

TEN OUT OF TEN FOR THE SUPERTRAINERS

BY LUCY FRY, FREELANCE JOURNALIST & PERSONAL TRAINER

Whether you've been taking Dynamic Pilates classes for years or you've just started out, the same question applies: how well do you know your instructor? I'm not talking about understanding his or her personal preferences, sleeping patterns, or even eating or exercise habits (although those can be important as your instructor should 'walk the walk' if they are working in the health and fitness industry). I'm talking about qualifications, pure and simple.

Do you really know how, where and what they learnt that made them able to tell you what's best for your body? Because many people make the assumption that they themselves know so little about exercise that their instructor must be qualified enough to train them.

There is a grain of truth in this; it's likely that most instructors of all exercise disciplines will know a good chunk more about it than someone who wanders in off the street to try out a class or undergo a personal training session. But that does not mean they know it all, or even necessarily enough to be in charge of your body (which is, after all, a fairly precious commodity). If hurting your instructor's feelings is what stops you querying his or her expertise, then just compare that to the pain you'll be in if you injure yourself on their watch.

Besides, you usually don't have to dig very deeply to get an inkling about whether you should trust an individual or company with your body. Generally speaking, if a trainer, instructor or the owner of a group exercise centre circumvents the issue of qualification or expertise, it's not a good sign. If they are clear, helpful and seem glad that you asked, they are probably proud of their training scheme and/or their instructors' abilities.

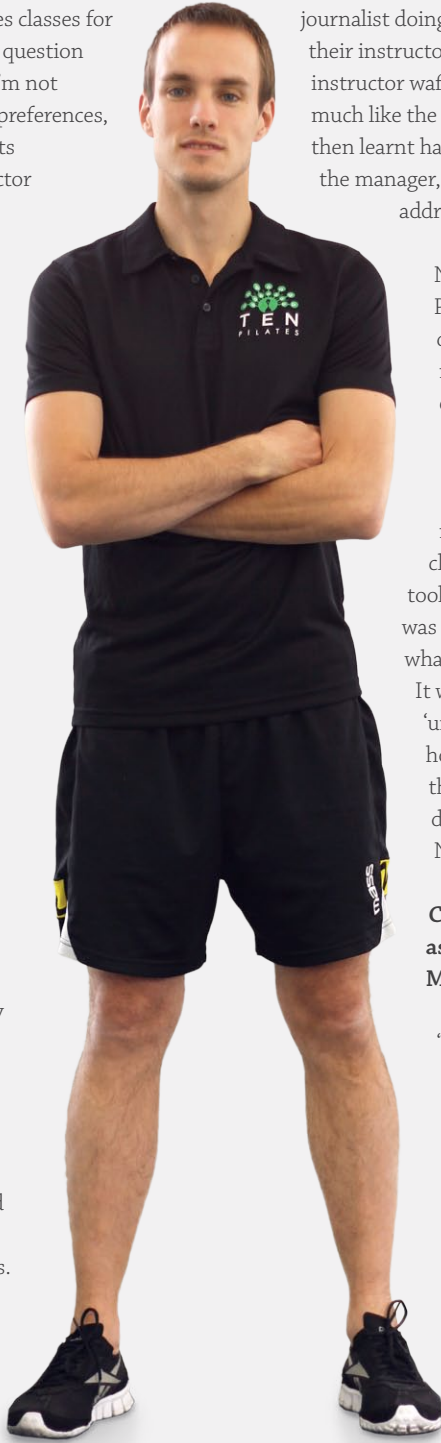
I approached one well known Dynamic Pilates company in North London, after enjoying a class there, explaining that I was a

journalist doing some research. I asked what kind of training their instructors received before they could teach classes. The instructor waffled at me for two minutes. It sounded very much like the instructors came in as Personal Trainers and then learnt haphazardly on the job. I was told to speak to the manager, who wasn't there at the time. So I emailed the address I was given. I never got a response.

Next, I approached another well-known Dynamic Pilates provider that has various centres in different parts of London. The staff were more helpful this time although I still wasn't entirely impressed by the answers. I was told that instructors there were 'generally' Reps 3 certified* and underwent a 'period' of class observations and intense training followed by mock classes before starting to teach their own classes. I was also told that the instructor training took two to three months (which calmed me) and was completely 'bespoke'. Not yet satisfied, I asked what exactly was meant by 'bespoke' in this instance. It was 'unique to the company', I was told, and 'unique in its intensity' (I must admit I wonder how they judged such a thing, and what exactly that even meant?) Indefatigable, I asked for more details about what those 2-3 months involved. No reply.

Compare this with the response I got when I asked the same question of Luke Meessmann, Master Trainer at TenPilates:

"When we developed Ten, we had three brand values in mind," he said. "These were celebratory (championing fitness and health), expert (uber knowledgeable) and people-driven (friendly and articulate). We realised that the kind of people we hire would take care of the celebratory and people-driven side of things. But the 'expert' side of things needed to be formalised and worked on. So David [Higgins, co-founder] and I sat down and collected what we knew from our experience and all the courses we had done."



Already I felt safer about training there, knowing that every single instructor in each of Ten's four London-based Dynamic Pilates and Personal Training Centres had gone through the 6-8 week Ten Pilates Academy, taught by Meessmann himself. I was also pleasantly surprised; in the nearly four years I've worked in this industry, I've never, ever come across anything quite as in-depth or progressive as this done in-house in a training centre.

So... if it's so unique, I asked, what's the purpose of such a stringent re-education of all teaching staff at Ten Pilates? Firstly, I was told, it's to ensure that the quality of instruction is second to none, secondly that there were few discrepancies between the ability and knowledge of all Ten's instructors and, thirdly, that the kind of people who approached Ten as potential employees were focussed fitness professionals who wanted so much to learn more (and to work there) that they were prepared to undergo serious internal training without a guaranteed job at the end of it. Dedication, pure and simple. Perhaps that's why only an average of one in one hundred applicants ever make it onto the academy, and why it's not unusual for people to leave halfway through. (It's also definitely why, after the first two week introduction period, students get paid a basic wage to train in this way.)

So what exactly goes on in those magical 8 weeks?

The Academy is, at its most basic, a course that educates existing trainers or group exercise instructors on how to be Dynamic Pilates instructors, using the reformers and working the body in the right way. The first two weeks are spent learning how to teach classes on the reformers, how to order the exercises and exactly which muscles are working and how (if it sounds complicated and meticulous, it's because it is, far more complicated in fact than any decent instructor will make it appear). Weeks 3-5 are all about practical application, shadowing classes and helping out with teaching. Weeks 6-8 involve further integration with plenty more teaching practice and informal assessment (and new employees remain on probation for three months).

Bonnie Turner, 29, has recently graduated from Ten's Academy. She says:

"Ten trainers know how the body works. They can pinpoint why you stand the way you do and why you feel pain where you do. They work well together and bounce things off each other; I'm constantly learning, every day, working there. The Academy basically just fine-tuned everything for me. It added all the dots together and made everything I already knew, make sense. Then I was able to apply it."

From what I can gather, Ten's Academy takes good trainers and turns them into Supertrainers who have a profound understanding of the human body, whether they are taking Dynamic Pilates classes or Personal Training sessions.

"Personal Training sessions will start with a simple postural re-education," says Meessmann.

"We'll go through a full, dynamic and static postural analysis, to identify the muscles that are likely to be overworked, underworked, overactive or underactive. Trainers need to know how to de-activate the area that's overactive, and position the client properly to isolate the muscle that they should be working. Once you've got it activated properly, the neural signals are firing to that muscle... and once you've got that firing, by all means get them up and move them into a more complex exercise."

Now that's what I call being qualified, not to mention answering my question...

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* This is the standard minimum qualification for Personal Trainers (and Reps Level 2 the approved minimum standard for group exercise instructors) although, rather shockingly, no qualification whatsoever is required legally before somebody can set themselves up as a Personal Trainer.