

The One

If you want to develop a world-class brand, the IHRSA connection can help

Just ask Lindsay G. Merrithew and Jill Stevens Kinney

By Patricia Amend

Consider, if you would, the case of Lindsay G. Merrithew, a talented individual who studied theatre at the renowned Juilliard School in New York City after receiving his undergraduate degree from Dalhousie University, in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Now, he's best known for cofounding the Merrithew Corporation, in Toronto, the parent company of STOTT PILATES, along with his wife, Moira, a former professional dancer. Today, STOTT PILATES has two corporate training facilities and 50 licensed training centers in 19 countries, and more than 15,000 trained instructors in 67 countries. It also manufactures its own line of Pilates equipment, which is marketed worldwide. STOTT PILATES first joined IHRSA as a club member in the late 1980s and later switched to an associate membership.

Consider also, if you would, the case of Jill Stevens Kinney, a brilliant woman armed with an MBA, who's best known as the cofounder of Club One, Inc., the San Francisco-based chain, along with her husband, John, who also holds an MBA. Today, Club One owns and operates 23 fitness facilities and manages an additional 72 fitness and wellness programs, under contract, in 10 states and Canada. Kinney is also known for her long and intimate association with IHRSA, which dates back to the early '80s.

Merrithew and Kinney are very different people, occupying different parts of the North American fitness industry, but both have left an indelible mark on the business. Ironically, however, there are strong parallels in their careers. Both have created world-class brands. Both have done so via successful working relationships with their spouses. And both have relied heavily on IHRSA—its publications, research studies, conventions and trade shows, industry advocacy efforts, etc.—to help them achieve their goals.

Trending into business

Twenty years ago, when the Merrithews opened their first Pilates studio in Toronto, the discipline was best known, and most utilized, by the dance community. At first, the husband/wife team didn't think they could transform it into a significant commercial venture, but, by the late '80s, they realized that they'd been wrong: Pilates, it had become clear, represented a major business opportunity.

"We recognized that training, while lengthy and somewhat complicated, was important and there was a real need for it," says Merrithew. "Equipment was also hard to get, so, initially, we designed our own reformer—one that was both aesthetically and ergonomically appealing, as well as adjustable to suit the individual user—and, then, an entire



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line. We established a manufacturing facility and began selling equipment around the world.”

The fitness industry, however, didn’t warm up to Pilates training immediately, Merrithew explains. “It requires very specific training. This was something of a barrier to Pilates’ growth for 10-15 years. But, over time, the fitness industry has evolved, and now understands the importance of high-quality Pilates education and equipment.”

Today, the worldwide enthusiasm for Pilates owes much to the Merrithew Corporation and STOTT PILATES, which, in turn, credit IHRSA for its ongoing help.

The Merrithews began by training instructors at their corporate headquarters, but, in 1999, embarked on a licensing program. Now, in addition to its own Licensed Training Centers and numerous hosting sites around the world, a number of club chains, such as Planet Fitness in Russia, host STOTT PILATES instructor teams to train their staff and, sometimes, the general public. The company also offers Full Solutions, a consulting service that helps fitness facilities create successful Pilates programs.

“The company has been growing by double digits yearly,” reports Merrithew. “Exhibiting at IHRSA’s annual trade shows was a great way for us to expose our company to the domestic and international markets,” Merrithew attests. “In addition, as our business has grown, we’ve looked to the IHRSA convention for help with our professional staff development. We send more staff people to the IHRSA event than to any other show.”

Invigorating an industry

IHRSA, it seems, has played a significant role in Kinney’s career virtually from the beginning.

A professional downhill ski racer prior to attending college, she brought a sports-oriented focus to her studies, and obtained her MBA from the University of California at Berkeley. A short while later, she became the business manager of Physis, an innovative new wellness company that happened to be located next to the Western Athletic Club (WAC) in San Francisco. She soon met WAC owners Jim Gerber, Pete Jones, and John Melin, who, recognizing her potential, hired her to manage The Bay Club. Later, as the company’s chief operating officer (COO), she oversaw the two WAC sites in San Francisco, plus additional facilities in Dallas, Houston, and Seattle, Washington.

Kinney attended her first IHRSA convention in 1984 at Gerber’s suggestion. “He said it was a great way to network and to learn about the industry,” she recalls, “and he was right.” It wasn’t long before she became involved with IHRSA’s board of directors, initially helping to choose speakers for the convention.

In 1986, she left WAC to become a consultant, and then, nursing her own dream, to create a business plan for Club One—a smaller fitness facility that would offer wellness services and a high level of personal care. She met John Kinney, who liked the Club One concept, as well as Jill. The two became business partners, married, and opened the first Club One in 1991. John served as CEO, and Jill, as COO. “It was a nice balance in terms of skill sets,” she says. “We really enjoy working together.”



While running that first club, the two relied on IHRSA’s staff for basic information about a host of vital issues—from membership agreement terms to political and tax issues specific to the state of California. “I’d call an IHRSA staff member, and, a few hours later, they’d have the information for me.” They continued to call on IHRSA as they nurtured Club One, transforming it into one of the fastest-growing club companies in the country, and also continued giving back: Kinney served as chairperson of IHRSA’s market research committee for five years, giving her a first glance at—and a chance to affect—industry developments.

Two years ago, the Kinneys hired a new management team to run Club One, while retaining their ownership, in order to pursue other interests. John now runs his own biodiesel fuel manufacturing company. Jill remains involved in the industry, as the managing director of Clubsource Development Partners, LLC, which designs and builds new clubs under the Club One brand. Club One, Inc., then manages them under contract.

And IHRSA still figures prominently in the picture.

“I’m on the board of three start-ups—a wellness company, a women-only concept, and a teen fitness center,” she explains. “I’ve taken people from all three to IHRSA conventions, advising them to make friends and go to every workshop they can. They come away *overwhelmed*... but with a *realistic* sense of the possibilities.” —