

essential wellbeing

Happy blokes in a class of their own

Single-sex yoga and Pilates sessions are helping men overcome their prejudices.

Words **Mary Fallon**

WILL BAIRD, 21, will keep on doing it despite the occasional ribbing from his mates. Rob Milne is 54 and wishes he had started it much earlier in life. Josh Walmsley, 34, is prepared to travel across town at the crack of dawn twice a week to do it.

The three are among a growing number of men joining male-only Pilates, yoga and fitness classes. And loving it. They say men's classes provide a level playing field. Men's bodies, men's goals, men's atmosphere. And possibly a little less performance anxiety without women around.

"I wouldn't have tried it if it hadn't been men only," says Baird, who started Pilates a year ago in the hope that its focus on conditioning core muscles and improving breathing techniques would deal with his back and knee injuries. "It's a bunch of guys in a small class. We all started at the same time, so we were at the same level. The teacher focuses on different muscle groups for men."

Kimberley Garlick, director of the Pilates Room in Belrose, says male-only classes hold huge appeal. "Mixed classes are often full of women with just the token male. At one stage we blended the classes and found that the male participation rate dropped off."

Garlick says she uses a different style of teaching for men and women, with a different vocabulary and tone of voice. "Women relate to emotive language; men want specific instructions without the fluff."

Her eight-man Pilates class is an eclectic group: "I have an 18-year-old footballer and a 65-year-old retired businessman, from chippies to IT specialists, but they are all fitness aware."

Edwina Griffin, director of Fitmen at Clovelly, says men interested in Pilates and yoga are educated about fitness. "Men do it for performance training, injury prevention, stress release and postural problems from sitting at a desk all day ... We have serious athletes, men in their 70s and even young boys ... They like a men's class to catch up with mates and get fitness into a busy life and make it a social event."

Griffin launched Fitmen at the end of last year as a spin-off from her business Fitwomen "because all the husbands wanted to join". Programs combine weight, cardiovascular and flexibility training.

Josh Walmsley travels from Balmain to Fitmen "because in Balmain you have to be beautiful to go to the gym", he says. "I like being able to work out with men. Our goals are similar and you can develop a rapport with men that you couldn't do if women were around. I like the atmosphere - you can crack a joke. The trainer is male as well."

Kevin Peckham teaches a men's class at Adore Yoga in Mosman. He says men like the fact he is a male teacher who can understand their bodies and they may feel more comfortable exercising "away from the gym bunnies".

"People used to think that yoga was only for hippies and chicks," he says. "In the '80s it was all about transcendental yoga; now it is corporate yoga." The typical men in his class are in their 40s or 50s, working long hours and experiencing back strain or other injury, or stress. "They realise their lifestyle needs balancing and their radar is turning to yoga."

One of his students is Rob Milne, who decided to try yoga when he saw the class advertised as male-only. "I used to do rugby-type exercises - press-ups for 15 minutes and then dart off running down the road. I was stiff and needed some stretching. Now I do my yoga stretches with my daughter and I am encouraging my son to do yoga."

Milne was after improved flexibility but has found that yoga has rid him of sore knees and shoulders and decreased his stress levels. "It has benefited me in far more ways that I ever anticipated. It is about the whole person. I don't want to sound like an ageing hippie but more men should be doing this."

Perhaps they are. In 2006, RMIT University surveyed 4000 yoga practitioners in Australia and found that in the more powerful and physical styles of yoga, nearly one in five yogis were men. Duncan Peak, of Power Living in Neutral Bay, says 30 to 40 per cent of his 1000 power yoga students are male.



Men only ... Duncan Peak of Power Living says at least 30 per cent of his students are male.

For footballers, Peak tailors a class that is a slow and physical form of yoga requiring upper body strength. "I was hired by the Waratahs' team doctor to teach in the off-season. She felt yoga could help them with injury prevention to open up their bodies and provide strength in a larger range of movement."

Rugby player Luke Burgess has continued his weekly classes since starting yoga in the off-season program. He says he has better flexibility, core control, balance and cardiovascular fitness, though he has been battling injury.

Burgess has translated the lessons from yoga of maintaining focus and a quiet mind to his

work on the football field. "I am definitely more composed; I can think more clearly and let my body do the work it is trained to do."

The RMIT study found that 70 per cent of all people - men and women - start yoga for health and fitness or flexibility and muscle tone, while only 18 per cent initially see yoga as a spiritual path.

People come to yoga for the physical benefits, Peak says, and the mental reward comes soon after. Peak's approach to spiritual teaching is delivered as a modern style of psychology. "The mental challenge is to stay focused in the moment. You are accountable for your state of being in the room in the present. In this way happiness can come."