

Taking

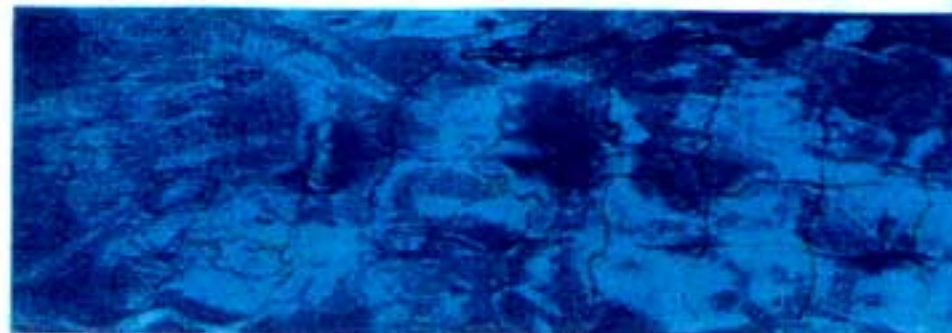
the Plunge

By Jennipher Shaver, associate editor

A look at why the industry is saying "the water is just fine" when it comes to safely putting land-based classes in the pool.

Under the water you can't hear the phone ring. That's Jane Katz's view of aquatics – it gives her class participants, and herself, a way to get away from life, get a good workout and have some fun. A professor of physical education and athletics at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice and a member of the 1964 U.S. Synchronized Swimming Performance Team in Tokyo, Katz spends her day in the pool showing students the benefits of water fitness and teaching New York City's police and firefighters about fitness and swimming. She says that in the water, the possibilities are endless.

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"Mostly, I like to do a bit of everything. If someone likes one particular thing, that's fine, but this way I expose them to everything," Katz says. "I go into Pilates and yoga and Tai Chi, and even cross training with sports and partner water boxing."

Katz, like many in the fitness industry, is recognizing that fusion goes beyond the group exercise studio. Aquatics directors and instructors are taking land-based classes out of the club floor and into the pool. Practically any exercise on terra firma can be moved into the water including kickboxing, Tai Chi, Pilates and yoga.

"I think that [fusion programs] are unique, and for the people who are doing it, it isn't new and novel, but I wouldn't be surprised to see more and more of it around the country," Thomas Lachocki, chief executive officer of the National Swimming Pool Foundation, says.

One such example is Poolates, and if you couldn't guess from the title, Rebecca Pfeiffer created the format by adapting Pilates movements to the pool. She developed the movements after having clients who, she felt, needed

a water-based workout. One was a swimmer who resented leaving the pool for mat class, two heavier participants had problems getting up and down from the mat and equipment comfortably, and another had no range of motion.

"I wanted to find ways to bring them the benefits of Pilates while still meeting their needs," Pfeiffer says. "So, I began to try water adaptations, and, in the process, I found that, not only is the water well suited to Pilates because of the principle of fluidity, but it also creates more challenge for the body to stabilize in the ultimate unstable environment."

With water's gentle nature and ability to be welcoming of all ages, sizes and exercise backgrounds, water can be a great way to get people moving whether they are a novice exerciser, weekend warrior or professional athlete.

There is some merit to doing some exercises in the water to take advantage of the buoyancy, and water can minimize the range of motion limitations that some people face. Dr. Cedric X. Bryant, chief exercise physiologist for the American Council on Exercise, says

"It can allow people to feel comfortable before moving to land-based activities, or it can be a nice way to increase the intensity level of these activities by using the water resistance offered while reducing joint loading," he says.

Jumping in Headfirst

With all of water's benefits, jumping in headfirst in the aquatic-fusion-class pool is tempting. However, before taking the plunge, a number of things should be considered: to whom you should market, how to ensure participants' safety and the level of your instructor's education.

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legs feel like Jell-O and realize how hard they actually were working while in the water."

Making Sure the Waters Are Safe

The next step is to make certain your fusion class is safe. Mary Sanders, an adjunct professor at the School of Public Health at the University of Nevada, Reno, researches functional training and water exercise and says although each program should be evaluated specifically, most are safe, although many times classes are more effective if movements are adapted with water in mind.

"One study by Ellen Evans indicated that simply performing land-based step moves in the pool was not as effective as step moves designed to engage the properties of water - which resulted in higher intensities when compared to a land step," Sanders says.

Other safety concerns involve instructor knowledge and training. To quickly get classes started, facilities may be tempted to give their water instructors a quick tutorial on Pilates or yoga poses or throw their land instructors in the water, but that might not be the best idea.

"Unfortunately, what happens sometimes is that you have people who have a good base of knowledge with aquatic activity, and they take this popular land activity and use it to reinvigorate the class. That could be potentially problematic," Bryant says. "Ideally, you want them trained in both."



Photo courtesy of Aquatics International/Sue Wrenn

Jane Katz (front right) has her participants perform a variety of movements in her aquatic classes to create a fun, social environment.

Many facilities already have a loyal base for their aqua aerobics programs, but before developing a fusion class you need to decide which of the many possible markets you want to coax into the water. For example, Lachockl says the water is a great place for obese members because there's less stress on their joints, and Katz emphasizes that the baby boomers and older members will find the water more "comfortable" and "forgiving" than other forms of traditional exercise. Also, the water can be great for rehabilitation and athletes.

Posting information about the benefits and gentle nature of water can be a good way to get the word out to these groups. And once you get people in the pool, word of mouth can be a great ally to encourage increased participation.

"It's really for anyone at any age, and that will help increase memberships," Katz says. "You might have someone who isn't ready for a boxing class, but they might be willing to try a water-box class."

So, marketing to your members who are cautious of high-impact exercise is a natural fit, but there is promise for your hard-core, high-impact exercisers if you can first get them into the water. Offering a few free classes and having land group exercise instructors promote the water classes as a "good workout" can encourage this group to try out the pool.

"Once they find out that they aren't doing their grandma's aqua aerobics, they are usually pleasantly surprised," Pfeiffer says. "Many people, while they are in the water, just report feeling good, not necessarily overwhelmed. Then they

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Four Steps to Start A Water Fusion Class

1. Understand the Pool Can Be a Gold Mine - "The big decision maker, owner, general manager, etc., has to understand that this swimming pool can be a gold mine. That person has to understand that they deserve a return on their investment," John Spannuth, president and CEO of the U.S. Water Fitness Association, says. Once the big dog of the facility knows his aquatic center can make money, the time, staff and resources are more likely to be funneled into the programming.

2. Have a Talented Aquatics Director and Treat Them Well - Having the right person in this position can make or break your aquatics program. However, Spannuth warns that pay in this field tends to be limited, so if your budget is limited, be sure to reward their hard work in other ways you can afford. "Show your appreciation and how important they are. They don't always leave for more pay if they feel they're appreciated. You can even give them free family or individual memberships," he says.

3. Get the Right Instructors - Make sure to get certified and trained instructors that know both the land-based class and the dynamics of water exercise. "Some people just have a knack for getting many people in the water. Maybe it's his enthusiasm or his knowledge, but the water program has to be a party. It has to be fun," Spannuth says.

4. Spread the Word - No one will know about your new classes if you don't tell them. Post fliers, get your personal trainers and other group exercise instructors talking about it, invite the general public in for a few free classes or allow class participants to bring a friend. Spannuth says word of mouth can really help create excitement.



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Bryant says instructors should have knowledge in both forms of exercises, especially since some of the fusion classes involve a fair amount of technique and skill to teach effectively and safely. The instructor should also feel comfortable in the water.

On the flip side, facilities should also be cautious of putting their land exercise instructors in the water. According to John Spannuth, president and CEO of the U.S. Water Fitness Association, comparing land instructors to water instructors is like comparing grapes to watermelons.

"One of the problems is that a number of facilities have their land-exercise people in charge of their water-fitness people. That is a terrible mistake because how many times do water people try to tell land people what to do?" he says. "Our opinion is that land people do a fabulous job [on land], but they shouldn't be in water - they are different animals."

He is also wary of trends that start out extremely popular, but eventually fade with the times leaving classes and clubs with low attendance numbers. He points to programs such as water step that started strong but have become less popular in recent years.

Although no one can really know for certain if fusion classes that blend on-land movements with aquatic exercise will have lasting popularity, the possibilities for creativity do seem to be endless.

"More people are going in the water, and more innovators are going to bring activities people enjoy into the water," Lachocki says. "Who knows what someone will come up with?"

One thing that's certain is that right now these types of fusion classes, if done correctly, have the potential to draw more people into the water to get fit - and that's always something to make a big splash about. 🌊



Photo courtesy of Diana Dumas

Rebecca Pfeiffer created Poolates by adapting Pilates movements to the water. Classes are offered at the Ritz Carlton-Carlton, Key Biscayne Wellness Center.

