



Mindful Movement, Mindful Business

Merrithew celebrates 30 years of fitness leadership, innovation and education

BY THE FBC TEAM

Thirty years ago, when step classes and aerobics were all the rage, Lindsay and Moira Merrithew opened their first Pilates studio in Toronto. Pilates was a niche fitness approach – not many people knew about it, and very few were trained to teach it.

When the couple decided to bring Pilates to the masses, it launched one of Canada's biggest fitness business success stories and brought mind-body exercise into the fitness mainstream.

Today, the problem-solving, entrepreneurial mindset that launched that first studio still guides how Merrithew does business and offers education, fitness programming and

premium-quality equipment across Canada and around the world.

"We've always been guided by the principle that health is wealth," says Lindsay. "Our goal is to motivate everyone – no matter what their age or physical ability – to lead healthier lives through mindful movement. It's a privilege to have made a difference in so many lives."

The early days: opportunity meets innovation

In those initial years, Lindsay and Moira's deep belief in the benefits of Pilates fueled the company's growth. At that time the field of physiotherapy was evolving, and research was pointing to the importance of neutral alignment of the spine. That research inspired them to develop STOTT PILATES®, the contemporary approach to the original Pilates method.

"Once you establish a neutral pelvis, it has a profound effect on the entire

body," says Moira. "This was the basis for how each exercise in STOTT PILATES would evolve."

When the National Ballet of Canada's Karen Kain took classes at their studio, she was excited by the modality and offered to help build awareness. Two national publications photographed her doing Pilates in their studio, and word quickly spread.

"Karen's support brought us a lot of attention," says Lindsay. "It gave us the confidence we needed to continue growing."

Part of that growth included manufacturing their own equipment. In those days, Pilates equipment was difficult to find, so the enterprising Merrithews designed their own Reformer, one that worked for a variety of body types and abilities. Excitement over the versatile piece of equipment inspired Lindsay and Moira to continue refining their design and to create additional pieces.

Expansion and growth: making Pilates a household name

In the late 1980s, demand for fitness programming was on the rise. Large fitness chains were establishing a strong foothold, and group exercise had gained in popularity. Pilates was an ideal fit with these trends, and the little Pilates company quickly grew into a significant industry player. It established an equipment manufacturing division, and expanded its instructor training programs. Relationships with training centres in Canada and the U.S. provided quality training to the growing number of instructors interested in teaching Pilates and building their careers.

Merrithew also entered into partnerships with the club and studio markets, helping businesses broaden their offerings, add revenue streams and retain members – it helped them identify the education their staff members needed, offered advice on space optimization and equipment selection, and provided marketing support. More and more clubs and studios began offering Pilates and popularizing it even more.

These early successes put the STOTT PILATES method on the map and solidified Merrithew as a leader in Pilates. The company was on the Profit 500: Canada's Fastest Growing Companies list for five years running, and Lindsay Merrithew was a finalist for the Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the Year two years in a row. >>

Lindsay and Moira Merrithew



» Success Story



“Mind-body exercise can be a part of everyone’s fitness regimen,” says Lindsay. “Our partnerships with clubs have helped us make it a fitness staple. We’ll keep helping our professional community enhance their careers and businesses, and support fitness enthusiasts looking for more mindful forms of exercise. At the end of the day, if we’re helping people lead healthier lives, that’s success to us.”

Pioneering the mind-body exercise category

Fitness and wellness trends took a turn toward mindfulness in the first decade of the 21st century; yoga was more mainstream than ever before, and interest in Pilates showed no signs of slowing.

“Clients were seeking long-term health and lifestyle solutions to improve their quality of life,” says Moira. “Instructors and facilities wanted to diversify to remain competitive and to cater to a broader set of clients. Our evolution into mindful movement was a natural extension of that.”

Merrithew quickly became a leader in the mindful movement category, adding more training centres and cementing partnerships with more businesses. By 2005, it had trained over 10,000 instructors, and by 2010 that number was well over 25,000. Studios and clubs began hosting their

own training courses and workshops, buying equipment and seeking advice on building their businesses.

To date, Merrithew is in over 100 countries and has trained over 50,000 instructors worldwide.

The Merrithews saw an appetite for programming apart from

Pilates, and expanded into other mind/body realms including Total Barre®, ZEN•GA®, Core™ Athletic Conditioning & Performance Training and Halo® Training. Their ability to develop innovative programming has redefined mind-body exercise and the range of modalities it can encompass; because it is focused on the needs of the individual, it provides a spectrum of offerings that allow instructors to cater to a variety of clients.

A dedicated fitness industry partner

These days, Merrithew serves a wide variety of businesses from small studios to large fitness chains and equipment retailers, helping them to expand their offerings to meet consumer and professional demand and to stay competitive in a saturated and ever-changing market.

Some of Merrithew’s greatest successes have been in helping gyms and studios drive revenue. An Australian fitness chain reported a 40 percent increase in membership after introducing Pilates classes, with Reformer classes being especially popular at 85 percent occupancy. A chain in Mexico has seen similar success, with 95 percent occupancy in Pilates classes across 53 clubs.

Always evolving

Today, the idea of an intelligent and mindful approach to fitness has moved well beyond Pilates to include fitness practices such as athletic conditioning, fascial movement, and barre and body-weight training.

Merrithew is as strong as ever. With education continuously expanding and innovative equipment launching, the company is excited about its next three decades. FBC

