



# A Complementary Couple

Pilates Style – July 2013

<http://www.pilatesstyle.com/2013/articles/a-complementary-couple>

by Anne Marie O'Connor

As Merrithew Health & Fitness celebrates the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its STOTT PILATES® brand, its founders, husband-and-wife team Moira and Lindsay Merrithew, recount how they went from a Reformer in their studio apartment to an international fitness company.

## **Pilates Style: Tell us about your childhood.**

**Moira Merrithew:** I was born in England but my parents moved to Bermuda when I was very young, so I spent my childhood there. Bermuda was a great place to grow up! I got into ballet when I was five, which was the thing they did with little girls back then. When I was 15, I was accepted into the Rambert School of Ballet in London, but would go back to Bermuda in the summer. The Bermuda Civic Ballet would bring in professional choreographers to do amateur productions in the summer. That's how I met Marijan Bayer, who owned the City Ballet of Toronto. I finished school, and then moved to Toronto to join his company. I danced professionally for almost eight years, eventually working my way up to principal dancer.

**Lindsay Merrithew:** I grew up primarily on the east coast of Canada. My father was in the construction business and we moved around a lot, so I ended up going to boarding school when I was 16. I then attended Dalhousie University in Nova Scotia, where I studied commerce. My last year there, I got involved with a summer stock production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and fell in love with the theater. I was encouraged to audition for drama schools and got accepted at The Juilliard School of Performing Arts in New York, which was a very rewarding and enriching experience.

## **PS: How did you two meet?**

**Moira:** I was teaching at a ballet summer school in Halifax, and Lindsay was on summer vacation from Juilliard.

## **PS: How did you discover Pilates?**

**Lindsay:** I first heard about it through a teacher of mine at Juilliard. Little did I know back then it would become such a meaningful part of my life.

**Moira:** I had broken my foot as a teenager and throughout my dance career, I had struggled with chronic foot injuries. I was forced to stop dancing when I was around 24 and so I was looking for another career. At that time, the Dancer Transition Resource Centre had just opened in Toronto. Its founder, Joysanne Sidimus, advised me to go to New York and explore Pilates. This was a very attractive idea as I had just met Lindsay and he was living there. I studied with Romana Kryzanowska at her studio on West 56<sup>th</sup> Street. Romana was quite a lady—full of charisma! I was given some assistance from the Dancer Transition Resource Centre on the condition that once I trained, I'd return to Canada to teach and share what I'd learned.



**PS: Lindsay, what did you do after Juilliard?**

**Lindsay:** I spent a couple of seasons in New York, auditioning and working in TV. I then spent a couple of seasons at the Shaw Festival in Niagara-on-the-Lake, a well-known theater festival in Ontario. After that, I did the gypsy thing, moving back and forth from New York, Los Angeles and Toronto, working mostly in film and television.

**PS: At some point you moved back to Toronto?**

**Moira:** Yes, in 1987, Lindsay and I moved back to Toronto. We wanted to open a studio, but we didn't have access to any equipment, and back then equipment was really hard to find.

**Lindsay:** At this point, I was still acting, but as an actor, you're never really quite as busy as you would like, so the idea of embarking on an entrepreneurial endeavour had great appeal. Getting access to Pilates equipment was difficult, so we decided to make our own. After many long hours and numerous prototypes, we came up with a Reformer that had adjustability so that whether you were 5'4" like Moira or 6'2" like me, you could comfortably perform the entire repertoire of exercises. Equally important was that the equipment was both ergonomically and aesthetically appealing.

**PS: So when did the business really start to take off?**

**Moira:** We received a big boost when Karen Kain, a principal dancer with the National Ballet of Canada, started to take classes at our humble studio apartment. We saw this as an opportunity to build interest in Pilates and our studio, and Karen graciously offered to help. Lindsay called all these papers and magazines to get them to write something on Karen Kain and Pilates; he convinced a local publication, *Toronto Life Fashion*, and Canada's national paper, *The Globe and Mail*, to photograph her doing Pilates in our apartment.

**Lindsay:** At that time, Pilates was relatively new and the fact that a Canadian national icon was practicing it made it a very attractive story. It seemed like overnight, our business quadrupled.

**Moira:** The education side of our business started out of necessity, as we needed to find people to work at the studio. But very early on it became clear instructors would invariably want to move on to open their own studios. We saw this as an opportunity to train instructors and assist them in building careers.

**Lindsay:** The largest barrier to growth of the Pilates method of exercise had always been the shortage of well-trained instructors. At that time, getting a Pilates education was tough: There were few teaching guides and everything was passed down by sitting at the foot of the master. It was our view that we could establish a more consistent, accessible and economical approach to training instructors by documenting and demystifying the work via videotape and educational teaching manuals.

**Moira:** I had a neck injury and my physiotherapist [physical therapist] identified that I was over-flexing my neck. Upon closer evaluation, Pilates at that time included a lot of spinal flexion without the balance of extension. That prompted us to look at whether we needed to modify the moves in order to deal with some of those issues, which opened the door to rebalancing the exercise content.

The field of physiotherapy was evolving and around this time, research came out from Australia about the importance of establishing neutral alignment of the spine in order to recruit the deep stabilizing muscles of the spine. We began focusing more on balancing flexion, extension and rotation of the spine and working to stabilize a neutral lumbo-pelvic alignment versus tucking under the pelvis. Once you establish a neutral pelvis, this has a profound effect on the entire body, and this was the basis for how each exercise in STOTT PILATES® would evolve.

Lindsay, who had experience in TV and film, had the idea that we should document all these changes, so we hired a small film crew and shot a video, which sold a lot of copies. Suddenly, people were saying, I like what you're doing, can you teach me that?

**Lindsay:** Video production was another key catalyst to our business' growth. We did one, and it was so successful we did four or five more, one after another. We then started producing videos for instructors as an economical way to complement the study guides and face-to-face training. To date, we have 172 DVDs, including professional and home-use titles.

**Moira:** As a result of the DVDs, we started to receive calls from people from all over who wanted to train in Pilates. Eventually, studios and clubs began hosting our training courses and workshops, buying our equipment and seeking our advice on building their businesses. We worked with our best instructors to develop them into instructor trainers. To accommodate the growing interest in Pilates around the world, we worked with people to establish training in their own facilities. This was the beginning of the Licensed Training Center model and to date we have trained almost 38,000 people.



**PS: And in the meantime, you were also developing your equipment line?**

**Moira:** Yes. Around this time we rented our first commercial space and we also embarked on building our own line of equipment. Lindsay is the type of person who always thinks outside the box. That's why the first metal equipment was developed, as it was easier to build in adaptability with metal.

**Lindsay:** We started building equipment in the early '90s and developed a professional-quality prototype we thought was pretty darn good! We packaged it in a "knocked-down" form and shipped it to Los Angeles via UPS, the most economical way of getting it there—need is the mother of invention! I had a list of about 150 people whom I invited to Le Montrose Suite Hotel in West Hollywood. Unbelievably, 75 to 80 of them showed up. People were hungry for equipment, as there were so few manufacturers at that time. That was the genesis of the equipment side of our business. It was pretty clear there was a great demand for what we were doing! That trip was galvanizing, to say the least.

We quickly started hiring welders, carpenters, upholsterers, assembly people and a shipping- and receiving staff to build our line of equipment. Despite our lack of formal business experience at the time, we persevered, and I believe our creative backgrounds and resourcefulness were essential ingredients to our success.

**PS: What are your roles with the company now?**

**Moira:** Lindsay's the CEO and idea guy. Without him, I'd still just have a mat on my living room floor! I head up the Programming and Education team. We wanted a team of strong, confident educators so we can always be developing new and fresh ideas.

**Lindsay:** The fact is we have very complementary skill sets. We worked hard, had the good fortune of attracting a lot of great people to work with us and are humbled when we realize how many individuals have trusted in our leadership to benefit their own well-being.

**PS: Now you've branched out and have started offering several new programs?**

**Lindsay:** One of the core strengths of the company has always been education. In fact, we often say it is the heartbeat of the company; a natural extension of this has been to develop other forms of mindful exercise. The additional branded programs we offer provide a platform for instructors to acquire additional knowledge to enhance their careers and their businesses.

**Moira:** Under the Merrithew umbrella, we've branched out into other mind/body realms. ZEN•GA™ is a combination of Zen and yoga. It has its own basic principles involving breath, support, yield and flow but is also based on the most current research about fascia. It's a very functional, mind/body approach to movement that enables people to be more present within their bodies.

With Core™, we wanted to create more of an athletic conditioning program so that our instructors could take their students into the athletic performance side of things. It makes our instructors much more marketable.

Our team also worked hard to come up with a really strong barre program that we call Total Barre™. It has our 25 years of experience behind it, ensuring that it's safe, effective and fun.

**PS: This year is the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of your STOTT PILATES brand. That's very exciting! How are you celebrating?**

**Moira:** We're doing what we're calling the Mindful Movement Tour, going to 10 different countries to say "thank you" to the people who've supported us all these years. It's also an opportunity for fitness professionals who have never tried or trained in mind/body exercise to see what it's about. In the fall, we're heading to Sao Paulo, Mexico City, Melbourne, Madrid and London before wrapping things up in Toronto. It's exhausting but exhilarating at the same time!

**PS: What are your weekly workouts like?**

**Moira:** I go through phases, but Pilates is always my mainstay, doing the Reformer, mat and weights to keep everything strong. When we were developing Total Barre, I was doing three to four barre classes a week. And I love to play golf.

**Lindsay:** For me exercise and good nutrition are the keys to a life well lived. When I do Pilates, I do feel energized and motivated but I also am a firm believer in the adage that you are what you eat. I play golf, a bit of tennis and love to sail.

**PS: Tell us about your children.**

**Lindsay:** Our daughter, Olivia, is 22 and just graduated from Dalhousie University, my alma mater. She's living in Halifax, where she's working at the Bank of Nova Scotia. Our son, Michael, is 20 and is an aspiring thespian. He has attended LAMDA, the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art, and will be attending the Ryerson Theater School in Toronto in the fall. I guess the fruit does not fall far from the tree!

**Moira:** Olivia and Michael have shared this company with us. They deserve a medal!

**PS: What else would you like to share?**

**Lindsay:** We would be remiss if we were not to pay our debt of gratitude to Joseph Pilates, a man truly ahead of his time and an individual who inspired a method of exercise and a following that has revolutionized the fitness field. The industry has drastically changed from when there were mostly part-time jobs to one where tremendous opportunity exists. We encourage professionals to take advantage of those opportunities, be passionate about their work, innovate, create their own success stories and make a positive contribution to the world we live in today.

**Moira:** Lindsay and I look forward to working with others to help shape the world of mind/body exercise through educating and guiding others to be conscious of their bodies and to make healthy choices about their well-being.

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