



The Right Attitude

Trent McEntire, 39, didn't learn he had cerebral palsy until he was 19. That surprising discovery put him on the path to Pilates.

by Trent McEntire • As told to Beth Johnson

I grew up in the small, conservative town of Cement City, MI—population 350. Despite the community's name, I actually grew up on a dairy farm.

I was always a very active child, running around the farm with my older brother and playing basketball in the barn. But at the same time, my body always felt incredibly tight and restricted. I couldn't lift my arms above my shoulders no matter how hard I tried. I could barely bend over. I had a lot of headaches, and I always had a feeling of general discomfort.

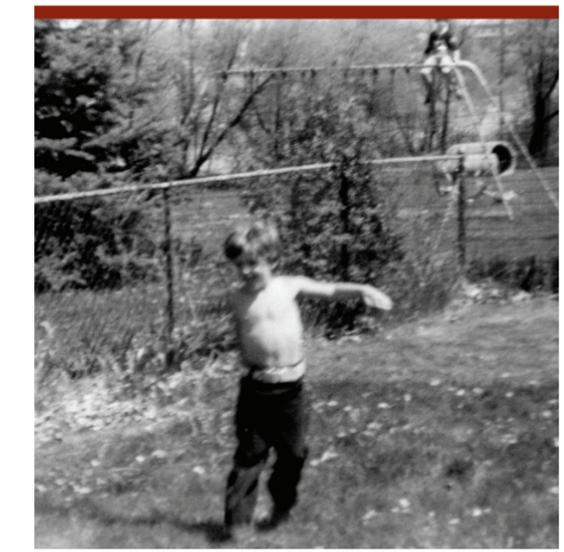
LEARNING TO COMPENSATE

But I was also very strong and big for my age, and very determined. Moving my body always brought some relief from the constant pain, and I unconsciously found ways to overcompensate for my limitations. For instance, since I couldn't lift my arms, when I played basketball, I'd overarch my back to make the shot, over and over and over again. Then every morning I'd wake up, and my shoulders and my back would be tight and aching.

RUNNING FAST THROUGH JUNIOR HIGH

By the time I reached junior high, I was aware that other kids didn't have my physical limitations. I wanted so badly to do front flips and cartwheels like my friends, but I couldn't even bend over and touch my knees! That was really tough. But on the other hand, I could run really fast...for short distances. I had the fastest speed for the 50-yard dash in my class. But in the 100-yard dash? I was last. I just didn't have the muscle endurance or the breath to run that far.

Because I played basketball every day of the summer, my mother nudged me to go out for the basketball team, and although I had a hard time letting myself be seen doing anything, soon



PHOTOS COURTESY OF TRENT MCENTIRE



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I was the starting center. It was so great to be successful at something physical.

HIGH SCHOOL JITTERS

The move to our much bigger high school, however, was very nerve-wracking. Like many teenagers, I was nervous for my limitations to be seen, and unfortunately, I decided not to go out for sports. I felt I'd be conspicuous, and everyone would be judging and making fun of me.

During freshman year, however, I had a friend who was really into theater, and he suggested I try out for the school musical because he thought we'd have fun doing it together. I said okay, and soon I was singing and dancing in the chorus of *Grease*, and the next year, I was in *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*.

I loved it instantaneously! Some of the girls in the musicals had been taking dance lessons since they were in pre-school, and they were so flexible and such athletes. I hadn't realized the potential for the human body before then, and it thrilled me. To improve my technique, I ordered some jazz-dance videos in the mail. I can only imagine how bizarre this must have been to my family when I'd practice routines in the backyard next to the cows!

TRUCKIN' TO LESSONS

The dance moves on the video were really hard for me to do, and they didn't bring any relief to my body. It didn't matter, though, because I

OPPOSITE PAGE: MCENTIRE DOING A JUMP SPLIT IN A COLLEGE PERFORMANCE OF *VALSE FANTASIE*.

THIS PAGE, FROM TOP TO BOTTOM: THOUGH THE CEMENT INDUSTRY IN MCENTIRE'S HOMETOWN OF CEMENT CITY, MI, SHUT DOWN YEARS AGO, THE TRAIN DEPOT STILL STANDS; MCENTIRE AT AGE SIX AT A LOCAL PLAYGROUND.



ABOVE: DESPITE HIS CEREBRAL PALSY, MCENTIRE WAS ABLE TO LIFT HIS PARTNER OVER HIS HEAD IN A COLLEGE PERFORMANCE OF KYOKO'S HOUSE BY CHOREOGRAPHER DAVID CURWEN.

was hooked. I knew I wanted to be a dancer. I realized if I wanted to get better, though, I needed to take dance classes. When I was 17, I found a dance studio by opening the Yellow Pages and picking the one with the best-looking ad: the Susan Vaughn School of Dance. It was 20 miles away in Jackson, MI. I got a job as a prep cook at a restaurant, and with my first \$400, bought a very beat-up Nissan Datsun truck to get me to classes.

I had terrible technique, but I had

strength, and I could turn and jump. And, boy, did I have passion and determination. Soon I was taking nine lessons a week in jazz and ballet.

Joining that studio was one of the defining moments of my life. When I was dancing, it gave me some range of motion, so I felt like a million bucks. But the next day, I'd be so sore, and any flexibility I had achieved was completely gone. So I'd do lots and lots of stretching throughout the day, and takes lots and lots of Advil. But for the first time, I could feel my body getting stronger. Plus, the studio owner, Susan Vaughn, opened up a whole world to me, pushing me to attend dance conventions and showing me that I could have a bigger life.

COLLEGE DREAMS

I decided I wanted to go to nearby Western Michigan University. When I was a senior in high school, I drove myself to the audition for their dance program. When I was offered a partial scholarship, I nearly exploded with excitement. With my mom's help, I moved into the dorm. I majored in dance—which meant dancing 35 to 45 hours a week—while working 20 to 30 hours a week selling hot pretzels to pay for my student loan. And in that first semester, I met the fantastic Jennifer, who is now my wife and the mother of our two daughters.

I HAVE WHAT?

The dance program was wonderful, and because there were just two guys in the dance major, I got a lot of good roles! But because I was dancing far more than I ever had before, it was almost unbearably hard and painful.

My first Christmas break, I was lamenting to my mother that I couldn't bend or lift or flex like the other dancers, and she said matter-of-factly, "Well, that's because you have cerebral palsy." "What?" I replied, stunned. She told me, "You were born with cerebral palsy, and the doctors knew that you were always going to have limitations."

I soon learned that cerebral palsy is caused by abnormalities in the parts of the brain that control muscle movement and coordination. Most people who have it are born with it, and its severity can range from mild to severe—I was considered to have a relatively mild case.

Learning I had cerebral palsy explained everything! It wasn't because I was lazy or bad, or everything else that had gone through my head. After my initial shock, I realized I had been lucky to escape being labeled as a kid. If I had been labeled, I think I would have seen myself differently, perhaps as someone who shouldn't even try. Now I'm really grateful I didn't know.

STARTING FROM SCRATCH AGAIN

My attitude quickly changed from surprise to, "Okay, I have to solve this." My biggest physical problem was that any range of motion I gained was gone the next day. So I took out anatomy books from the library and enrolled in dance-conditioning classes and movement analysis, trying to understand how the body worked. I'd come in early to the dance studio every day to warm up, so I was better prepared for class. I forced myself to muscle through my classes, no matter what. But I was still so frustrated by my body's limitations.

Then in my sophomore year, I got a part in *Swan Lake* that required lifting the female lead over my head many, many times. Up until then, I faked my way through lifting other dancers by over-bending my back. But I knew that wasn't going to cut it with this ballet.

FINDING PILATES

So after the first couple of disappointing rehearsals, I happened to go to a weekend dance conference in Chicago that included a Pilates class. I remember thinking, in that very first little class, *Oh! Those are my abdominals! Oh, that's what it means to move from my center!* After that one class, it was like a light switched on. I had always tried lifting with just my arm strength, and it never worked. But when I started the chain reactions of engaging my feet, then abdominals and then arms, I was able to lift my partner over my head at the next *Swan Lake* rehearsal. My ballet master nearly fell over!

PHOTOS COURTESY OF TRENT MCENTIRE



If doing just that one Pilates class made this remarkable difference, I thought, what else could it do for me? That was a life-altering moment for me. Back at school, I now did almost daily matwork with a lot of focus on the abdominal series. I could really feel the difference that connection made when I danced. Whenever there was a chance to work on Pilates moves with the teachers, I'd take it, because what they taught was great for emphasizing the external rotation of the hips and building leg strength.

The next semester, our dance program had the honor of staging a Balanchine ballet, *Valse Fantasie*. It's an extremely fast, demanding ballet where your heels hardly ever touch the floor. Soon I was waking up in the morning with incredibly inflamed lower legs. I could hardly walk, and Advil barely touched the burning pain. I knew I had to figure a way to be able to dance without all this physical agony.

SOMETHING HAS TO CHANGE

So I started my own rehabilitation program, experimenting with a four-dollar TheraBand, which was all I could afford. I'd work on my hip mobility by placing my heel in the band, holding the ends of it, and "stir" my leg in the socket. I did moves like Swan Dive and Roll-Ups with the band on my feet. Looking back, I realize I was doing what Joseph Pilates had done for himself. I'd keep a journal and make notes of what dance-and-Pilates-type moves made my body feel better or worse.

TEACHER TRAINING

Immediately after graduating from college, I became part of the Eisenhower Dance Ensemble in the Detroit area; two months later, I got a call from the head of the dance department, Professor Jane Baas, saying that there was a Pilates studio—the second in the state—opening near me in Bloomfield Hills. They needed teachers and were offering to train them. I signed up immediately.

While taking the intensive certification course, I discovered so many moves that helped my own body. I loved anything that involved the Cadillac because it got my nerve endings activated. The rolling-through spine moves reduced the stresses on my body. On the Reformer, I particularly responded to Kneeling Cat, Side Splits, the Long Box Series and Lunge Stretches. On the mat, I loved (and still do!) Hip Rolls, Shoulder Bridge, Saw, Seal and the Side-Lying Series.

I had better muscle endurance, and I became more flexible and could finally bend to the floor and reach over my head more easily. I also had better mental focus.

FIRST STUDIO

I ended up teaching at the Bloomfield Hills studio for three years, while still dancing with the Detroit troupe. Then in 2001, I opened my first studio in Troy, MI; I have since moved and expanded it several times. My current studio is in Rochester, MI, where I have 10 teachers. And for the past six years, I was the president of the Pilates Method Alliance. I'm also one of the original members of the PMA's Heroes in Motion committee, which helps people with severe traumas, such as brain injuries and prosthetic limbs. It means a great deal to me to be able to pay it forward.

INSPIRED BY JOSEPH

As much as anything, Pilates has given me permission to see what's possible. Learning how Joseph Pilates designed exercises and witnessing the remarkable recoveries that have happened because of him have inspired me to keep finding new ways to help my clients.

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THIS PAGE, FROM TOP TO BOTTOM: MCENTIRE USING THE ARCUS BAR, WHICH HE INVENTED; MCENTIRE WITH ALISSA CZISNY, TWO-TIME U.S. FIGURE SKATING CHAMPION. MCENTIRE PILATES SPONSORED HER OFFICE TRAINING FOR FOUR YEARS, DURING WHICH TIME SHE WON HER SECOND U.S. TITLE.

I've even developed the ARCUS, a replacement for the straight Cadillac roll-down bar that can be used by people with all sorts of limitations. Not only does it solve many of my clients' movement issues, but it helps me tremendously by keeping my shoulders moving and hips articulating freely.

USE IT OR LOSE IT EVERY SINGLE DAY

But no matter how long I've been studying and teaching Pilates, because

of my cerebral palsy, I can never take a break from exercising. I now have significantly better range that I used to have, but it's something I have to work on every single day. So at home, I have a Spring Wall, a Spine Corrector, bands and balls. And of course, I have a full suite of equipment that I use at my studio.

About 50 times a day, I'll clasp my fingers overhead, raise my shoulders way up and take some really long deep breaths. That will lead into a

side stretch and side opening of the shoulder. My family has gotten so used to me continually adjusting my body, even while cooking or playing board games with my daughters—Kassia, 13, and Zana, 10—that they don't even notice.

Because of Pilates, my options for movement are practically limitless. I'm so grateful to everyone who led me to Pilates, and for what it has given me. I know that Pilates can change lives because it certainly changed mine. **PS**