

Some predict it's going to change the way we work out. Others are hinting it could be as big as aerobics. Libby Schultz unveils the Bodywall, a Kiwi-bred innovation with the potential to take the international fitness industry by storm



The great wall

FIT BIZ

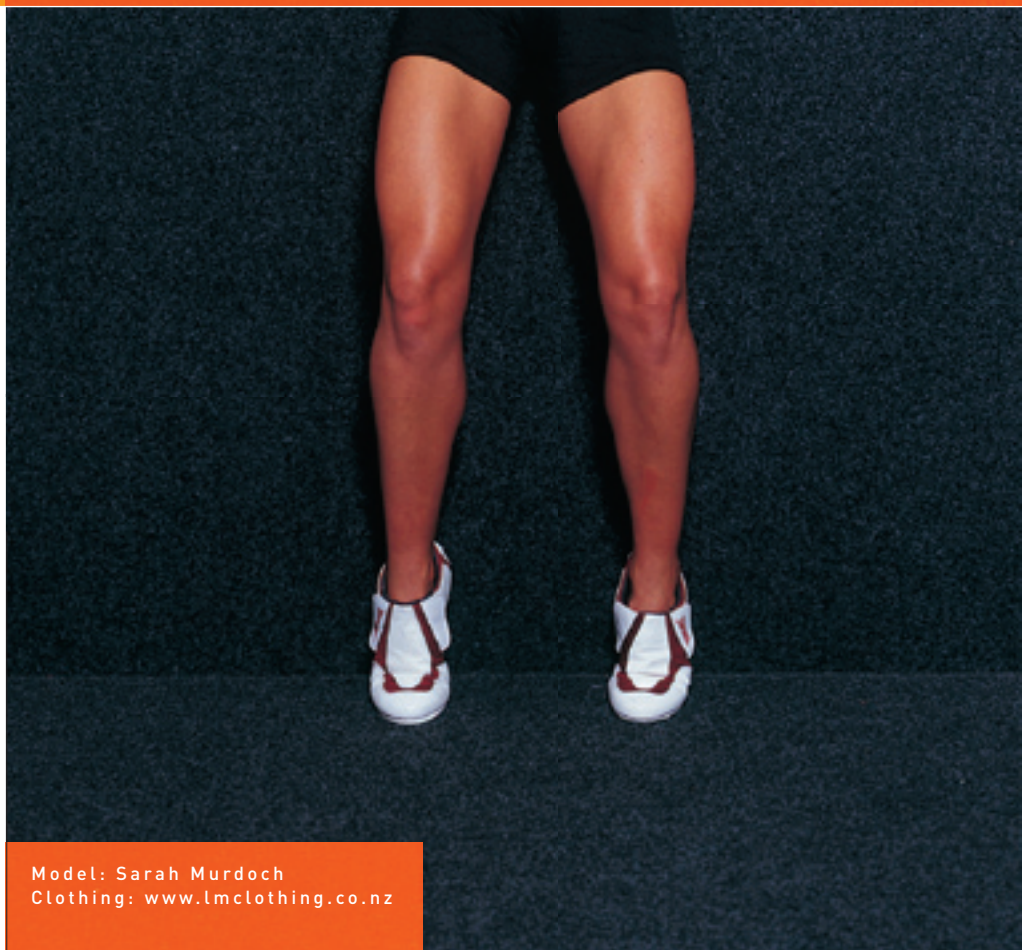
Libby Schultz

WHEN Chris Toal talks about his brainchild, he cheerfully describes the idea as "stupid simple". Because like some of the world's greatest products – the Post-It note, or the humble clothes peg – the whole concept can be explained in about 20 seconds.

Imagine if you could do stretching exercises by 'sticking' yourself to a near-vertical wall. You're held securely in place by the gloves and boots you're wearing, both covered in a Velcro-like material. Instead of having to manipulate your limbs into a stretching position, you use your own body-weight to simply hang. In a nutshell, that's what the Bodywall does.

While the idea behind it couldn't be simpler, the road to development has been a long one for its inventor, Chris Toal. In fact, it's taken the Auckland-based massage therapist more than three years – and endless fine-tuning – to bring his product to the market. Now it's ready to be launched this year – and those already involved are predicting it's going to be big.

The idea grew out of Chris' own thriving



Model: Sarah Murdoch
Clothing: www.lmclclothing.co.nz



business practice in Grey Lynn, which combines therapeutic massage with aromatherapy and Chinese therapies. (His company Wellness at Work also provides mobile massage services to major corporates and Chris was team masseur to Team New Zealand in the 2003 campaign).

Over the years Chris has observed that – despite the benefits of stretching – most of us just don't bother to actually do it. "There are several reasons for that," he says. "It's boring, it takes too long and it's hard to get it right. And in the gym environment it can even be unpleasant to be lying down and have people walking around your head."

However, Chris found that once people have a reason to stretch, for example if

"Being related to primates, it's in our nature to hang. And it's good for us. As kids, we'd spend hours hanging out on a jungle gym, talking to our mates."

But at a certain age, our parents discouraged us from such activity, because it's not socially acceptable to hang around like a monkey.

"But that doesn't mean it's not physiologically acceptable," argues Chris. "In fact, it's physiologically required. The idea behind Bodywall is that it will make hanging around an acceptable thing for adults to do..."

And it could soon become not only acceptable but highly sought-after in elite sporting circles. As part of his marketing strategy, Chris plans to launch the Bodywall

technique as an integral part of the training of our top sports teams. Team New Zealand used the Bodywall during the latest America's Cup campaign. The Warriors are also on board and Auckland University of Technology's Sport Performance Research Centre is trialling and testing the Bodywall among its elite athletes.

AUT's Patria Hume, a biomechanics scientist, has been involved in the project from the start. Dr Hume was the first person Chris approached with his idea, showing her a miniature cardboard prototype. In her role as director of AUT's Sport Performance Research Centre, Dr Hume is conducting independent research on the effectiveness of Bodywall. This will involve



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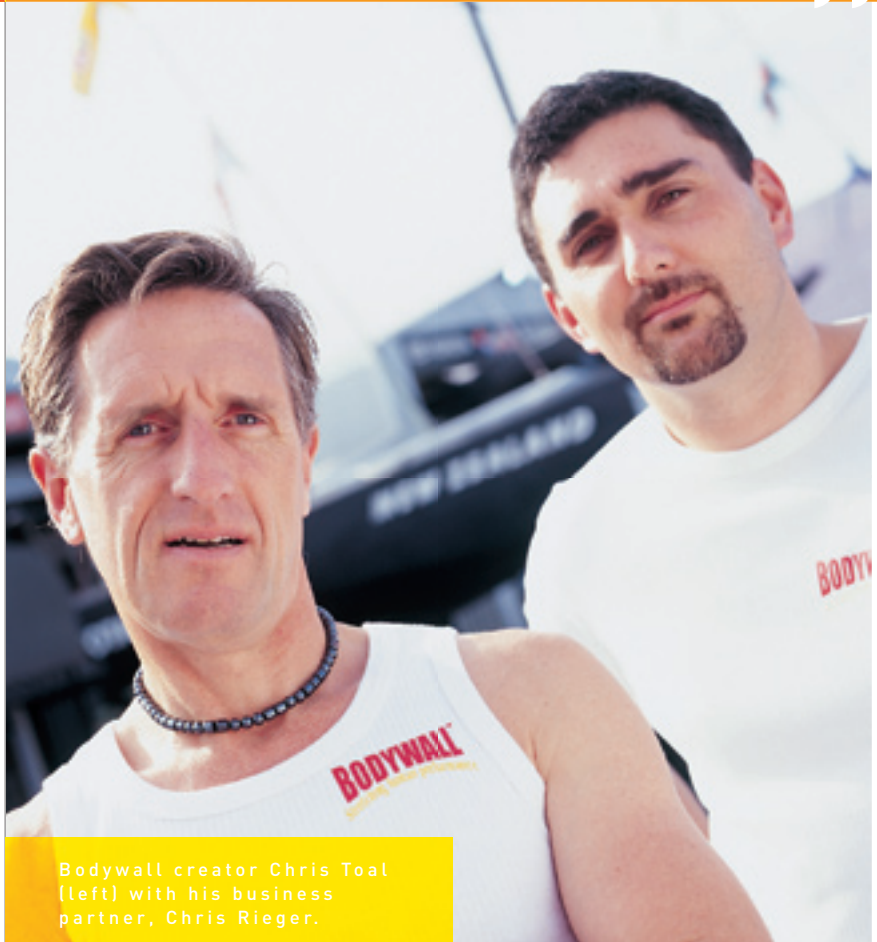
they're recovering from injury or want to boost their sporting performance, they are keen to give it a go. So therein lay the challenge: how do you turn stretching into an activity that's fun, fast and demonstrably effective?

According to Chris, the answer lies in allowing people to – quite literally – hang around. "I can recall from my youth seeing a truck driver 'hanging' on the side of his truck to stretch his back and relieve the pain. Most of us have used the top of a doorframe or railings. When you're tired from excessive work or strain these sensations are quite enjoyable."

The beauty of the Bodywall is that it requires virtually no effort. The Velcro-like grips (made from 3M Nulock) on the gloves and slip-on boots adhere so securely to the wall they can support full bodyweight. It simulates the sensation of hanging from a bar or doorframe, yet does not require you to actually 'hold on'.

So why does stretching this way feel intuitively good? It all stems from our childhood, Chris believes, not to mention our primeval beginnings.

Photographs: Paul Sutherland



Bodywall creator Chris Toal (left) with his business partner, Chris Rieger.

trials with groups of athletes from various fields as well as patients who could benefit from stretching therapies.

Although it's too early to comment until the research is complete, Dr Hume describes Bodywall as a product with "good potential".

One of its main advantages is that it allows movements to be performed without the muscles contracting on opposite sides of the joint, which results in a more effective stretch.

Stretching expert Wendy Sweet, who recruits the trainers at AUT and is currently director of the Waikato Institute for Leisure and Sports Studies, is "very excited" by the potential of Bodywall.

"My immediate reaction was 'wow'," she says. "I can see it offers a great oppor-

BODYWALL™
Stretching human performance



BODYWALL™
Stretching human performance

With its benefits for people at all levels of fitness, Bodywall is predicted by experts to

find acceptance throughout the entire fitness and sports therapy industry



tunity for structuring stretching into the whole fitness industry and in services like personal training."

According to Wendy, the technique overcomes two major barriers to traditional methods of stretching – that it can be both painful and awkward.

"On the Bodywall you're hanging freely, which creates a wonderful sense of release. The fact that there is no impact also makes it good for bigger people or those who otherwise find stretching awkward."

Wendy likens it to rock climbing, minus the major effort. "Potentially, we could all have the flexibility of a rock climber – strengthening our adductors, hamstrings or inner thighs – without having to grip to a rockface."

Wendy predicts the Bodywall will have "huge ramifications" for physical therapy and rehabilitation, not to mention the needs of our ageing population. The growing popularity of activities like yoga and Pilates is

proof of the market demand for techniques which improve flexibility. "You can work any one muscle you want by putting yourself in the right position," Chris explains. "There are endless variations on the load you can place on the muscles."

And the types of exercises one can perform on the Bodywall are limitless too – anything from a mild stretch to a test of superhuman strength. There are different types of gloves, graded for beginners, advanced or extreme.

"The Bodywall can be as challenging to use as you want to make it," says Chris. "It's way more powerful than it looks. For instance, you'd need to be one of New Zealand's fittest athletes to perform a reverse crunch."

So will a set of Bodywall gloves and boots eventually become a standard piece of personal gym equipment, to be found in every gym bag? Chris believes so.

"I can see that it will change the way

people work out," he says. "They won't be finished until they've done their stretching."

The home market is another avenue – the Bodywall home gym can be used after a training session, or to de-stress for 10 minutes after a long day at work.

Wendy Sweet agrees that the Bodywall has what it takes to be a 'stayer' in the fitness and body conditioning industry. She says that for something to be really big in the business it has to fulfil three criteria – it has to be fun, pain free and offer real benefits. "People are often attracted to things that are a bit more activity-based, or because there's a fun element to it," she says. "Bodywall offers opportunities for structuring stretching into the fitness industry, particularly around things like personal training."

Chris is already looking ahead to the day when a Bodywall personal training programme is being implemented in gyms around the world. "This not only offers gyms an additional income stream – as personal trainers work with clients on workout and stretch routines – but it also ensures the Bodywall is being properly used. Because it looks so simple, people want to go straight to it and give it a go. We want to avoid 'instant experts', so we'll develop

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On the Bodywall you can hang freely, which creates a wonderful sense of release

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protocols, manuals and training programmes to ensure safety."

Les Mills has already committed to trialling the Bodywall in its flagship central Auckland gym. Phillip Mills says the growth of yoga and other stretching-orientated classes indicates there is a demand for such techniques. "This looks like a great innovative way for people to stretch," Phillip says. "We're looking forward to trialling it."

Another person who has a keen interest in the potential of Bodywall is Chris Rieger, director of Pacific Health & Fitness Ltd, the strategic partner and major shareholder in the Bodywall venture. Pacific Health imports, exports and distributes a range of products in the natural health industry – and is already manufacturing the first of the walls.

Despite the simplicity of the concept, developing the Bodywall technology has been a time-intensive and expensive process. Half a million dollars have already been invested in product development and securing the intellectual property rights.

It's taken two-and-half years to perfect the glove – with 10 major variants and countless modifications. The challenge was to build a glove that was sufficiently strong and had the requisite 'stickability', yet would not damage the structure of the hand. "The pressure must be applied ergonomically otherwise it could cause severe stress to the hand or wrist," says Chris Toal. "Over the years we've made



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The types of exercises that can be performed on the Bodywall are limitless – anything from a



mild stretch to a test of superhuman strength. Gloves are graded according to ability

loads and loads of gloves... a huge stack of them!"

But Chris never doubted they'd eventually hit on the magic formula. "I knew from the start when I had the idea that it would work. The technology existed... we just had to put it together."

And for Chris, who spent his childhood "learning to make things on the farm" in rural Australia, it was a labour of love. He also thrives on a challenge, and has a philosophy of tackling life head-on. Chris has always been into fast sports – including skydiving, flying and racing superbikes in the mid-1990s (before a snapped femur put a spanner in the works). "When I get scared of things, I just go do them," he says.

To overcome his fear of the ocean at night in a storm, for example, he talked his way into crewing for the hazardous 1997 trans-Tasman yacht race. And to celebrate the millennium, Chris was part of a Guinness Book of Records' attempt for the world's highest dinner party on

the summit of Mt Aconcagua in South America.

His personal enthusiasm for the future of the Bodywall demonstrates the same 'give it a go' attitude. Yet despite its financial potential, which could conceivably be in the millions, making money, whilst important, is not Chris' prime motivation. He has set up the Bodywall Charitable Trust, which will receive 20 percent of the company profits. The Trust income will be used to donate Bodywalls to organisations and institutions that may not otherwise be able to afford them, such as Starship Hospital or the Otago Spinal Unit.

Chris says "I'll be happy to work my guts out for the benefit of the Trust and the shareholders. That will give me the motivating essence I need to make Bodywall a success and to protect it."

Chris says the investors are more than happy with the philanthropic aspect of the business. "To start up the company I first went to Pacific Health, then we asked family, clients and friends to come

on board. The Bodywall Trust was always a part of the project so our investors had to believe not only in the product, but also in the Trust and the rewards people could reap if we succeeded. They will all tell you how nice it feels to be involved in this project."

Making a positive difference has been a constant theme both in Chris' personal life and his work with clients. "Maybe you can't change the world, but you can make a difference in the lives of people you come in contact with," he says. So his dream for the Bodywall is that it will one day be used in gyms, by sports teams and in rehabilitation centres around the world. And that it will benefit everyone from top-level athletes to stressed-out executives to people with disabilities.

"I will be happy when I'm watching a kid with spina bifida who's using the Bodywall and being helped by an All Black. That'll be the point where I get a tear in my eye and think, yeah, I've got it right now..." 🏈