSA clubs.”

They have managed to do so, in part, by being hawkish about emerging trends—spotting them from afar, and descending on them quickly—and by utilizing every square foot of their club to maximum effect.

Today, Shank and Theiring are hot on: Pilates.

“I haven’t seen this much excitement, and such a dramatic response, since we brought in Spinning,” says Shank. ▶



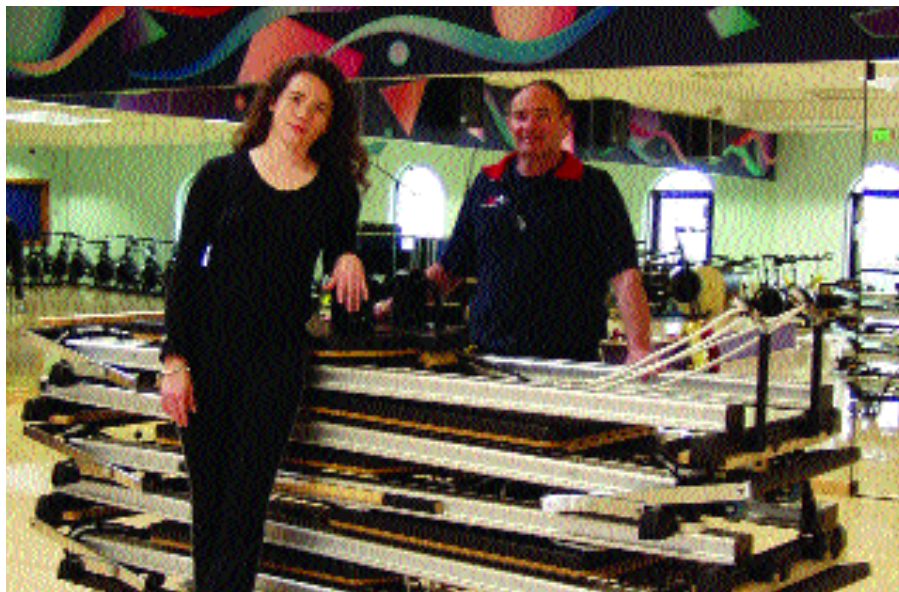
"Spinning certainly grew quickly, but not like this. We just did a sign-up for a Pilates class for Wednesday evening—traditionally, a slow night for us—and it filled up *immediately*."

AVAC certainly isn't alone in discovering the appeal and power of Pilates, and its own experience, it seem clear, is but the tip of a statistical iceberg. The 16th annual *Superstudy of Sports Participation* in the U.S., recently published by American Sports Data, Inc. (ASD), a research firm based in Hartsdale, New York, documents a sharp increase in the popularity of less-strenuous forms of exercise.

And the No. 1 beneficiary—hands down, no questions asked—was Pilates.

Between 2001 and 2002, the number of participants jumped from 2.4 million to 4.7 million people, a 96% increase! (See "Soft Fitness Strong.")

Pilates is, admittedly, not a "big" part of AVAC—either in terms of space, or number of students, or revenues—but it is, nonetheless, an essential and contributing part. AVAC sits on six acres, and, among its many amenities, boasts a 6,000-square-foot fitness center, a 2,600-square-foot group exercise room, a 1,500-square-foot child-care facility, 11 tennis courts, and a 25-yard outdoor pool. The Pilates group mat and reformer classes take place in its group



Pile on Pilates Joe Shank and Carla Hales, a STOTT PILATES instructor trainer

exercise room, and private sessions are conducted in a dedicated, 450-square-foot Pilates studio. Last year, the club's Pilates-related activities—i.e., classes, personal training, and instructor-certification programs—generated \$156,000 in revenues, and, this year, Shank expects the figure to top \$200,000. The profit margin? About that, Shank is mum.

Pilates, he points out, fulfills all of the criteria for spectacular club programming. It is interesting, appealing, accessible, effective, appropriate for different populations, and, at the moment, is enjoying enthusiastic word-of-mouth and incredible media buzz. Since Shank and Theiring sensed its promise two-and-a-half years ago and introduced it to the club, Pilate's profile and impact have grown steadily. Newspapers, magazines, and TV have provided endless, appreciative coverage, duly noting how many celebrities practice Pilates, and, most recently, have been focusing on the role it plays in core conditioning, senior workouts, and the trend towards less strenuous exercise.

"Every club is used to being busy between 6 a.m. and 11 a.m.," observes Shank, "but, between 11 a.m. and 3 p.m., we used to be *dead*, and all of that space on our exercise floor was doing nothing. Now, we're running revenue-producing classes throughout the day. Unlike our yoga and tai chi classes, which are included in the cost of membership, Pilates is fee-based." Mat classes are \$10 per person for a six-week session; group reformer classes are \$20-\$30 per person, depending on class size; personal training, on equipment, is \$50 per hour; and instructor-certification training is \$850 for 40 hours, \$1,250 for 50 hours.

AVAC offers six classes per week, with 15-20 students in each, and introduces a

SOFT FITNESS STRONG

According to the recently released 16th annual *Superstudy of Sports Participation* in the U.S., conducted by American Sports Data, Inc. (ASD), the greatest increase in participation in any exercise activity was recorded by Pilates, which jumped from 2.4 million to 4.7 million participants between 2001 and 2002, a 96% increase. IHRSA's statistics also confirm the climb: today, the association reports, approximately 50% of its member clubs offer Pilates.

Other "kinder and gentler" forms of exercise have also experienced a significant uptick in popularity. During the same period, the *Superstudy* found, yoga and tai chi were up by 14%; recumbent cycling, by 18%; and the use of elliptical motion crosstrainers, by 30%. Conversely, aerobics, a more demanding discipline, was down 5%.

Other "gainers" included the use of barbells, dumbbells, resistance equipment, and treadmills; and, among the other "losers" were swimming, stairclimbers, stationary cycling, and kickboxing.



Magic movements on Cadillac unit

new class every six weeks. “A week after we announce that we’re going to do a Pilates class—it’s filled,” attests Shank. Another 180-200 members who make use of personal trainers, he points out, utilize Pilates as part of their regimen. By way of contrast, the club conducts three yoga classes per week, with 35 people in each.

All of AVAC’s instructors are certified by ACE, ACSM, NASM, or NASCA, and those who teach Pilates (see “Go to the Sources”) are also certified by STOTT PILATES, a leading provider of Pilates products and services based in Canada.

Shank understands, both from personal experience and industry studies, that high-impact is passé, and that “gentler” is in, but, having said that, suggests that Pilates may be in a class of its own. “Our aerobics classes have been losing a tremendous amount of ground,” he observes, “and, in fact, we may be canceling as many as four of them. We still have large step, Spinning, and body sculpting programs, and our bikes, treadmills, stairclimbers, and elliptical trainers run pretty constantly from 5 a.m. until closing.” But what’s clearly growing—not just perpetuating the status quo—are the softer disciplines, such as Pilates, yoga, and tai chi. “Another example,” Shank indicates, “is our deep-water training program for people 40 and older. We offer it three times a day, and have more than 450 people participating. Stability

GO TO THE SOURCE

The Almaden Valley Athletic Club (AVAC) employs a form of Pilates known as STOTT PILATES, developed by Moira Stott and Lindsay Merrithew, which combines traditional Pilates techniques with modern principals of exercise science and spinal rehabilitation. All of AVAC’s STOTT instructors are STOTT-certified, and one is a STOTT Instructor Trainer (i.e., qualified to teach others trainers). A number of IHRSA associate members provide Pilates instruction, services, or equipment. Among them are:

Company	Address	Phone	E-Mail
Balanced Body Pilates	8220 Ferguson Ave., Sacramento, CA 95828-0932	800-240-3539	info@pilates.com
Peak Pilates	4865 Riverbend Rd., Ste. 200, Boulder, CO 80301	800-925-3674	info@peakpilates.com
PhysicalMind Institute	84 Wooster St., Ste. 405, New York, NY 10012	800-505-1990	cathy@themethodpilates.com
The Pilates Coach	Reno, NV 89509	1141 California Ave.,	775-324-0131
Pilates Method Alliance	P.O. Box 370906, Miami, FL 33137-0906	866-573-4945	kevin@pilatesmethodalliance.org
Powerhouse Pilates	442 W. Main St., Monongahela, PA 15063	877-716-4879	
STOTT PILATES	2200 Yonge St., Ste. 1402, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, M4S 2CS0	800-910-0001	info@stottpilates.com
The Xercize Corp.	566 7th Ave., Suite 701 New York, NY 10018	800-IMX-1336	info@www.xercize.com

ball training is also becoming increasingly popular, and we’re going to be incorporating it into our Pilates programming.”

But, if you’re looking for increases in participation of, say, 96%, you’re talking about—Pilates. Today’s more diverse club members, searching for programs that deliver what they’re looking for—whether it’s a torso that looks like Britney Spears’, or core strength, or better balance, or simply a form of exercise that they can perform comfortably, safely, and rewardingly—are turning to it in ever-increasing numbers. “The results can be pretty dramatic,” Shank

explains. “We have, for instance, a senior fitness director who’s in her 60s who, because of improvements in her posture and lean muscle mass, has grown an inch since she began taking mat classes.” He notes that, while Pilates appeals to individuals of both sexes and every age, 80% of AVAC’s students are women, and 60% are over the age of 40. “It’s also great for people undergoing rehab,” he points out.

For Shank and Theiring, however, the principal payoff of Pilates is simple: for them, it represents the best possible use of valuable club space. ■