

## Chapter 7

# Fun, Adaptability, and Mindfulness

By Heather Fahrenkrog

As a child, I had a front row seat for the first wave of fitness. My dad was a bodybuilder, and I was the free child labor tasked with cleaning his gym. My dad won the title of “Mr. New Jersey” when I was a kid, so I’ve grown up alongside the fitness industry, both of us evolving with each passing decade.

My vision for the future of fitness is strongly influenced by what I’ve experienced over the years. I’ve witnessed a lifetime of fitness fads and realized some enduring truths along the way that have shaped my love of fitness. Our recent global pandemic brought a few new lessons and forced most business owners to reevaluate their business models and reinvent themselves in some way. The upside of that was many of us discovered deeper meaning and purpose in our work. Fitness professionals now have an unprecedented opportunity to serve more people than ever before, and in a much more holistic, interconnected way.

When I think about what’s next, I know we must continue to motivate our communities toward a healthy lifestyle by making fitness fun, encouraging adaptability, and, now more than ever, teaching our clients to embrace mindfulness. Fun and a willingness to reinvent as circumstances and life change are imbedded in my DNA, but more recently I have learned the importance of *inner* fitness, or mindfulness. The mental, emotional, and spiritual skills and practices that foster resilience are also a vital aspect of wellness. Our communities need all three – fun, adaptability, and mindfulness to truly feel good and live their best lives. I learned these important lessons throughout my own fitness journey.

My roots, just like those of the fitness industry, took hold in the hardcore bodybuilding gyms of the 1970s. In the ’70s, the fitness industry consisted of small bodybuilding gyms like my dad’s and the YMCA, that was it. It was a scrappy beginning; I can still remember how my dad’s gym looked and smelled. Imprinted in my mind are the huge barbells and weight racks, stacks of black plates, and the giant men who lifted them. The men wore tiny shorts and tank tops with wide leather weightlifting belts, and they survived on handfuls of vitamins and supplements that were washed down with raw eggs from a blender. Steroids were common, and most bodybuilders (including my dad) took them regularly as an unquestioned aspect of “fitness.”

The 1980s brought the emergence of group exercise, back then called “aerobics.” The cardio craze was just beginning, and what I remember most is the sense of freewheeling fun. Fitness in the ’80s was not so much a discipline, but rather one big party. With his bodybuilding days behind him, my dad blazed a career path that was unheard of at that time. He took over a failing tennis club, and for a brief period, he created the fitness trifecta of Nautilus, aerobics, and racquetball. Dad endlessly dreamed up new fitness events: fashion shows, concerts, boxing matches, limbo contests, pool parties, and themed racquetball tournaments. Creativity was the main ingredient in my dad’s approach to this new business model and I soaked it in.

My love of group fitness can be traced back to these early days of aerobics. My mom and her best friend taught the first aerobics classes: Jane Fonda look-alikes with a boom box on a tennis court doing high knees in high top sneakers. By age 15, I was teaching my own aerobics classes. Over the years, I created my own style of fitness fusion, combining formats with aspects of dance and various equipment in my own creative way. To this day I love combining strength and fun, those same themes from the '70s and '80s.

But there was a dark side to the emerging fitness culture. The flip side of the '80s fun was a toxic culture of physical perfectionism. At that time, fitness was all about how you looked, not how you felt. There were many extremes, an absence of balance, and zero talk of mental health, personal growth, or the mind-body connection. I had no example of a growth mindset growing up in the '80s; instead, I learned loss. My dad's business ultimately failed, and our family lost everything. I learned a painful lesson, a passion for fitness is not enough. Entrepreneurs must be constantly learning and evolving. We must invest in ourselves and our teams to run successful businesses and to grow them. Then, we must teach and mentor self-growth to our clients. I did not understand these basic truths until many years later.

For many years teaching group fitness was a fun side hustle. Throughout many decades I saw the fads come and go, and I enjoyed teaching them all. My evolution in fitness continued into my 40s when I started "Kettlebell in the Park" in the summer of 2014. I was working part-time as a prosecutor in Chicago and teaching a variety of group fitness classes in a large downtown gym, but I wanted to take my fusion thing out on my own in the town where I lived with my family. I learned something very important about myself with this experiment - I am not afraid of risk. Pretty surprising considering what happened with my dad's business. It turns out that I am a natural entrepreneur with both passion and a yearning for personal growth. I also luckily suffer from chronic over-confidence. If you consider yourself to be a natural entrepreneur, do a gut check and be honest with yourself about your willingness to work and risk to serve others. The skill set required to build your vision into a successful business requires far more than passion. You need a strong work ethic, a stomach for risk, a willingness to learn as you grow, and a love of people.

Kettlebell in the Park was a hit – I took 80 people and created a community by the end of that summer, and it was indeed fun. I decided to move indoors and sublet a small dance studio. Within weeks, I needed a larger studio and a method for people to register that didn't involve legal pads and collecting paper checks. I found a larger dance studio and sublet during off hours. I purchased a branded app, even though I didn't yet have a website or a sign on the door. To open my own brick-and-mortar studio, I knew I needed to build an autopay membership base while subletting at a low cost. I encourage all fitness entrepreneurs to first create a strong following with low overhead before taking on the expenses that come with a brick-and-mortar studio. Take your time building your brand first – you need a community!

Within one year of Kettlebell in the Park, I had 100 autopay members using my branded app. I hired several instructors, and I was ready for my brick-and-mortar studio. My husband had created a file on our desktop with my member lists called "Heather's Gym." I thought it had a

nice ring to it. My sister-in-law created a beautiful logo, and the name stuck. Heather's Gym is a brand that continues to grow and has evolved into "HG Studios," now encompassing three separate studios. I did not see that coming.

I'm not sure why it took me so long to admit I was in the business of fitness, and to accept that it was inevitably going to be my full-time job. I wanted to serve others in some positive way, I thought I would best serve as a lawyer. Instead, I decided to leave my 19-year career as a prosecutor so that I could grow my fitness business. Looking back, when I went out on my own that first summer, there was some nostalgia for me that my young daughters would see firsthand, like I had as a child, that fitness is fun. It's a twist of fate that what began as a six-week summer program in the park became my life's passion and purpose. I had found what I was meant to do, but before I retired as a lawyer, I made sure I had a vision for what I wanted to create in my life.

Whether you tend to be overconfident or risk-averse, it's never too late to reinvent yourself. There is so much to be gained by evolving who you are and who you serve. It doesn't happen overnight, and it will absolutely involve struggle. Who *you* are (your influences, your career paths, your passions, your losses) will shape your growth. The sooner you understand who you are and what has shaped you, for better or worse, the sooner you can play to your strengths and improve your areas of weakness. Reinvention cannot happen without self-reflection and self-awareness. Once you understand your story, share it! Your story should become synonymous with your name and your business. People relate to your story first. Your brand *is* your story.

Those of you wondering if you can, or should, begin to build a business in fitness while keeping your day job, I say absolutely, yes. Let your brand and confidence grow without depending on the revenue. Start with a little risk and adjust. Once you take the initial leap and start to do what you love, don't stop there. You must continually invest in yourself and in your team to learn and grow. It is not possible to navigate growing pains without a strong team who are also growing and supporting the mission.

One year after opening Heather's Gym, I opened HG Cycle. Looking back, I made a lot of miscalculations. I had the cash to invest in 21 bikes, so I found a space to build this new studio, but many members were slow to adopt cycling into their fitness routine, and others didn't want to go to two different locations. Even worse, the building where the studio was located was falling apart. It was a bad choice in location and a significant investment, it was a struggle for over a year before it began to generate profit.

In 2019, I added hot yoga classes to my original studio. I felt my members needed more recovery and mind-body connection. I knew I had to lead the way, so I convinced several instructors on my team to become yoga-certified along with me. While I worked on my certification, I researched hot yoga and the logistics involved in offering that type of class. I had been looking for a separate studio for hot yoga but couldn't find a good location or a space large enough. I also feared my members wouldn't want another location. It was a risk, but I

decided to purchase 26 heat panels and add them to my original studio – we led the way into this new frontier of yoga, and it worked. By February of 2020, my members were enjoying hot yoga and cycling, and both studios were making a profit. Then February turned into March 2020 and, well, we all know what happened next.

It's hard to put into words the toll that the pandemic years took on me. Like many fitness professionals, I had a very strong community heading into the pandemic, and yet it took everything I had to keep them committed to their health and moving forward for those two years. I lost many members to online training, and many others gave up because they had to wear masks. I somehow held my team together, and we did everything we could to lift our community up, adapt, and survive. What we learned along the way through the various technologies, the virtual classes, the non-stop re-designing of classes and schedules, the logistics in the studios, teaching in various PPE, teaching outside and in garages, renting out most of our equipment, and then ultimately closing the cycling studio, was the importance of adaptability and *inner* fitness. I am a better business owner and coach today because of the pandemic, and my community is stronger and more connected because of what we went through together. I did not see that coming.

After enduring a two-year struggle for survival, I see a big lesson for all of us who coach others. I return to what made an impression on me growing up. People now need, more than ever, a variety of wellness experiences to feel good. People need to enjoy themselves while doing whatever they are doing for their health, or they simply won't continue. We must embrace that freewheeling '80s vibe, without forgetting the importance of making people strong that began in the '70s, and the lesson from the pandemic years – adaptability and community are everything. Today's fitness innovators should be creative in planning experiences that draw people to a fun atmosphere with a strong community ambiance that also includes mindfulness.

I encourage fitness professionals to create a calendar of campaigns. Give each campaign a name, create a challenge, a reward, and a clear plan for your members. Each campaign should have the fun baked right in. I often buy matching headbands and wristbands (circa 1980), as well as silly props and costumes to use in our marketing and challenges. People want to feel like they are part of something bigger and they like to see how they are doing in relation to others. It's amazing what a few matching headbands can do for collective morale, it's truly powerful to experience a community-oriented fitness campaign.

The purpose of every campaign is to make your community feel healthy and connected. Every business has its own style and brand, so think about how you can uniquely reach people with the campaigns you launch. How can you weave mindset awareness into physical activity? How can we foster a strong sense of community as a constant reminder that community *itself* boosts our health? I try to find campaign names that are fun: The Beat Goes On, Spring it On, and March MATness, just to name a few. Gamify your campaigns. We've done sticker charts and MyZone challenges, all with fun team names, team captains, and prizes. Create the community vibe and the magic happens.

In an ever-evolving field, the future of the fitness industry also requires input from the very people we serve. Ask and listen. Bring the best of what you know and leave behind ego and perfection. Your clients and members appreciate a say in the vision as it evolves. I now conduct focus groups before I expand or launch a new idea. Before I opened my new cycle studio in March of 2021, I conducted focus groups and listened to people who didn't completely see or agree with my concept for the studio or the new technology I was investing in. Through listening, I gained a clearer picture of how to message and market my ideas, and those who were involved felt valued because they had a voice. The new cycle studio, complete with new technology, is now thriving. I conducted focus groups a second time before raising my membership cost following the pandemic. I wanted to know where I was failing to deliver value to my clients. In 2022, I opened a hot yoga and meditation studio, again after conducting a round of focus groups. If you want to know people's honest feelings about your business, your brand, or your ideas, get them talking. Focus groups will give competing perceptions. The hard work is what you do with that information.

Growing my business now, compared to pre-pandemic, is far more member centered. I listen more and use the objections and suggestions to tweak the vision. I attribute these changes to my personal growth and evolution in this business, and I thank my coaches and the people I surround myself with for helping to keep me in a growth mindset. It's not easy to hear competing opinions or critiques of your ideas, but the ability to do so will make you a far better leader and business owner.

The future of fitness must not be about physical perfection, or *any* kind of perfection. Fitness professionals must lead by example encouraging mindfulness and self-growth as part of every fitness experience. I am proud to be part of a new era of leaders who demonstrate balanced, holistic health. The future of wellness must embrace mental health, real food, recovery, and love for our bodies. We must address our client's *inner* fitness. A lack of inner fitness – mental, emotional, and spiritual balance – leaves people struggling. I watched my dad struggle his entire life because he lacked this inner fitness. I vowed to do better for my clients.

As I scale my business post-pandemic, I try to approach my members from a holistic perspective. I try to meet people where they are. I ask myself: how can I create a more holistic approach to this client's pain points? How can I grow my business to meet these new demands and create a more integrated wellness experience for each client?

I believe that our communities yearn for authentic leaders who are not afraid to be honest about the mental and physical struggles that make us human. We must connect with each client, lead with passion, and let our story, what we have learned through experience, be the foundation upon which we build those relationships. Be the leader they can trust, by showing through example that self-growth is a way of life. We are playing the long game so show your members how to evolve. To do that consider hiring your own coach, join a mastermind group, read business and mindset books, and listen to self-growth podcasts. Draw from your experiences, the ups, and the downs, utilize all of this in your marketing, coaching, and

speaking. Your self-growth is your spark, and it will create a true bond between you and your community.

It's a tall order to put so many pieces together to offer a more holistic wellness experience for our clients, but I believe today's fitness leaders are up for the task. I am so grateful for the perspective I gained from evolving over the years along with the fitness industry. My journey taught me that our calling is to build community, facilitate connection, and encourage our clients to evolve right along with us. With fun, adaptability, and mindfulness we can truly make an impact and help others to live their best lives. I am no longer in the front row observing, now I lead the way. Let's go!



## **Heather Fahrenkrog**

Heather Fahrenkrog is a lawyer-turned-fitness studio owner. Heather is a longtime runner and triathlete, but her true passion has always been group fitness. In 2014 she opened her first studio, Heather's Gym. Her fitness business has expanded to include two additional studios: RPM Cycle & Bootcamp and Zen Yoga & Meditation – together they comprise HG Studios. Heather has been teaching group fitness for over 30 years, she is ACE certified, RYT 200 certified, she is a Platinum member of the Todd Durkin Mastermind Group, a certified Impact coach, a motivational speaker, and an outspoken advocate in her community for living a balanced, healthy life. Heather lives in Libertyville, Illinois with her family. Follow Heather at @heathersgym.club @zen.libertyville, @rpm.libertyville, and her website [www.hgstudios.club](http://www.hgstudios.club).