ATN

ATHLETECH NEWS : GYM OF THE FUTURE

OCTOBER 2026



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WE INFORM AND INSPIRE those who are out to disrupt the future of our rapidly evolving industry. Launched in 2020 at the intersection of fitness, wellness and technology, we cover topics as diverse as brick-and-mortar gyms, connected fitness products, boutique formats, outdoor exercise, equipment innovations, emerging technologies, wellness trends, and consumer insights. ✡ Our writers set out each day to deliver proprietary content and analysis that will help spark ideas and shape agendas for decision-makers in the fast-paced fitness space. ✡ We provide comprehensive and multi-platform coverage of the most impactful news and trends shaping the fitness and wellness segment, bringing together innovators, influencers and executives with content that sparks ideas, uncovers opportunities, and drives growth.

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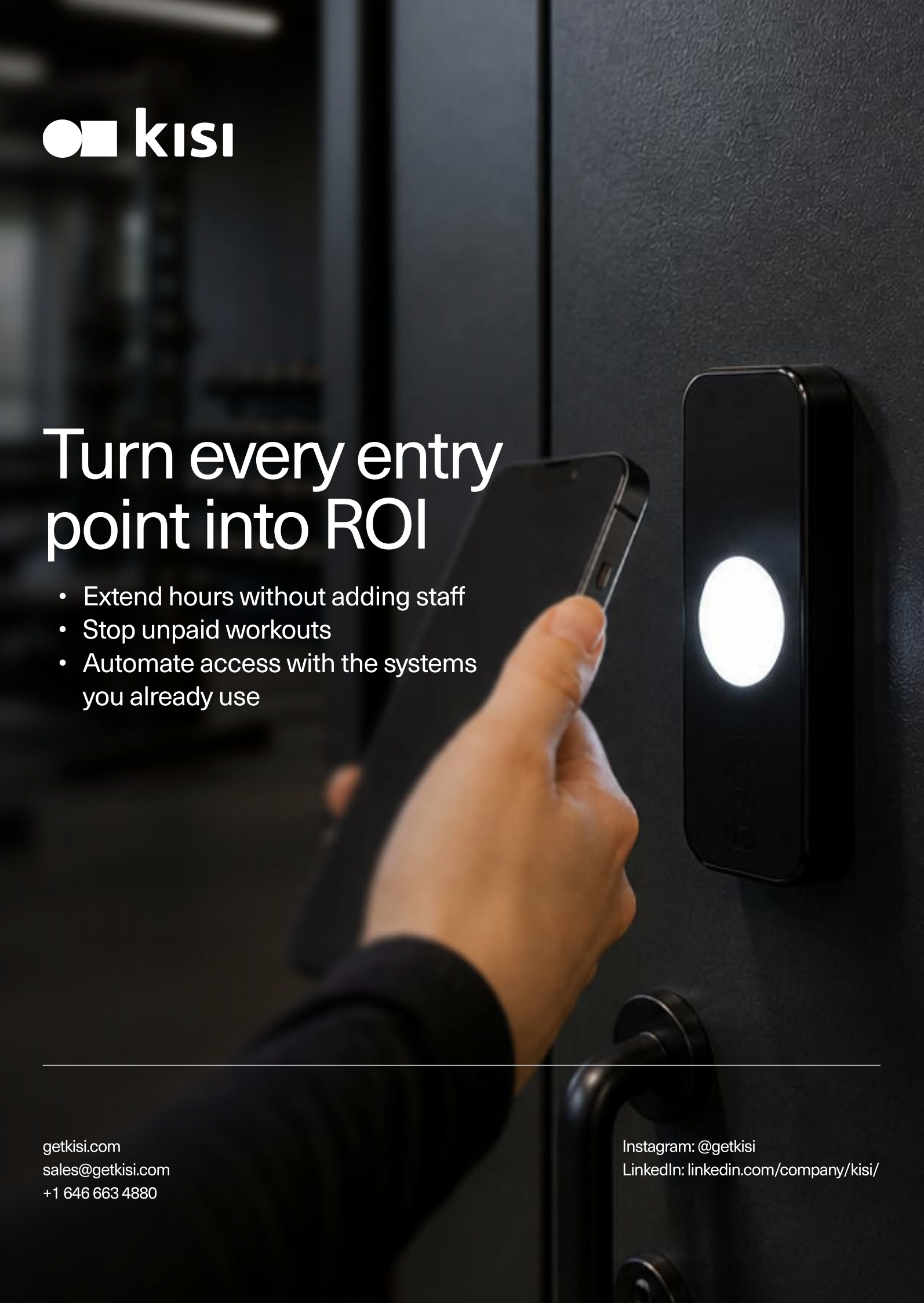
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> **A room full of equipment isn't enough anymore."**—**Bill Bourque**, Exos



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> **Modern life and increased focus on digital life is causing urban isolation, leaving people craving healthy, social environments.** —**Robbie Hammond**, Therme Group



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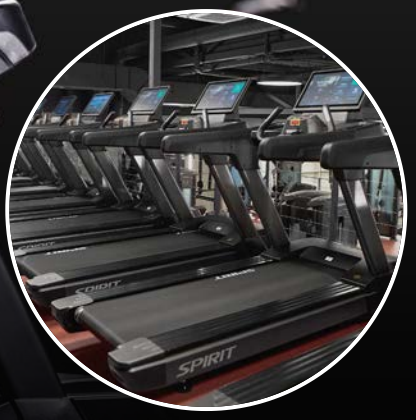
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BIG-BOX GYMS BUILD FOR THE FUTURE

From reformer Pilates and Hyrox training to AI-powered basketball courts and destination-style spaces, gym operators are rethinking what belongs inside their four walls.

by Josh Liberatore



SHUTTERSTOCK

THE BIG-BOX IS GETTING BIGGER, even if its physical footprint stays the same. ✡ High-level strength-training equipment, expansive turf areas and recovery amenities like saunas and cold plunges have become commonplace inside America's gyms. Now, some of the country's top big-box operators are taking things a step further. ✡ Boutique-style studios are making their way inside high-value, low-price (HVLP) gyms, giving members access to modalities like reformer Pilates, heated yoga, boxing and small-group strength training without having to pay for separate memberships. ✡ Hyrox is finding a home inside major gym chains, too, as operators build dedicated training spaces and offer programming designed around the booming fitness competition. Operators are also experimenting with entirely new ideas, from themed rooms and AI-powered basketball courts to upscale gym concepts that push into luxury territory. ✡ Taken together, the moves offer an early look at what the big-box gym of the future might look like.



AMPED

BIG BOX GOES BOUTIQUE

Boutique fitness has long been positioned as the antithesis of the traditional big-box gym experience: smaller spaces with specialized, group-oriented classes built around a single modality.

Increasingly, big-box operators are seeking to replicate that experience inside their own walls.

Vasa Fitness is among the most aggressive. The 70-plus-location HVLP operator has launched Studio Pilates, a reformer-based program, along with Studio LFT, a small-group strength-training concept, and infrared yoga.

"We're not just adding another class, we're building a comprehensive training ecosystem that gives members access to multiple premium training modalities in one place," Vasa CEO Michael Osanloo said.

The Edge Fitness Clubs, an HVLP chain in the Northeast, has been rolling out infrared yoga, small-group reformer Pilates and semi-private strength training across its 40-plus-club network, along with dedicated recovery areas.

Crunch Fitness may be going furthest of all.

As part of its Crunch 3.0 initiative, the HVLP giant has unveiled a collection of specialized concepts including Crunch Reform Pilates, a Pump Strength Training Studio, an Abs & Glutes Studio and a Spar Boxing Studio, along with expanded recovery offerings. Franchisees can choose which concepts they put inside their clubs through a hub-and-spoke model.

By offering boutique concepts, HVLP operators are effectively seeking to take advantage of economies of scale, giving consumers more bang for their buck than they'd get by attending multiple specialized studios.

"For consumers, the value proposition is fairly straightforward," Michael Goodsell, the chief strategy officer of Fit Fusion, a top Crunch franchisee, told ATN. "Why pay for several separate memberships if your gym can increasingly offer strength training, Pilates, boxing, recovery and traditional fitness under one roof?"

Fit Fusion is bringing Reform Pilates and Pump Strength classes to its

> **"I don't care what industry we're talking about, you're gonna have to compete and fight for attention. Social media has proven that… But who's fighting for attention in the real world?"** —**Travis LaBazzo**, Amped Fitness

> **For consumers, the value proposition is fairly straightforward. Why pay for several separate memberships if your gym can increasingly offer strength training, Pilates, boxing, recovery and traditional fitness under one roof?"** —**Michael Goodsell**, Fit Fusion (Crunch Fitness)



locations, starting with Fort Walton Beach, Florida.

"We take a lot of pride in bringing that type of amenity to a market and opening it up to a much larger population and making it financially palatable," Goodsell added.

Goodsell said Fit Fusion plans to incorporate the new Crunch 3.0 boutique classes in most, if not all, of its new buildouts moving forward. The franchisee will also look to retrofit some existing locations with the classes if space permits.

"We're going to offer it everywhere if we can," he said.

HYROX PROGRAMMING BECOMES THE STANDARD

The big-box gym's evolution isn't limited to taking cues from boutique fitness.

As Hyrox continues its rapid ascent, some of the country's largest gym operators are turning their facilities into year-round training grounds for fitness racing.

Gold's Gym partnered with Hyrox to open North America's first Hyrox Performance Center at its Little Elm club in the Dallas area last year. The dedicated space features official competition equipment along with workshops, clinics and specialized group and individual training programs. Gold's has indicated it plans to bring the concept to additional locations.

More recently, EoS Fitness made an even bigger bet, bringing official Hyrox training to an initial 25 locations, combining dedicated training environments with instructor-led classes and digital programming delivered through its app.

EoS will also host Hyrox simulation events and serve as title sponsor of the 2027 Hyrox San Diego race.

Vasa joined the movement in September, striking an enterprise

CRUNCH FITNESS

> **Fitness is truly universal.…We believe the sport of Hyrox can be trained inside every fitness facility around the world in the same way you go to yoga or HIIT class,"** —**Douglas Gremmen**, Hyrox

partnership that will initially bring official Hyrox training environments to 10 clubs across Colorado, Utah, Arizona, Oklahoma and Illinois, with further expansion planned.

Hyrox's growing presence inside big-box gyms makes good on a vision the brand's executives have been laying out for some time.

"Fitness is truly universal. … We believe the sport of Hyrox can be trained inside every fitness facility around the world in the same way you go to yoga or HIIT class," Hyrox chief growth officer Douglas Gremmen told ATN back in 2024, setting the stage for the partnerships that have come since.

AMPED FITNESS, OTHER OPERATORS TRY NEW THINGS

Some operators are thinking even further outside the box.

Amped Fitness, the fast-growing HVLP brand already known for its brash approach to fitness, is going even bolder, unveiling an approach that — if successful — could change gyms as we know them.

At its Sugar Land, Texas, flagship, Amped debuted Amped Universe, a collection of eight themed spaces designed to turn a trip to the gym into something closer to a theme-park experience.

There's Amped Arena for strength training, Aura Pilates for reformer classes and Sweat Cinema for cardio, among others.

"There's a reason theme parks are so popular," Amped founder and CEO Travis LaBazzo told ATN of the strategy. "We want to be the theme park for fitness."

The concept is an extension of how Amped has positioned itself for years. LaBazzo said the operator has deliberately leaned into dramatic lighting, high-energy environments and a nightclub-like atmosphere as a way to stand apart in the crowded HVLP category.

Amped Universe takes that philosophy much further, creating what LaBazzo describes as essentially "eight gyms in one," with members passing through a portal connecting a series of themed destinations.

The idea might seem theatrical, but it's grounded in business logic: LaBazzo believes gyms increasingly have to compete for attention in the same way digital platforms do, particularly with younger consumers.



"At the end of the day, I don't care what industry we're talking about, you're gonna have to compete and fight for attention," he said. "Social media has proven that people are fighting for attention on social media. That's great, but who's fighting for attention in the real world?"

Importantly, Amped Universe isn't intended to remain a one-off experiment. LaBazzo told ATN the concept will become the standard experience for new Amped clubs moving forward, while several existing locations could also be upgraded.

Other big-box operators are experimenting in different ways.

Fitness International, the parent company of LA Fitness and City Sports Club, is working with Shoot 360 to turn traditional basketball courts into tech-enabled training environments. The companies have piloted the concept across Northern California, Oregon and Washington.

Crunch Fitness, meanwhile, is trying to make low-price and luxury coexist under one brand.

The operator unveiled Crunch Select, an upscale gym concept, coming first to Long Beach, New York. The reimagined format includes more than 60 hours of group fitness each week, expanded studio spaces, towel service and amenities including infrared salt saunas, cold therapy, red light infrared sauna, dry cold plunge, massage chairs and HydroMassage.

Memberships at the Long Beach club range from a founding rate of $65 per month for single-club access to $127 per month for its highest tier.

"Crunch Select brings together the best of what the fitness world has to offer — an elevated, high-end fitness environment, while maintaining the energy, group fitness community and 'No Limits' approach that have made Crunch unique for more than 35 years," new Crunch CEO Chequan Lewis said. ■

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TORQUE FITNESS' NEW SLED BRINGS MORE RESISTANCE, MORE POSSIBILITIES

With greater resistance and multidirectional movement, Torque Fitness' SX gives athletes and operators a better approach to functional training.



TORQUE FITNESS is continuing to innovate around one of the oldest and most straightforward forms of training. The equipment supplier, known for its dynamic push sleds, is adding to its product line with a new concept – the SX sled.

Years ago, Torque set out to solve a simple, yet persistent pain point in push sleds: multi-directional mobility. Most standard sleds on the market could move forward or backward, so in 2025, Torque launched the TANK M3, which holds a center wheel that allows users to push or pull it in any direction. The sled's magnetic resistance technology also makes it drivable on any surface.

While the M3 and the other components of the TANK line were well received, its highest-performing users eventually wanted something that featured more resistance and presented a greater challenge. Those athletes looking to take a step forward with their training prompted Torque to take one of its own, building a more demanding, yet equally versatile version of the sled.

"A lot of the SX actually goes back to a conversation with Garrett Giemont, who was the head strength coach for the Pittsburgh Steelers," said Jerry Dettinger, CEO of Torque Fitness. "He asked for a sled that could turn. Every sled on the market went in a straight line, but his defensive backs and receivers don't play in straight lines. They break, cut, and change direction, and he wanted to load those movements. That stuck with us. At the same time, as TANK showed up in more health clubs and college weight rooms, the strongest athletes kept asking for more resistance and more ways to use it. The SX brings all of that together."

EVERYTHING THE SX UNLOCKS

The SX is Torque's most resistant sled to date. It features Mag-Force™ resistance technology, which increases resistance as the user pushes harder. These factors make the sled applicable to elite athletes, base-level fitness consumers and everyone else in between.

"With most sleds, strong athletes hit the top pretty quickly,

> Functional training isn't a trend anymore.
> It's how people train, from pro locker rooms to apartment fitness rooms."
> —**Jerry Dettinger**, Torque Fitness





and then you're stacking plates and adjusting instead of training," Dettinger said. "The SX raises that ceiling. A coach can take a lineman, a sprinter and a member who's just getting started, and every one of them gets the right challenge on the same piece of equipment. Because the resistance builds with speed, the harder you push, the harder it pushes back. That's the magic of it."

The SX also differs from standard sleds with its four wheel base, allowing it to move in any direction like the M3 or the later-launched TANK M1S.

"That changes everything about how you can train," Dettinger added. "You're not limited to pushing forward and dragging back. You can load curved runs, cuts, lateral work and change-of-direction patterns."

That mobility also allows the SX to store easily and live in a variety of spots on a gym floor, which stands to benefit any operator trying to pack as many offerings into their space as possible.

"For a facility, one piece of floor space now covers speed, strength and agility work," Dettinger said. "For the athlete, the equipment gets out of the way and you just train. That's always been the goal with TANK."

PRO APPROVED

Two-time NFL Pro Bowler Adam Thielen is among the SX's satisfied users. For Dettinger, seeing the SX challenge the former Minnesota Vikings, Carolina Panthers and Pittsburgh Steelers wide receiver cemented his trust in the sled's premium capabilities.

"Adam has been training at the highest level for a long time, and there isn't much equipment that really challenges someone like him," Dettinger said. "The SX did. Watching him drive the sled and seeing how hard it pushed back told us more than any spec sheet could. That was exactly the goal. If the SX can push an athlete of Adam's caliber, it can push anyone, whether that's a D1 program, a premium club, or a serious athlete training at home."

ONTO SOMETHING BIGGER

Torque recognizes functional fitness as something that's grown beyond a popular consumer demand, viewing it as a key pillar in the future of fitness. As it drives consumers to demand more out of their equipment, it'll make the SX an increasingly valuable addition for gyms looking to stay relevant.

"Functional training isn't a trend anymore. It's how people train, from pro locker rooms to apartment fitness rooms," Dettinger said. "What I see is athletes and everyday members wanting equipment that does more than one thing, takes up less space, and meets them where they are, whether that's day one or year fifteen. The SX fits right into that."

Sled-based exercise facilitates strength, cardio and agility-based exercise. It's also applicable in rehab or physical therapy. The SX delivers all that in a more versatile and owner-friendly fashion.

In the future, Dettinger shared that he expects to see facilities build entire training zones around functional training. From an individual consumer standpoint, he also foresees serious athletes bringing more functional training equipment for it into their homes.

Torque intends to be part of that process, delivering in each setting. For now, it'll largely do so with the TANK series and the SX. However, the brand has no plans to stop there, still intent on innovating at the same pace that's gotten it this far already.

"The SX isn't the finish line," Dettinger said. "It sets a new standard for what a sled should be, and we'll keep pushing it forward, because that's who we are. Don't Quit. Ever."

The SX will be available for purchase on October 6th, 2026. ●

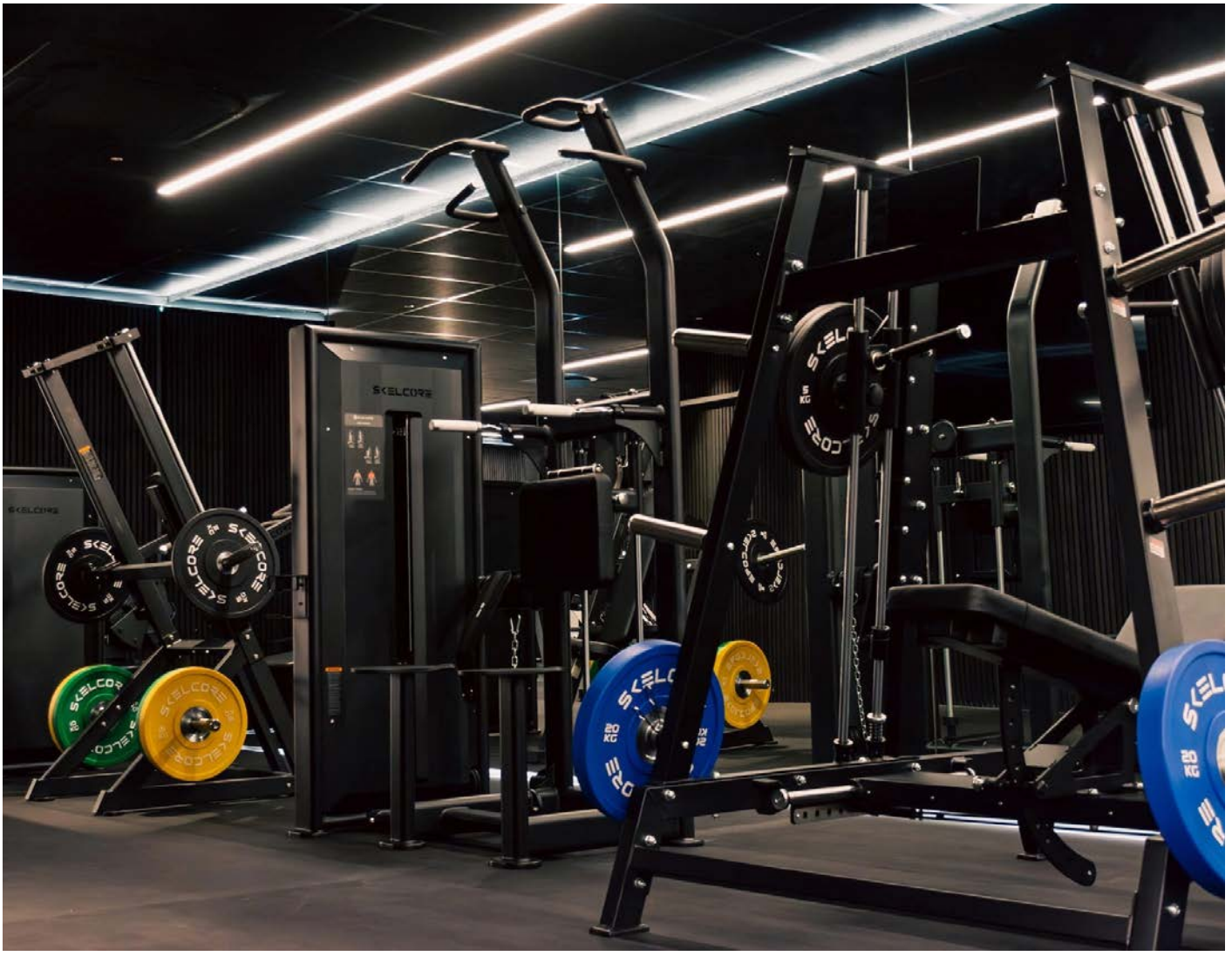
WHAT BELONGS ON THE FITNESS FLOOR OF THE FUTURE?

ATN speaks to operators, equipment makers and tech execs to get a sense of the equipment, technology and physical design trends shaping the next generation of fitness facilities. **by Kim KIsner**



SKELCORE

FOR DECADES, outfitting a fitness floor largely meant deciding which strength and cardio equipment to buy. In 2026, that equation has become considerably more complicated. ✡ Strength continues to command more space. Pilates is moving deeper into traditional fitness facilities. Functional and hybrid training are reshaping floor design. Recovery and wellness are becoming part of the core club experience. AI, connected equipment and wearables are creating increasingly personalized training journeys. At the same time, members are arriving with more specific goals, whether they're training for performance, longevity, weight management or simply trying to move and feel better.



All of it has to fit within essentially the same four walls, forcing operators to ask more of every square foot of the facility.

To that end, the question facing operators isn't simply what's new. It's what deserves to be there.

The answer emerging from equipment manufacturers, technology companies and operators is nuanced. The gym of the future may be more connected and intelligent, but that doesn't mean putting more technology on every machine or chasing every new modality. Instead, operators are becoming more intentional about how equipment earns its footprint, where technology meaningfully improves the experience and how individual investments work together to serve a much broader range of member needs.

Rowdy Yates, executive vice president of fitness at EoS Fitness, sees that nuance playing out on the gym floor.

"I don't think the gym floor itself is going to look dramatically different five years from now, but the equipment and the experience around it will be much smarter and more connected," Yates tells Athletech News.

The result may challenge an old assumption about what a futuristic gym actually looks like. The next generation of fitness facilities may be defined less by how futuristic the equipment appears and more by how intentionally every piece of the experience works together.

> **"I don't think the gym floor itself is going to look dramatically different five years from now, but the equipment and the experience around it will be much smarter and more connected."**
>
> —**Rowdy Yates**, EOS Fitness

SKELCORE



MAKING EVERY SQUARE FOOT WORK HARDER

The expansion of strength alone illustrates how much more today's fitness floor is being asked to accommodate. Dan Wille, chief product officer at Life Fitness / Hammer Strength, says its growth now spans performance, weight management, healthy aging and longevity, bringing people with very different objectives into the same training environment.

"Strength is not just growing, it is expanding to serve more people and more purposes," Wille says. "That shift will require operators to think more intentionally about zoning, programming and making strength approachable without losing its performance foundation."

Other modalities are expanding alongside it. Technogym identifies strength, Pilates and a resurgence in running among the trends shaping its product development. Its upcoming Technogym Reform brings connected technology to Pilates, while Pure Strength addresses high-load performance training and AI-enabled Biostrength adapts training to the individual user. Its RUN X 5K treadmill competition with World Athletics brings a competitive, community-driven dimension to running inside the club.

As operators make room for those varied experiences, equipment itself is evolving to help them do it.

Torque Fitness' upcoming Omnistack, for example, consolidates cable, lat, row, back, hip, triceps and other training stations onto a modular selectorized strength system, with four- to 10-station configurations that can evolve as programming changes.

"Space efficiency and modularity are becoming design principles in their own right," explains Sarah Dettinger Schmitt, vice president of marketing and consumer sales at Torque Fitness. "Floors can be reconfigured as programming changes, rather than fixed rows that lock a facility in."

Skelcore is tackling the same challenge through simpler, smaller strength machines.

"Operators are asking for equipment with fewer adjustment points and smaller footprints, allowing them to introduce more machines within the same real estate," CEO and founder Marc Ackermann says.

The company is preparing three new product ranges developed with industry veteran Roy Simonson for late 2026 and early 2027, building on innovations previewed at the HFA Show earlier this year, including its Inverz system, which combines selectorized and plate-loaded strength training in one platform.

That pressure is changing how operators evaluate the floor itself. Irina Dima, vice president of growth, strategy and operations at Sport Alliance, says operators are starting to think more like retailers, examining revenue per square foot and which classes, equipment and experiences justify the space they occupy.

Core Health & Fitness is seeing the same shift.

"Operators ultimately want to know: How can I get more value from my space, create greater engagement, and give members more reasons to keep coming back?" says Joey Osborne, vice president of global sales, marketing and product.

Core's Gym Rax powered by Wexer reflects that thinking, combining functional training equipment with digital content and programming to create multiple training experiences within an efficient footprint.

CONNECTED, WITH A PURPOSE

Technology is changing the floor too, although more technology on the machine isn't necessarily the end goal.

EoS offers one real-world view of where connected equipment can add meaningful value. Through EoS Smart Strength powered by EGYM, members receive guidance around positioning, resistance, repetitions and tempo, while advanced users can access modes including negative, adaptive and explosive training.

"What we've seen is that members really respond when technology makes strength training feel less intimidating and more purposeful," Yates says.

EoS has also expanded its EGYM partnership through EoS Gainiac, which uses AI to build personalized training plans that evolve as members log workouts and progress. EGYM's broader ecosystem, including its latest Smart Strength Series 3, is designed to connect training and member data across the fitness experience.

Technogym sees AI and data becoming foundational to personalization, with tools including Technogym Checkup assessing strength, mobility, cardio and balance.

EOS

"AI allows us to move toward hyper-personalization, where training can continuously adapt to the individual," says Enrico Manaresi, global head of communication.

At the same time, members are bringing more of their own technology into the gym.

Precor sees personal devices becoming a larger part of that ecosystem.

"Wearables and smartphones will increasingly inform recommendations around exercise, sleep, recovery and nutrition," Erica Tillinghast, vice president of commercial marketing, says.

Ackermann, meanwhile, sees a growing debate around how much technology members actually want embedded into the machines they use, particularly when some view exercise as an opportunity to disconnect.

FROM COLLECTING DATA TO ACTING ON IT

Behind the scenes, Daxko chief product officer Wes Gillette sees AI becoming infrastructure within the systems already running a facility.

"AI is poised to become the new operating system for member experience and club operations," Gillette says.

The opportunity comes from connecting signals such as attendance, equipment usage, engagement and wearable data with operational information and then acting on it. Instead of requiring staff to interpret another dashboard, software can identify an at-risk member, personalize outreach or automate administrative work.

Sport Alliance is taking a similar approach with PerfectAI Engage, now rolling out to customers. The system can detect when, for example, a member who regularly trained three times per week drops to once and initiate engagement before that behavior becomes a cancellation.

WellnessSpace Brands is bringing greater visibility to another category of equipment. Its Control 2.0 platform allows operators to see usage patterns across WellnessSpace recovery products, giving them insight into which experiences members are actually using and how utilization changes over time.

"The goal isn't to add technology for technology's sake," explains Eric Jaworsky, vice president of sales at WellnessSpace Brands. "It's to use data and connected technology to create a better member experience while giving operators better insight into their business."

> **"Space efficiency and modularity are becoming design principles in their own right. Floors can be reconfigured as programming changes, rather than fixed rows that lock a facility in."** —**Sarah Dettinger Schmitt**, Torque Fitness



RECOVERY BECOMES A CORE EXPERIENCE

What counts as essential equipment is changing as well.

"The next generation of fitness facilities won't just be places people go to work out," Jaworsky says. "They'll be places people go to feel better."

Recovery once occupied an ancillary corner of many clubs. WellnessSpace now sees operators evaluating it around retention, premium membership value and revenue generation, while looking for ways to deliver those experiences without adding significant staffing or operational complexity.

That requirement is influencing the equipment itself. WellnessSpace's RedZone Sauna and PolarWave dry plunge were developed to bring modalities traditionally associated with buildouts, water management and greater staff involvement into high-volume commercial environments with fewer operational demands.

Precor similarly sees wellness rooms, specialized strength and cross-training spaces replacing more generic zones as operators create experiences with distinct value propositions. Daxko's Elevate Wellness pushes the definition further, giving operators a way to connect members with medically supervised weight management and metabolic health services as fitness facilities play a larger role in the broader health journey.

For all the innovation entering the fitness industry, one of the clearest messages from manufacturers, technology providers and operators is also one of the simplest: buying what's newest isn't a strategy.

"Buy the solution, not the SKU," Dettinger Schmitt says.

That means evaluating whether equipment can serve multiple member populations, withstand commercial use and adapt with the facility over time.

The result is a different vision of the gym of the future: potentially more varied at the equipment level, while becoming more integrated at the experience level.

For Wille, the place to begin is with the outcome.

"Start with the outcome you want to create, not the equipment you want to buy," he says. "The strongest investments begin with a clear understanding of who the facility serves and the experience it wants to create. Then align equipment, technology, service and long-term support around that goal." ■

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IS YOUR FITNESS BUSINESS READY FOR AI?

Xplor Technologies CEO Randy Eckels on the data, systems and strategies that operators need to get AI right.



FITNESS OPERATORS are racing to determine where AI fits into their businesses. Randy Eckels, CEO of Xplor Technologies, thinks many are starting in the wrong place — before determining whether the business underneath the technology is ready to support it.

For him, AI readiness comes down to four conditions. Every number that matters needs one source of truth and one definition. Systems need to communicate with one another in real time. Operating routines need to be consistent enough that a machine could follow them. And someone within the organization needs to be accountable for the outcome AI is intended to influence.

"If 'active member' means something different in your billing system than in your CRM, no AI built on top of either is trustworthy," Eckels explains.

The same applies to connectivity. If two systems depend on a nightly file export to remain synchronized, the information is already outdated when it arrives. And if every club within a brand handles something as common as a failed payment differently, there isn't yet a consistent process for AI to automate.

Eckels offers operators a simple test.

"Can you tell me which members are at risk of leaving this month and why, without anyone exporting a spreadsheet?" he asks. "If the answer is no, then buying another AI feature just makes the mess faster, not better."

It is why Eckels believes much of the conversation about AI in fitness is getting ahead of itself.

"The fitness industry doesn't have an AI problem, it has a data quality problem," he says. "AI can surface insights in seconds, but if the underlying member, booking and payment data isn't accurate, operators risk making faster decisions based on flawed information."

For operators, getting AI-ready starts there: building a foundation the technology can trust before asking it to make decisions on the business's behalf.

START WITH THE PROBLEM

Once that foundation is in place, the question becomes where AI can provide the greatest value.

Eckels says instead of searching for places to deploy AI, look first at the decisions and processes already creating friction within the business.

"Operators are asking 'where can we use AI' when the question should be 'which decisions do

> AI can surface insights in seconds, but if the underlying member, booking and payment data isn't accurate, operators risk making faster decisions based on flawed information." —**Randy Eckels**, Xplor Technologies



we make inconsistently, slowly or too late,'" he says. "Every AI investment should start with a named decision, a named owner and the cost of getting that decision wrong."

Following that approach can lead operators toward some of the less visible parts of the business.

"A lot of operators want to point AI at the front desk.I get it - it works there, and can solve staffing challenges.," Eckels says. "But payments and back-office operations are a great opportunity for automation, and they're just as important to your business as the front desk. Failed payment recovery, reconciliation and collections are high-volume, rule-heavy processes. This is a great place for AI automation to tap in. Automate after-hours communications or routine customer requests, but keep the human in the conversation to handle escalations or nuances.

From there, he sees an opportunity to improve everyday decisions around staffing, class and space scheduling, pricing and capacity.

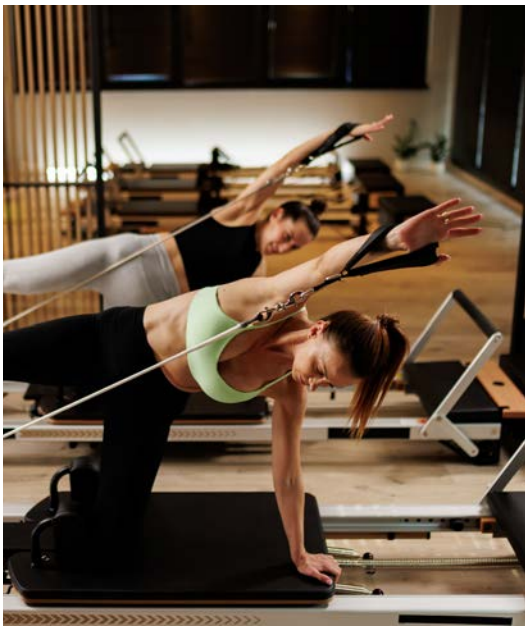
TURNING RETENTION SIGNALS INTO ACTION

Retention offers a clear example of what Eckels means by improving the quality of a decision.

Identifying a member as a churn risk is only the beginning. The more valuable information is why that particular member's behavior has changed and getting that information to someone in a position to do something about it.

"What the system should produce is a short list of named members, ranked by how much their behavior has shifted, with the reason next to each one," he says.

That could mean identifying a member who stopped booking after a class time changed, someone who hasn't returned since their trainer left or a member whose payment failed the previous month. From there, the information



can be routed to the staff member who actually knows that person.

"The 'reason' means a specific, actionable cause a coach or staff member can act on, not just a risk score," Eckels says. "A number tells staff someone is leaving, a reason guides them on how to intervene."

That distinction also helps explain why member-facing conversational AI falls further down Eckels' list of priorities.

"Not because it doesn't work, but because it's the highest-risk place to be early and the lowest-risk thing to be late on," he says. "The highest-return AI in fitness right now isn't talking to your members. It's fixing the reasons they were about to leave."

PUT THE TIME BACK WHERE IT BELONGS

That approach doesn't remove people from the equation. It changes where they spend their time.

Eckels believes operators should be deliberate about what happens to the capacity AI creates. Saving hours of administrative work has limited value if those same hours simply get absorbed by another layer of email or meetings.

"If you take six hours a week of admin off a studio manager, those hours should be specifically redirected to activities like floor time, member conversations and coaching new staff," he says.

For a people-driven business like fitness, Eckels sees an opportunity to use AI to move employees away from repetitive administrative tasks and toward work that relies on judgment, awareness and relationships.

"The tasks most at risk were already data entry," he says. "The roles most protected are the ones built on judgment and relationships. AI raises the value of the person who can read a room and connect with members."

That same philosophy carries into personalization. AI can help determine which member needs attention, when to reach out and what information may be relevant to the interaction. Eckels would leave the actual interaction with a person.

"Use AI to personalize the timing and relevance, but let the human provide the voice," he says. "The system can determine who to reach, when and with what context, while the person determines how to have that conversation."

As more AI-enabled products enter the fitness industry, Eckels believes the businesses that benefit most won't necessarily be those that adopt the fastest or accumulate the most tools.

The opportunity begins much further upstream: reliable data, connected systems, consistent operating routines and clear accountability.

For Eckels, that's ultimately the difference between having AI tools and being AI-ready.

"Stop using AI randomly and start thinking in systems," he says. "The winners won't be the businesses with the most AI tools, they'll be the businesses that make better decisions, create better member experiences and free their teams to focus on the work humans are uniquely good at." ●

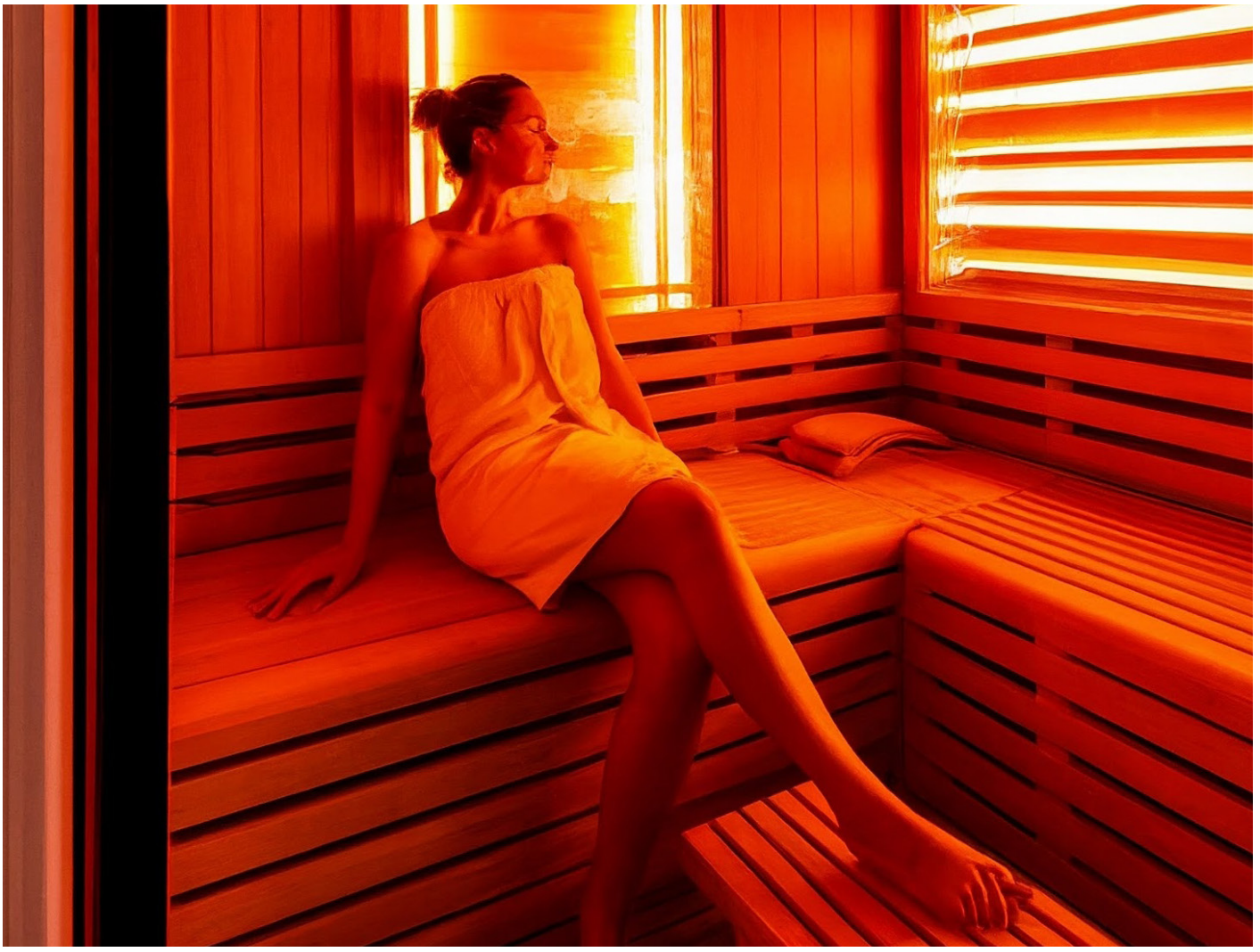


WHAT'S A LUXURY GYM IN 2026?

As low-price gyms add recovery amenities and Pilates, luxury operators from Chicago to Texas to the West Coast are moving the fight somewhere else.
by Courtney Rehfeldt

SHUTTERSTOCK

THE BUDGET GYM down the block now has an infrared sauna, a cold plunge and Pilates, all at an attractive price point. ✡ The category even has a name for its glow-up: HVLP 3.0, the newest iteration of the high-volume, low-price club, which has spent the past few years adding recovery lounges and boutique-style studios that used to signal a premium price tag, leaving luxury operators with a pointed question. When the amenities go mass market, what is a high-end membership actually for?



SHUTTERSTOCK

LUXURY GYMS SELL SPACE, EXCLUSIVITY & A PLACE TO STAY

Life Time offered one answer this summer: bigger clubs holding fewer people. Founder and CEO Bahram Akradi told analysts the upscale athletic country club operator's new urban builds are designed for 3,000 to 4,000 members and at a higher rack rate right off the get-go. Its 2026 class of clubs will span roughly 1.3 million square feet, nearly double its 2024 and 2025 classes, with most of the square footage serving more room per member.

Mel Kleist has watched the split from the inside. As CEO of Chicago's East Bank Club, a 400,000-square-foot institution spread across two city blocks on the Chicago River and open since 1980, and as a board member of the Health and Fitness Association, he sees an industry pulling in two different directions.

"The industry has become increasingly bifurcated," he said, high volume and low price at one end, luxury at the other. And members are more active than ever, Kleist said, leading East Bank to take measures to protect the member experience rather than chase new clients.

Fitness socials launched about a year and a half ago, giving members a chance to mingle and enjoy mocktails and have become quite popular. For social recovery, an event sauna is slated to be completed by the end of the year and will fit 40-50 members.

> **"Luxury amenities may attract attention, but people stay for the experience and the connections they build."** —**Audra McDonald**, Midtown Athletic Clubs

The upscale health club — and its nearly 700 employees — also connects the departments most clubs keep apart. The club's dietitians build the healthy meals sold across East Bank's restaurants, grocery store and juice bars, while a longevity medical wellness center is taking shape inside the club, a genuine healthcare operation offering concierge medicine and dermatology, built with Chicago Medical Society doctors. It's as much a preventive push, with doctors prescribing a way of life

> **“We have absolutely seen a bigger increase in young families… They’re looking for those social events, but they’re also looking to be able to work out and drop their kids in the child care facilities, knowing that it’s safe and clean.”** —**Allie McCullough**, The Houstonian



that keeps people out of the doctor’s office, as it is proof of a philosophy.

“This will be a true healthcare component inside the club, which brings that convenience to the members,” Kleist said.

Nearly 1,200 miles south, The Houstonian Club sits on 27 wooded acres in the middle of Houston, part of a resort campus that also holds a hotel, a four-star spa and five restaurants, and it runs on a country-club model with a high initiation fee and dues that climb every year. In 2025, it did something telling: it stopped taking new members and moved to a waitlist after reaching preferred capacity.

Allie McCullough, club marketing manager for The Houstonian, credits recovery and longevity for much of the demand, from The Covery, a recovery suite that runs as a membership within the membership, to a new partnership with longevity firm Fountain Life. The median member age falls between the low 40s and high 50s, but the club has been courting young professionals and young families, with under-35 members paying only part of their initiation fee and legacy pricing for those aging off a family plan.

“We have absolutely seen a bigger increase in young families,” McCullough said, pointing to kids’ camps, on-site childcare, trainers who work with children and group exercise classes for kids. “Families are just looking for places to go and places to grow as a family … they’re looking for those social events, but they’re also looking to be able to work out and drop their kids in the child care facilities, knowing that it’s safe and clean.”

Young professionals and families, she said, have been the club’s fastest-growing group.

THE NEW LUXURY IS HUMAN

Audra McDonald, vice president of marketing for Midtown Athletic Clubs, makes a similar case from a different set of cities. The “more resort than club, more club than gym” operator, with locations from Chicago to Montreal to Rochester, New York, has deliberately raised prices beyond inflation for years.

“It has allowed us to continue investing in larger, more upscale clubs while also attracting members who value a luxury experience and are looking for more than just a place to work out,” McDonald said.

The meaning of luxury has shifted, too.

“For many brands, luxury is primarily about amenities,” she said. Midtown’s position is that the real product is the intangibles: how a space feels, the quality of the interactions, the sense of belonging. As more brands move upmarket, McDonald added, the company is “strengthening the human side of the experience.”

“Luxury amenities may attract attention, but people stay for the experience and the connections they build,” she said.

Midtown is also holding back from adding the newest wellness trends to its clubs, instead opting to be intentional. It plans to roll out its own take on wellness over the coming year, one built on lasting habits.

On the West Coast, Bay Club is chasing a different kind of stickiness via the social calendar. The KKR-backed operator of sports and lifestyle clubs has leaned into “wellness clubbing,” also known as soft clubbing, a run of Silent Disco dance classes, sound bath meditations and other seasonal themed events.

FROM AMENITIES TO PERSONALIZATION & PERFORMANCE

But community is only one thing members want under a single roof. Recovery is the other front where the premium brands are adding a human layer to advanced tech. Equinox, the luxury lifestyle brand, is meeting the recovery boom with technology and coaches rather than picking one. Its Equinox Exclusives program, now in more than 50 clubs, pairs Aescape’s robotic massage machines with sessions the brand’s own coaches designed, from a 15-minute Precision Run Prep before a run to a Flow State Recovery after yoga or Pilates.

The clubs aren’t the only ones watching the expectations shift. Exos, which brings training methods honed on elite athletes and military operators into Fortune 100 workplaces, sees the luxury mindset traveling straight into corporate fitness. The company partnered with JPMorgan Chase to design and build its state-of-the-art employee fitness and well-being center.

“There’s actually a lot of convergence between the two,” said Bill Bourque, Exos’ president of enterprise services. In luxury wellness, he said, people have moved past beautiful rooms and the latest modality toward personalization, expertise and measurable outcomes.

“A room full of equipment isn’t enough anymore,” he said. In the workplace, he noted that companies are asking more of their people while navigating AI, constant change, distributed teams and increasing demands on leaders.

“So we’re helping them think about energy, resilience, readiness and performance as organizational opportunities, not just one-off issues,” Bourque said. ■

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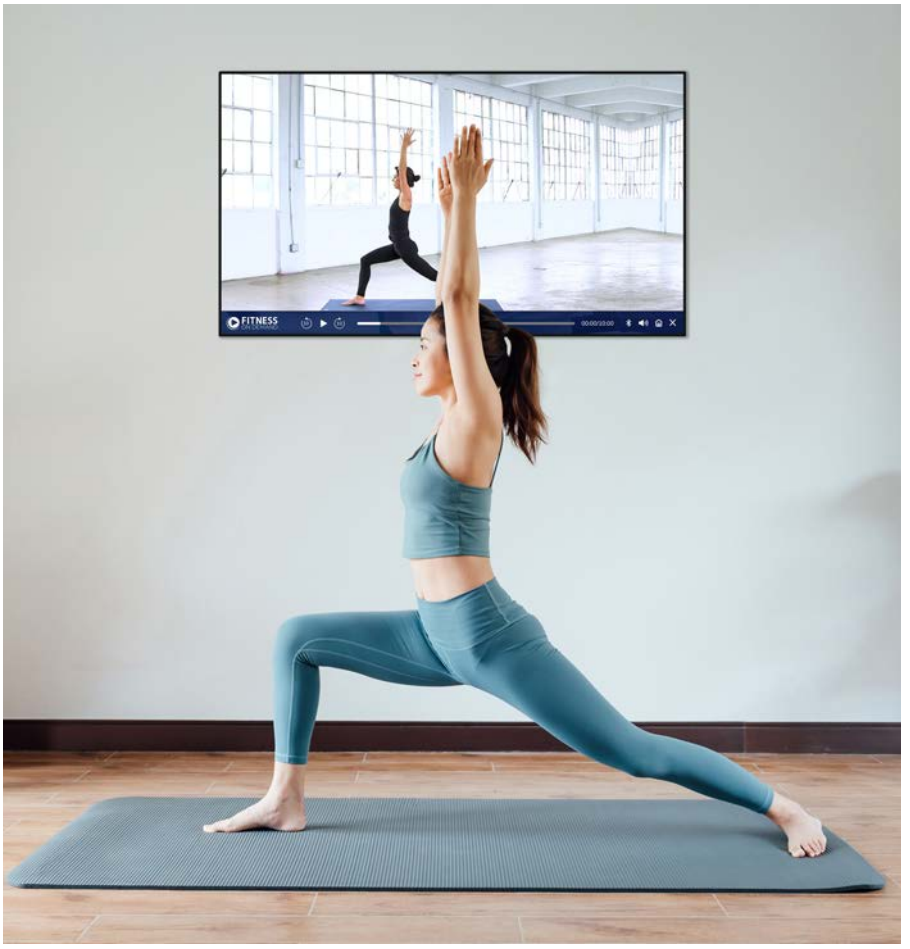
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HOW FITNESS ON DEMAND IS HELPING BIG-BOX GYMS SEIZE A NEW OPPORTUNITY

Big-boxes are embracing boutique-style fitness. Fitness On Demand is helping them do it strategically.



FITNESS CONSUMERS are getting healthier—and greedier. In their eyes, strength training, cardio or group fitness classes alone aren't enough to justify a gym or studio membership. They want all the aforementioned modalities, along with Pilates, cold plunge, sauna, mindfulness programming and everything in between.

It's a shift many have recognized across the industry, although few have had a better view of it than Fitness On Demand.

"The industry is moving away from the idea that members belong to one gym and follow one type of training," said Andy Peat, CEO of Fitness On Demand. "People now build their own routines across strength, Pilates, mobility, recovery and mindfulness."

As a leading content and tech partner for fitness businesses, the brand has witnessed this appetite growth firsthand, and the sector's reaction to it. In the past few years, that's involved a concerted effort amongst big-box operators to bring the modalities and amenities that were once only accessible in boutique settings onto their floors.

"The opportunity isn't to copy boutiques, it's to borrow what they do well," Peat said.

As this consumer evolution continues to take place, Fitness On Demand intends to help broker the exchange, offering the means for strategic implementation and leaning on its omnichannel platform in the process.

DOING BOUTIQUE FITNESS BETTER

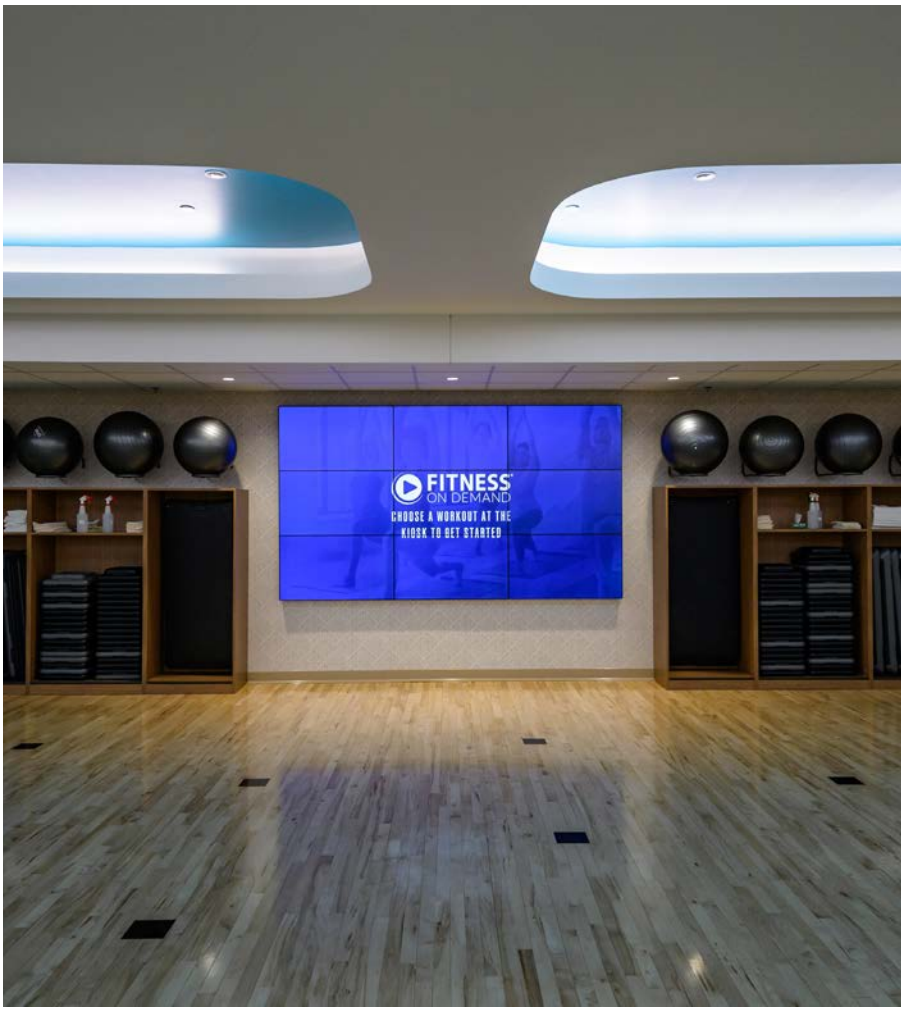
Big-box gym operations have a distinct advantage over boutiques, which are often built around one modality, smaller classes and a high level of instructor contact. That adds up to create a captivating consumer experience, but it also means a higher cost per visit.

Big-boxes operate for longer hours, benefit from more memberships and have wider space flexibility. Under these parameters, they can still offer what members value most in boutiques, such as quality programming, clear guidance and a space that feels designed for the activity, but without the high costs.

"This matters with equipment-heavy modalities such as reformer Pilates," Peat said. "If the equipment is only used for a few coached sessions, the numbers can be hard to justify. Extending access with self-guided digital programming improves the use of the space and makes the experience available to more members at a lower price."

> The opportunity isn't to copy boutiques, it's to borrow what they do well."
> —**Andy Peat**, Fitness on Demand





GETTING STARTED WITH DIGITAL

However, not all fitness modalities are easily introduced and embraced by consumers. Peat called investing heavily in a trend with an unknown outcome one of "the biggest risks in fitness."

"What performs well in a boutique in New York or Los Angeles won't automatically translate to every big-box location," he said.

To avoid purchasing an abundance of equipment that ends up collecting dust, big-box operators need to incorporate boutique-style modalities gradually rather than abruptly and extensively.

And while that requires a slower, more prudent approach, Fitness On Demand can help brands navigate it. With over a thousand digital fitness videos and on-demand classes, it allows gyms to deliver boutique-style fitness without the risk that comes from putting money into new machines, staff or spaces.

"Digital programming gives operators a way to test demand," Peat said. "They can introduce reformer Pilates, mobility or recovery content, track when and how it's used, and expand the offer if engagement is strong. That's a better starting point than filling a timetable based on assumptions."

YOU CAN'T THROW CONTENT AIMLESSLY AT CONSUMERS

Size, however, isn't everything. Even with its extensive content library, Fitness On Demand doesn't want gyms to end up spamming their members in this process.

The brand reports it has recently shifted to become more "selective" in choosing the content partners, only aligning with experts in their respective fields. For example, Fitness On Demand partnered with BodyBase to include reformer instruction, Armor321 for adaptive fitness and Synergy Dance for dance-related programming.

"It's not just a case of listing as many classes as possible; it's about addressing the training needs of different members that standard gym programming can struggle to meet," Peat said. "More choice can be valuable, but it can also create friction. A member with 20 minutes before work needs a very different experience from someone attending an instructor-led reformer Pilates class or a member looking for recovery after a strength training session."

Content curation and presentation are part of the equation as well. Fitness On Demand supports both with the omnichannel nature of its platform, which makes programming accessible across in-gym and mobile experiences.

"This makes it easy for members to find a session that fits their goals, abilities and available time," Peat said.

Peat also expects this distinction between offering content for content's sake and delivering programming that's relevant to members when they need it to separate winning operators from the struggling ones.

"Ultimately, volume doesn't drive engagement on its own," he said. "The gym of the future will be better at matching people with experiences that suit their goals, abilities, available time and preferred way of training. That shift will give operators much more scope to create experiences that feel relevant to each member, and that's where some of the industry's most interesting progress will come from." ●

AMERICA'S INDEPENDENT GYMS BUILD WITHOUT PRIVATE EQUITY



As roll-ups swallow the fitness industry, a crop of successful founder-owned concepts are scaling on their own money — and instincts. **by Courtney Rehfeldt**

ADOBE STOCK

PRIVATE EQUITY has spent the post-pandemic years buying up independent gyms and installing executives from outside the business, which makes the holdouts particularly interesting. They are founders scaling on their own terms, and while they don't agree on much — some are flooring the gas, and others are locking the doors — they share one conviction: the person running the gym should answer to members first.



SCALING WITHOUT SELLING OUT

Angel Bajana will tell you a gym run by someone who doesn't work out is a terrible idea. The Elev8tion Fitness founder, a self-described "meathead" who spent a decade in New York real estate and banking before training clients at Equinox, launched the brand in 2017 and now runs nine clubs across Florida, New Jersey and New York, with a West Palm Beach location breaking ground and franchising planned for 2027.

He hunts what he calls second-generation spaces. The newest and largest Elev8tion sits in a former LA Fitness in Aventura, and his chain operates "like a mom-and-pop," with Bajana noting he watches every dollar and negotiates leases as a tenant landlords have learned to trust.

He owns 100% of the company, and he means to keep it that way.

Offers arrive constantly, some from gym members who work in private equity and venture capital, and in 2024 he bought out his last partner partly because the partner wanted to sell and he did not. "If I sell this, what am I gonna do?" he said. "I'm in this for the long run. I love what I do."

He also still loves working out — and does so at all of his clubs. Next, he is eyeing New York City, Las Vegas and an international debut in Medellín, Colombia.

"[Franchising] is not really good at executing the modality, and I think it's very difficult to maintain a brand voice and quality when you have owners all over the place." —**Heather Andersen**, New York Pilates



THE GARAGE GYM · NEW YORK PILATES

“If I sell this (to private investors), what am I gonna do? I’m in this for the long run. I love what I do.” —**Angel Bajana**, Founder, Elev8tion Fitness



SOMETIMES GROWTH MEANS SAYING NO

If Bajana’s answer to demand is more locations, Kieran Williams’ is a velvet rope. The Garage started around 2019 when Sam Tooley, a co-founder of the group training brand Alpha Fit Club, handed out the keypad code to a room full of iron in Garwood, New Jersey, on the honor system.

Williams found it as a member, and at 24 he put in $50,000, nearly all his savings, to buy in, a leap he articulates through Tim Ferriss’s idea of a “real world MBA,” the money for a degree spent on a business instead. He came from supply chain management and software sales, not fitness, and is now CEO of two gyms in Westfield and Little Silver.

Prospective members apply on the website, sit for a conversation and get in only if there is space. When Westfield started to feel tight, Williams stopped taking members for about a year and a half, reopening it only after he expanded the floor.



“I’m a huge, huge, huge fan of doing totally unscalable things,” he said, adding that he would rather add one owner-operated location in Monmouth County than a franchise model.

Chris Travis, a former Amazon product manager who left the company in 2019, opened Seattle Strength & Performance (SSP) six years ago. SSP offers small-group, semi-private strength training modeled on athletic coaching, and it did just under $2 million in the first half of 2026, with membership up 32% year over year.

He is doing it self-funded and entirely company-owned rather than franchised, which he says keeps direct control of coaching and culture as the footprint grows. Most SSP coaches are full-time employees with salaries, fully covered health benefits, a 4% 401(k) match and three weeks of paid time off.

“SSP has grown far beyond what I imagined when we opened in 2020,” Travis said. “Today, we have more than 1,100 members across five open locations and are on track for seven locations and a $4 million-plus run rate by the end of 2026.”

FOR FOUNDERS, CONTROL IS THE POINT

In the boutique fitness space, there is Heather Andersen and Brion Isaacs, who have remained independent as a matter of principle.

The couple — she, a Pilates instructor of 20 years he calls the “Queen of Pilates,” and he, a branding and design professional — have spent 13 years building New York Pilates into multiple studios. No two studios look alike, and a West Village location sits in what Isaacs says was Bob Dylan’s old practice space.

Restraint has not cost them clients. After the studio paused new memberships, its waitlist swelled to as many as 4,000 people angling for its reformer-based Abs, Arms & Ass class, and after COVID the brand pulled itself off booking platform ClassPass to pass the savings to students directly.

Private equity has come calling, and they have said no every time.

“We have no private equity, no family money, nothing,” Isaacs said.

Andersen was reluctant from the start to even consider the idea.

“My passion is Pilates, and being able to maintain the quality as the number one most important thing is non-negotiable for me,” she said. Debt financing carries personal liability, but it keeps control where they want it. Franchising is off the table for the same reason.

“It is not really good at executing the modality,” Andersen said, “and I think it’s very difficult to maintain a brand voice and quality when you have owners all over the place.”

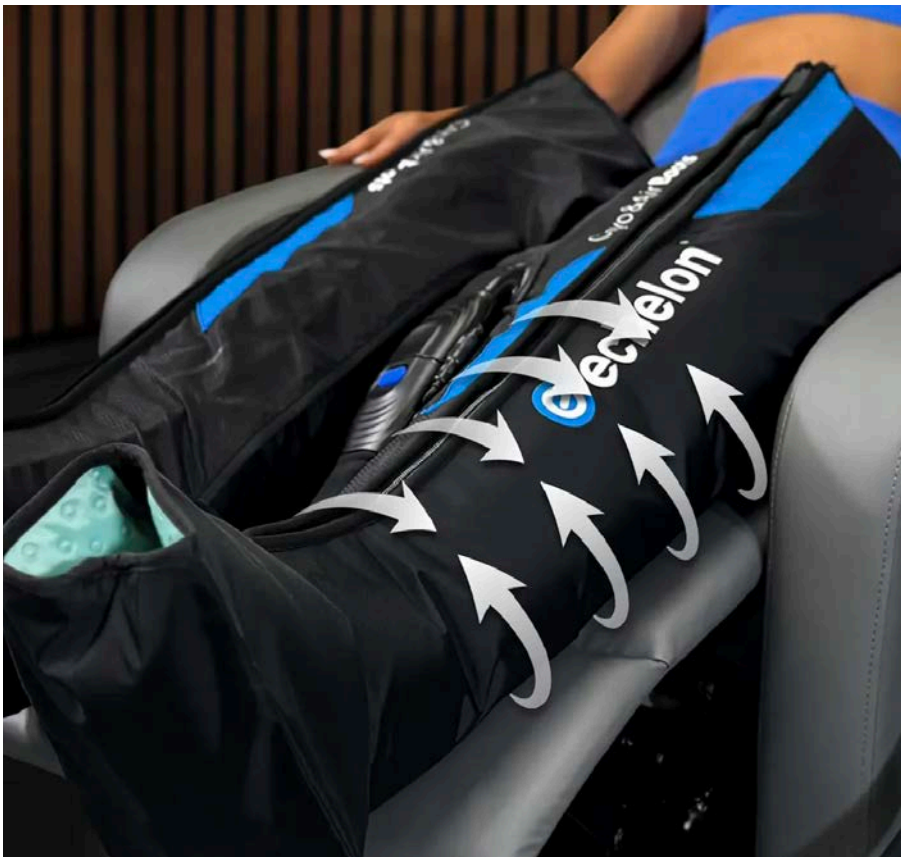
Isaacs added that he has seen several PE-backed rivals race to open and, often, flame out.

“There’s this rapid growth, but then there’s this just as rapid decline,” he said. ■

ELEV8TION FITNESS

ECHELON LAYS THE FOUNDATION FOR THE EVOLUTION OF THE MODERN GYM

Echelon's expanding ecosystem gives operators the tools to create distinct strength, digital and recovery zones designed to keep members engaged



AS A LEADING fitness equipment manufacturer, Echelon naturally believes the "gym of the future" won't be defined by the facility itself, but by machines inside. With a sizable lineup of products covering strength, cardio, Pilates and wellness, the brand has everything modern operators require to meet member needs.

However, Echelon isn't setting out to aimlessly fill floors with equipment that crowds users. Rather than creating chaotic environments riddled with its own branding, Echelon wants to help operators facilitate distinct experiences and give members more ways to engage.

"A facility built around experiences rather than rows of equipment is what a 'gym of the future' should look like," said Lauren Foundos, President of Strategic Partnerships at Echelon | Primal USA. "That's dedicated strength, connected training and recovery zones that work together and give members a reason to engage more often."

DOING DIGITAL & RECOVERY RIGHT

In a traditional gym setting, digital fitness can be isolating. Members focus on a screen rather than the people or coaches around them, while others use virtual programs exclusively as a tool for remote exercise.

While digital fitness can certainly serve those purposes, its potential extends far beyond them.

With Echelon, facilities can create dedicated digital training zones featuring screens, connected equipment and live or on-demand classes that multiple members can take together – leveraging the technology without losing the communal appeal that many gyms rely on to spur engagement and retention.

"Digital should enhance the club experience, not replace it," Foundos said. "A digital zone can bring members together, expand the class schedule and create a guided experience without requiring a traditional studio format for every class. The technology becomes part of the physical space and supports a shared experience."

"Technology shouldn't be a layer added on top of the gym experience – it should be built into it," added John Santo, CTO and Co-Founder of Echelon. "The future is an environment where equipment, content and data work

> A facility built around experiences rather than rows of equipment is what a 'gym of the future' should look like."
> —**Lauren Foundos**, Echelon





together seamlessly to create a more personalized experience for every member.

Integrating recovery represents another challenge for traditional gyms. Setting up a cold plunge or sauna requires staff, clearing permits and extra maintenance. Both also require their own floor space.

To help operators avoid all that and still check the "recovery" box, Echelon launched the ThermaChill. The adaptable product plugs in anywhere. It facilitates heat, cold and compression therapy by pumping air through three modular garments that target the major muscle groups. The precision temperature and pressure controls allow fully personalized sessions as well.

"Members increasingly view recovery as part of training," Lou Lentine, CEO & Co-Founder of Echelon | Primal USA said. "Bringing solutions such as ThermaChill into the club lets operators respond to that behavior and create another meaningful touchpoint in the member journey."

A LOOK AT STRENGTH

Earlier this year, Echelon also partnered with strength-training equipment brand Primal to combine their own fitness technology platform and connected ecosystem with Primal's strength machines.

The agreement echoes Echelon's commitment toward furnishing gyms of the future — bringing an elevated look and feel to strength training that operators and consumers both desire.

"Members are more educated and discerning," Foundos explained. "Operators want equipment that performs extremely well but also feels intentional and differentiated. Primal Strength's attention to detail, design and brand identity resonates with that shift."

BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

But as Foundos indicated, it's not just about adding to a gym floor with these innovations; it's creating unique experiences. Across strength, recovery and through digital offerings, Echelon wants to help brands build multiple zones that touch different modalities while still living collectively.

"For operators, the future isn't about adding more equipment or more technology just for the sake of it," said Lentine. "Every investment has to earn its place on the floor by improving the member experience, creating more opportunities for engagement and ultimately delivering value back to the operator."

"Echelon's broader opportunity is to help operators think about the facility as an integrated ecosystem," Foundos added. "That's with premium strength through Primal, connected cardio and digital experiences through Echelon, and recovery through ThermaChill."

The ThermaChill and digital experiences naturally support cohesion with their spatial flexibility. However, Echelon also assists in this regard with its WorkoutBuilder, a white-label platform that lets gym operators create workout programming based on available equipment, layout and space.

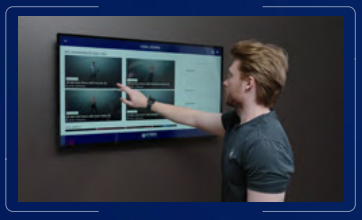
Foundos argues that cohesion will help gyms and studios stand out from the pack, even as they begin to pack modern machinery into their four walls.

"The combination of differentiated strength equipment, connected programming and recovery can make the facility itself feel more distinctive," she said. "The opportunity is to curate a recognizable experience." ●

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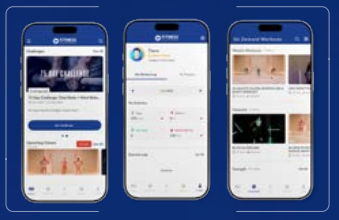
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CIRCUITS



SMART SCREENS



GROUP STUDIO



CYCLING CLASSES

EXPLORE THE PLATFORM

IN REAL ESTATE, GYMS HAVE BECOME A HOT COMMODITY

As fitness facilities replace traditional retail as a coveted real estate tenant, operators are finding different ways to secure the locations that will fuel growth.
by Courtney Rehfeldt



SHUTTERSTOCK

FOR A GENERATION, the department store was the thing a shopping center was built around. The industry even had a name for it — the anchor. Fast-forward to 2026, and the anchor increasingly wears cross-trainers and offers IV drips. ✡ It's not hard to see why things have changed. Amazon upended traditional shopping, hollowing out the big-box stores that once pulled in foot traffic. In the age of all things health and wellness, fitness has become one of the tenants developers love — part of a broader move away from stores that sell goods and toward businesses that sell an experience, whether it's food, entertainment or a cold plunge, the types of activities that the internet can't touch. Even better, gyms bring a membership model, which means recurring monthly revenue rather than one-time sales. ✡ Whether it's a luxury player or a high-value, low-price operator, real estate is the one problem every gym has to solve. What separates them is how they solve it.



CRUNCH FITNESS

FITNESS BECOMES THE ANCHOR

Life Time plays real estate like a real estate company because, in most respects, it is one. Its clubs are the kind developers build luxury towers around. Late last year, Life Time signed a lease for an athletic country club of more than 85,000 square feet at 175 Third Street in Gowanus, Brooklyn — rooftop pools, a coed wet suite, pickleball, coworking — inside what will be the largest building in Gowanus, roughly 1.1 million square feet and 1,100 residences.

Charney Companies, co-developer of the project, called Life Time an "iconic anchor" and "a distinction that sets 175 Third Street apart."

The opportunity is richer than it's ever been, Life Time founder and CEO Bahram Akradi told analysts on the company's second-quarter earnings call, and increasingly it's the developers doing the courting.

"There are more developers, more large projects, more office buildings that they're reaching out to us, and they want to have the Life Time brand," he said. "Not just the fitness center, the Life Time Athletic Country Club, coupled with Life Time Living or their development."

Stanley Schuckman, founder of Schuckman Realty and a broker who spent years planning locations for top U.S. retail chains, is among them. He pitched Life Time on a space at the Broadway Mall in Hicksville, on Long Island — the site of the upcoming Shops on Broadway project. He says a full-service club such as Life Time is an "excellent fit" for a shopping center built to create a lifestyle, not just a place to shop.

> **"Growth at this scale requires an operating system behind the real estate strategy, not just a pipeline of sites."**
>
> —**J.B. Lacombe**, Undefeated Tribe (Crunch Fitness)

"A lifestyle shopping center with a Life Time unit has the potential of attracting the many people who never had interest in joining a health club, while at the same time adding more services to the shopping experience," he said. "As such, both Life Time and property ownership benefit."

The site sits between two busy Life Time clubs, in Syosset and Garden City, which Schuckman — a Life Time member himself — considers "too busy to adequately service membership, and the potential of each trade area." So far, Life Time hasn't taken him up on the idea.

> **“There are tremendous communities outside the major metropolitan areas where people want a great fitness experience but may not have access to one. … I think there is still tremendous runway there.”** — **Jerry Pugh**, Workout Anytime



THE FIGHT FOR THE RIGHT REAL ESTATE

Crunch Fitness, meanwhile, is a real estate hunter, though the hunt is harder than it used to be.

Five or 10 years ago, the job was finding available space, said J.B. Lacombe, vice president of construction and new club openings at Undefeated Tribe, one of Crunch’s largest franchisees, with 53 clubs open and a goal of more than 100 by 2028. Today, he said, it’s about finding the right space — construction costs are up, landlords have more leverage and every site has to pencil out over the long term.

And the competition is no longer just other gyms. Lacombe and Dillon Okner, CEO of development-technology firm SiteRise, point to the same crowded field: fitness operators now bid against restaurants, health care providers, grocery concepts and entertainment venues for the same high-traffic corners.

Getting to the finish line, he said, is now less about the site than the technique behind it. “Growth at this scale requires an operating system behind the real estate strategy, not just a pipeline of sites,” Lacombe said.

Where he sees room is in the fast-growing suburbs, where he notes residential growth is outpacing fitness supply and communities are looking for more comprehensive fitness and wellness options.

IF YOU CAN’T BUILD IT, BUY IT

Jerry Pugh has a third answer. Buy what’s already there.

The Workout Anytime CEO is pursuing 400 locations in five years and has grown largely by buying existing gyms, a route he calls faster but trickier than it looks.

“The hidden challenge is that acquiring a gym is easier than integrating it into your brand,” Pugh said. “You inherit everything — the facility, equipment, membership base, staff, culture and sometimes years of deferred maintenance. You really have to understand what you are buying beyond the financials.”

What the company has learned, he added, is that there has to be enough capital and discipline behind an acquisition to bring a club up to Workout Anytime standards.

“You cannot simply put our sign on the building and call it a Workout Anytime,” he said.

His other strategy is geographic. While the rest of the field crowds the same dense corridors, Pugh said he is “extremely bullish” on secondary and tertiary markets, particularly across the Southeast.

“There are tremendous communities outside the major metropolitan areas where people want a great fitness experience but may not have access to one,” he said. “That is where our model has historically performed extremely well, and I think there is still tremendous runway there.”

Ian McClure represents a fourth path: the developer who stops recruiting a fitness tenant and becomes one. In August, Planet Fitness signed three area development agreements with McClure, CEO of Dallas-based Gulf Coast Hotel Management, to expand the chain on Florida’s west coast. He’s also putting up more than 30 extended-stay hotels across Texas, Florida and Colorado.

“Planet Fitness is a clear industry leader with a proven model to make fitness more accessible, and I’m eager to partner with the system as a new franchisee,” McClure said in a statement. “Having developed assets across the hospitality, retail and multifamily sectors, I have been impressed by the strength of the Planet Fitness brand, and I’m excited to bring it to more communities across Florida.” ■

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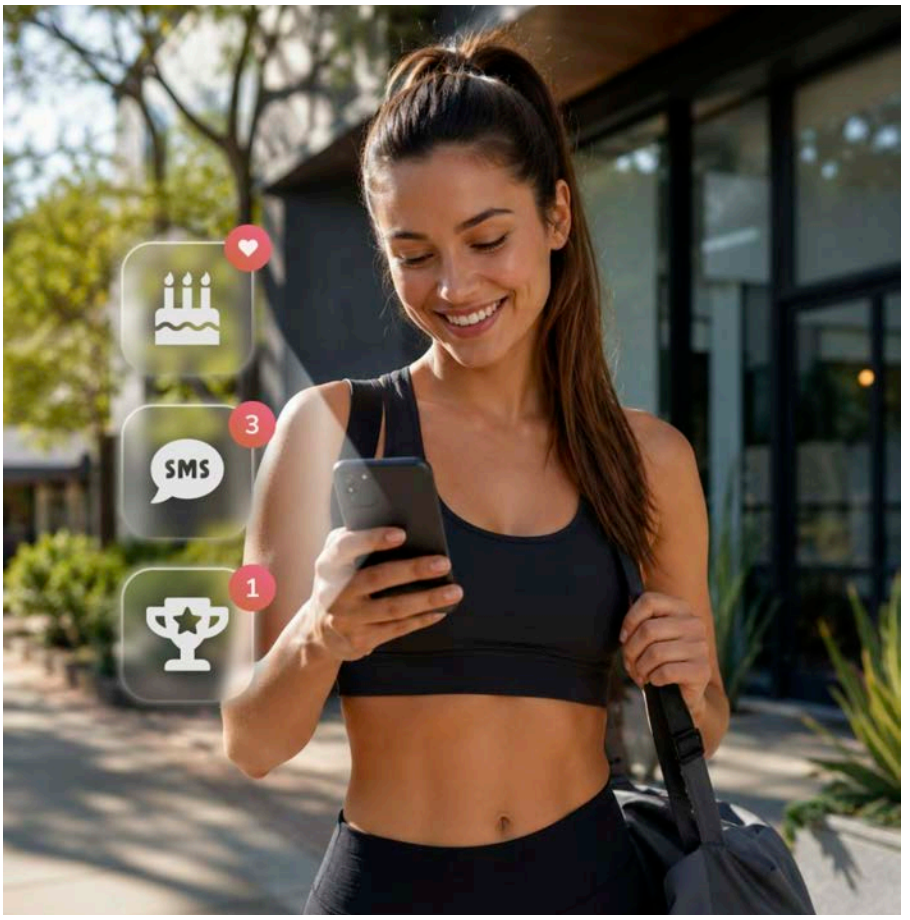
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FROM EFFICIENCY TO REVENUE: RETHINKING AI'S ROLE IN FITNESS

AI can do more than save time. WellnessLiving CEO Len Fridman explains how operators can use it to capture missed revenue opportunities.



THE REVENUE operators lose every day is not always easy to see.

A prospective member fills out a form on Friday night and does not hear back until Monday. Someone calls while the front desk is busy and reaches voicemail. A trial ends without anyone following up. A longtime member who once visited three times a week drops to once a week without attracting anyone's attention.

Individually, these moments can seem small. Collectively, they represent a significant opportunity for fitness businesses, according to Len Fridman, CEO and co-founder of WellnessLiving.

"What we see over and over is that the operator is not losing money on things they know about," Fridman says. "They are losing it on things they never see. The lead that never got a reply. The member who quietly stopped showing up. That is where the revenue is going, and that is exactly what AI is good at catching."

For fitness operators, much of the early conversation around artificial intelligence has centered on efficiency: automating repetitive tasks, reducing administrative work and giving staff more time to focus on members. Fridman sees those benefits as the beginning of a much larger opportunity.

"I think efficiency is the entry point, but revenue is the real prize," he says.

The shift comes when AI moves beyond taking work off a team's plate and begins helping operators capture opportunities they might otherwise miss.

"If all AI does is save time, you have a nicer to-do list," Fridman says. "The bigger shift happens when that saved time and that always-on coverage turn into bookings that would not have happened otherwise."

CLOSING THE GAPS FROM DISCOVERY TO BOOKING

Capturing that revenue begins before a prospective member ever walks through the door.

A consumer may discover a fitness business through Google, social media or an AI assistant, visit its website, ask a question and book an introductory offer without speaking to an employee. Fridman says every step in that journey needs to make it easy for the prospect to keep moving.

The first requirement is accurate information. Hours, pricing, services, class types and location information need to be current and consistent across a business's

> If all AI does is save time, you have a nicer to-do list. The bigger shift happens when that saved time and that always-on coverage turn into bookings that would not have happened otherwise."—**Len Fridman**, WellnessLiving



digital presence. That has taken on new significance as consumers begin using AI tools to find and evaluate local services.

"Traditional SEO was about keywords and ranking on a page of blue links. AI search is about being understood," Fridman says.

If someone asks an AI assistant to find a beginner-friendly yoga studio offering morning classes, for example, the technology needs clear information that establishes whether a business fits that request.

The website itself also needs to work harder.

"A lot of fitness websites are pretty brochures," Fridman says. "They do not answer the questions a person actually has, and they make you hunt for the booking button."

WellnessLiving develops websites designed around that changing journey, bringing together discovery, live schedules and booking while structuring information for both traditional and AI-driven search. Fridman says operators should also answer common consumer questions in plain language and eliminate unnecessary steps between interest and action.

"If someone has to click four times to book a trial, half of them leave," he says.

CAPTURING THE CONVERSATION

The next opportunity comes when a prospect is ready to engage but a staff member is unavailable.

WellnessLiving offers two AI systems serving different sides of the business. CAASI, its customer-facing AI sales agent, can handle website chat and phone conversations, answer questions and help prospects book an introductory offer. ISAAC works within the business platform, supporting staff with functions such as campaign creation, client insights and retention efforts.

Fridman says some of the highest-value interactions CAASI handles are also among the simplest. Prospects want to know whether there is a class that day, how much it costs, whether beginners are welcome or if they can bring a friend.

The challenge is answering while their interest is high.

"People plan their fitness life on their couch at night and on their phone early in the morning," he says. "That is often when nobody is at the front desk."

The same problem occurs during busy periods, when employees are focused on serving the members already inside the facility.

"The lesson is that operators are not losing to a competitor with a better product," Fridman says. "They are losing to silence. Every unanswered call or chat is a booking that went somewhere else."

FINDING REVENUE IN MEMBER BEHAVIOR

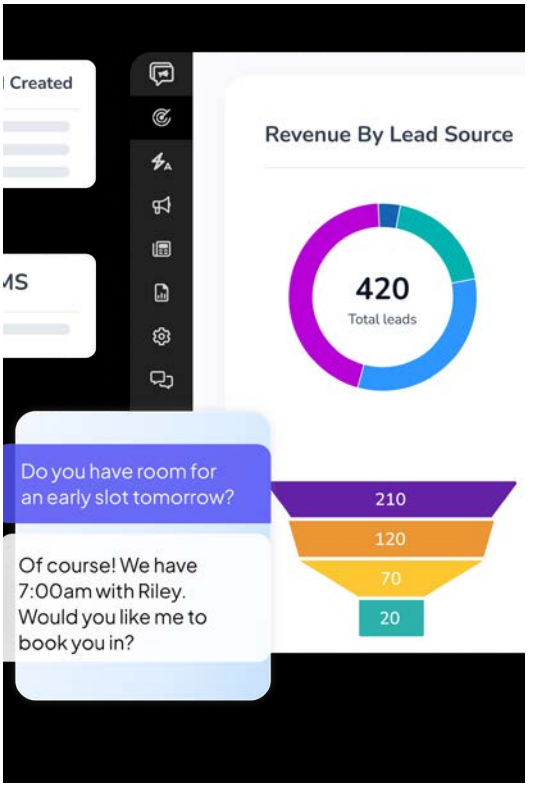
The same principle extends to the existing membership base, where subtle changes in behavior can provide early indications that revenue is at risk.

Traditional marketing automation often follows a predetermined schedule: send one message on day one, another on day seven. Connecting AI with booking, purchase and attendance data allows communication to respond to what a person is actually doing.

A member who regularly attended three times per week may begin coming once. A starter package may be approaching expiration without another purchase. A prospect may repeatedly explore pricing without booking.

"Separate tools react to dates. Connected AI reacts to people," Fridman says.

That distinction is particularly important for retention. Fridman ranks retention ahead of lead nurture and win-back when considering preventable revenue leakage because operators have already invested in acquiring those members, and attrition often happens quietly.



"People do not storm out. They just fade," he says. "That fading is very detectable and very fixable if you are paying attention."

For operators unsure where to begin with AI, Fridman recommends starting with a clearly identifiable revenue leak rather than attempting a sweeping technology overhaul. His first choices are website chat and the phone, where missed interactions can quickly become missed sales.

"It is also easy to understand," he says. "You do not need to believe in a big AI strategy to understand, 'We stopped missing calls.' Once an operator sees that working, the next steps become obvious."

Ultimately, Fridman believes operators should evaluate AI through both the work it removes and the business it creates.

"Efficiency is how you justify starting," he says. "Incremental revenue is why you keep going." ●

ARE GLP-1S REALLY CHANGING GYMS?

As GLP-1 use rises, gyms are reshaping strength programming, adding clinical services and building referral partnerships to meet a fast-changing member base.

by Ani Freedman



SHUTTERSTOCK

AS GLP-1S RESHAPE individual's relationships with fitness and wellness, the revolutionary weight-loss medications are also changing how gyms operate. With GLP-1 use roughly doubling from where it was three years ago — 13.2% of U.S. adults have now taken one — fitness brands who haven't embraced the GLP-1 wave in some form or another are already far behind. ✡ Those approaches vary as operators figure out ways to adapt to a changing consumer and shifting demands, as building strength and preserving muscle takes top priority, while also meeting an overall rising interest in weight-loss treatment. ✡ Fitness clubs' adoption of GLP-1s has varied from adapted programming for GLP-1 users to in-house clinics to creating referral loops in which gyms refer members to clinics, and clinics refer patients to fitness clubs for support. ✡ "We see GLP-1s as part of a broader shift in how people think about their health and fitness. As our members' needs change, we'll continue evolving our clubs and programming to meet them," Crunch chief marketing officer Chad Waetzig told Athletech News.



LAND O'LAKES ON UNSPLASH

CHANGES ON THE FLOOR

It's hard to fully gauge the impact that GLP-1s have had on the fitness industry thus far, with conflicting data and limited metrics as operators are still experiencing those changes in real time.

On one hand, there's research to suggest that people taking GLP-1s could be less motivated to exercise, with some users decreasing their exercise upon starting treatment.

But other data points to a widespread cultural shift centered around fitness and wellness that could be amplified by the weight-loss drugs. Other research points to more people gravitating towards fitness, finding that many users became more likely to join a gym after starting treatment.

While gyms haven't been able to measure how many of their new members are GLP-1 users, they are seeing steady growth and notable shifts in member priorities on the floor.

"General trends and increased adoption of GLP-1s have shifted our members toward strength-training workouts," Waetzig noted. "We've expanded our Olympic platforms and other strength-building equipment, and we recently introduced the Pump strength training studio to accommodate this specialized training. We continue to see growth in our membership base in large part due to our offerings across various strength training modalities."

In 2025, Crunch saw the highest attendance of any group fitness category in strength training, up 36% year over

> **"General trends and increased adoption of GLP-1s have shifted our members toward strength-training workouts. We've expanded our Olympic platforms and other strength-building equipment, and we recently introduced the Pump strength training studio."**
>
> —**Chad Waetzig,** Crunch Fitness

> **We are seeing greater consumer interest in comprehensive health and wellness solutions that extend well beyond traditional exercise."**
>
> —**Ryan Sonnenburg**, Life Time



year. Other operators are noticing similar trends, as GLP-1 users — and consumers overall — prioritize preventing muscle loss and building strength.

"For us, the more significant shift is in what consumers are looking for after weight loss. Increasingly, the conversation is about building muscle, improving definition, becoming stronger and maintaining results over the long term," The Edge Fitness chief strategy officer Jimmy Sansone told ATN.

"What we do see is increasing demand for strength training, body-composition improvement and more personalized fitness experiences," he added. "Those trends create meaningful opportunities across membership, personal training, nutrition and long-term engagement with our brand."

HOW BRANDS ARE EMBRACING GLP-1S

Operators have taken a variety of approaches to that increased interest and changing member base. Luxury brands like Life Time are embracing the gym-as-a-clinic model, as the brand launched its own in-club longevity and performance clinic, Miora, where members have the option to get GLP-1 prescriptions through health professionals.

"We are seeing greater consumer interest in comprehensive health and wellness solutions that extend well beyond traditional exercise," Life Time senior vice president of business operations Ryan Sonnenburg told ATN.

Coupled with the brand's extensive fitness offerings to accommodate the strength training boom and expert-led nutrition program, "these offerings make Life Time the ideal place for GLP-1 users who want to translate weight loss into lasting improvements in their strength, health and quality of life," he said.

Life Time's move to invest more in Miora arrives as a result of greater awareness and interest in GLP-1 medications as part of a broader consumer shift toward preventive, personalized health care, Sonnenburg said.

Other top operators are working GLP-1s into their offerings through partnerships and referral models, including UFC Gym, which unveiled in-club clinics through a partnership with NexGen MD Scientific. The partnership is known as a telehealth white-label program, where telehealth providers deliver clinical services under the gym's brand.

F45 Training, meanwhile, which offers a bundle program through telehealth platform Dr. B that consists of a co-branded GLP-1 and fitness/nutrition program, giving both partners a revenue share. F45 also has a partnership with telehealth platform Joi + Blokes that includes access to GLP-1s.

Big-box gym giants Planet Fitness and Crunch have opted for referral-only models, with the former partnering with GLP-1 provider Ro to offer members a referral/discount, and the latter partnered with telehealth platform Thrive for its own referral program.

Additionally, many brands like Crunch, Orangetheory Fitness and Anytime Fitness are hitting two birds with one stone, doubling down on strength training programming amid a weight lifting boom, while also leaning into concerns about muscle loss from taking the medication.

▲ **Life Time launched its own in-club longevity and performance clinic, Miora.**

The GLP-1 fitness shift is not just reflected in changes on the gym floor, but also where GLP-1 users are directing their dollars as well. A recent study from the Consumer Collective found that GLP-1 users are spending $449 a month on fitness across categories — nearly four times more than non-users, who average $120 per month of fitness spending.

WHAT'S COMING NEXT?

The future of gyms could increasingly revolve around capturing the growing consumer base of GLP-1 users willing to invest more in their health, brands indicate.

"We'll keep an eye on those trends and look for ways to build on what's working,'" Crunch's Waetzig said. "We want to keep the Crunch experience relevant to where our members are today, without taking a one-size-fits-all approach."

The Edge is applying a similar mindset to how it adapts its offerings moving forward, keeping an eye not only on trends, but on how its consumer base changes alongside the growing ubiquity of GLP-1s.

"Innovation for us is ultimately about anticipating where the member is going next and ensuring we're positioned to meet them there," Sansone said.

Other brands may follow Life Time's lead moving forward in embracing in-house wellness offerings, as the luxury operator is planning to expand its Miora clinic to reach more members, Sonnenburg said.

"Miora gives us an existing foundation for connecting clinical care and health optimization with Life Time's broader healthy-living ecosystem," he explained. "As we expand Miora, we see an opportunity to make that integrated approach accessible to more Life Time members."

Sonnenburg also importantly pointed out that the GLP-1 conversation is evolving beyond weight loss, touching nearly every segment of fitness and wellness.

"Consumers are increasingly asking how to maintain muscle, improve metabolic health and sustain their results," he said. "Those are areas where Life Time's integrated approach to exercise, nutrition, recovery and health can play an important role." ■

LIFE TIME

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Why community, accountability and habit are replacing novelty as fitness's biggest growth drivers.



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HOW FLIGHT HOUSE CREATED THE CONNECTED GYM OF THE FUTURE

Inside the gym's partnership with Technogym to build a more integrated, personalized fitness experience

WHEN FLIGHT HOUSE FITNESS began planning its 50,000-square-foot Boston flagship, the goal was bigger than creating an impressive gym floor. The team wanted to build around the way people are training now — and where they believe fitness is headed next.

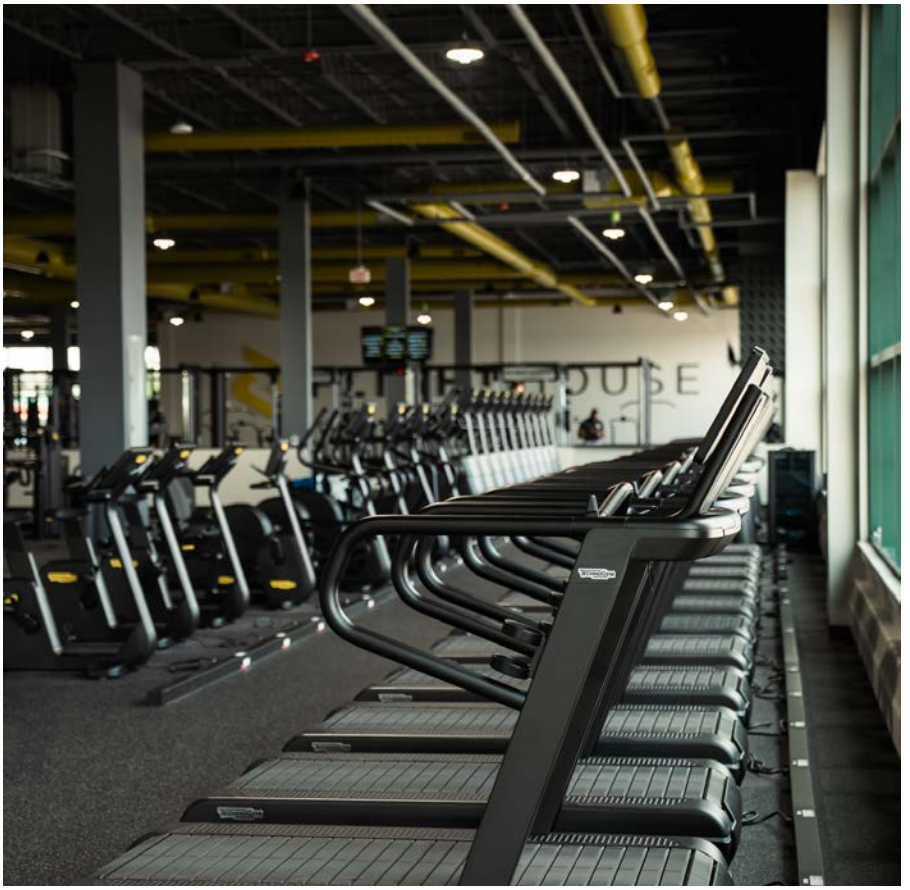
"The fitness consumer has changed," Jay Collins, Founder and CEO of Flight House Fitness. "People don't necessarily want to choose between a traditional open gym, a boutique studio, performance training or recovery. They want access to all of it."

So Flight House set out to design around that expectation, bringing assessment, coaching, strength and performance training, studio programming and recovery together within one premium fitness and wellness environment.

That ambition shaped the partners Flight House brought into the project. The team needed equipment that could meet the demands of a broad member base, along with technology capable of connecting training, assessment, personalization and engagement across the facility, while creating enough flexibility for the model to continue evolving.

In Technogym, Flight House found a partner aligned with that vision and equipped to help bring it to life.

"Technogym became the technological backbone and core ecosystem of the facility," Collins says.



DESIGNING AROUND THE MEMBER JOURNEY

Planning began with a fundamental question: How did Flight House want people to use the building?

Within that footprint, the Flight House and Technogym teams considered traffic patterns, equipment adjacencies and how members would move through a workout and between different experiences.

"We wanted the facility to feel huge without ever feeling overwhelming," Collins says. "Our conversations with Technogym were therefore less about filling a floor plan and more about matching equipment and technology to the member journey."

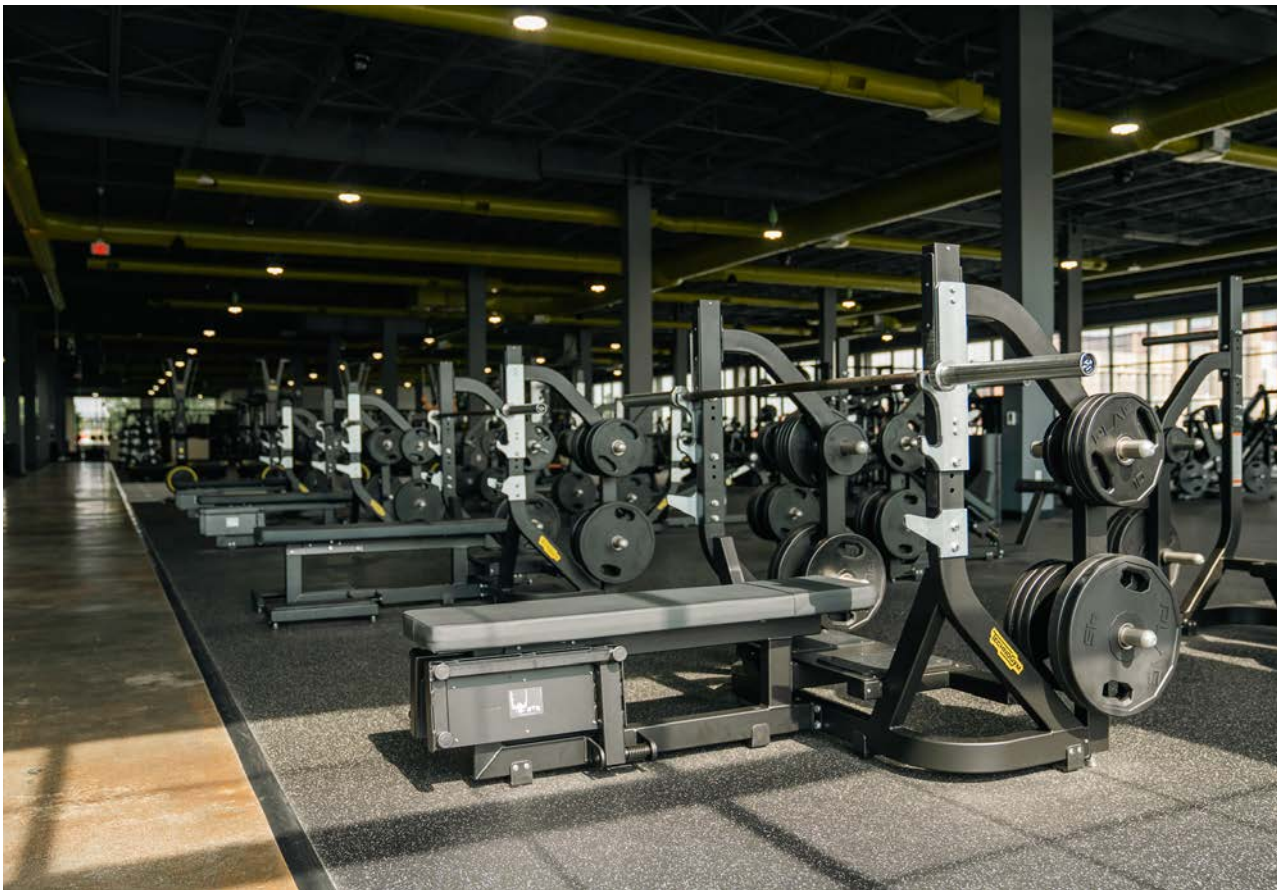
That approach shaped the equipment mix as well. Flight House incorporated specialty products from other best-in-class manufacturers where appropriate, while Technogym served as the primary ecosystem across the facility.

Its range gave Flight House the ability to serve members with widely different objectives. Approximately half of the club is devoted to its premium open-gym experience, alongside dedicated environments for HYBRID training, the brand's LIFT strength program, studio programming and recovery. Roughly 80 yards of indoor turf run throughout the facility.

Collins says Technogym's Skill line was particularly well suited to the concept because of its ability

> People don't necessarily want to choose between a traditional open gym, a boutique studio, performance training or recovery. They want access to all of it." —**Jay Collins,** Flight House Fitness





to bridge traditional cardio and performance training.

"We don't think of our treadmills, rowers or other conditioning equipment as equipment sitting along a cardio wall," he says. "They are training tools that are integrated throughout the experience."

The equipment also needed to complement the environment Flight House was creating.

"There is something to be said for the appearance and feel of the equipment," Collins says. "We invested heavily in the architecture and design of Flight House, and Technogym equipment looks like it belongs in that environment."

The process reinforced a broader lesson for the Flight House team. "Equipment selection, programming, technology and facility design cannot be separate conversations anymore," Collins says. "They all influence one another."

CREATING A MORE PERSONAL FITNESS EXPERIENCE

Technology plays an equally important role in how Flight House wants members to understand and navigate their fitness.

"I believe the next generation of great gyms is going to do a much better job of helping members understand their fitness rather than simply giving them access to equipment," Collins says.

Technogym Checkup represents the kick off of the customer's personalized journey. Members can establish a baseline across areas including body composition, cardiovascular capacity, strength, mobility,balance and cognitive performance. That information then becomes part of an individualized journey through the club.

"Historically, you joined a gym, received a membership card and were largely left on your own," Collins says. "We want to increasingly be able to say, 'Here is where you are today, here are the areas where you can improve, and here are the tools within Flight House that can help you get there.'"

That deeper understanding of the member also gives Flight House's trainers and coaches more to work with.

A coach can draw from assessment and performance data alongside conversations and observation, creating a more complete view of the person they are working with. Changes in strength, cardiovascular fitness, body composition and other measures become part of an ongoing dialogue about progress and goals.

"Technology shouldn't replace coaching," Collins says. "It should give a great coach better information and give the member more visibility into their own progress."



That philosophy extends to the broader Flight House team. The company wants its staff actively involved in the member experience throughout the facility.

"That combination of technology and human interaction is where I think fitness facilities are headed."

PUTTING THE EXPERIENCE INTO PRACTICE

So far, member response has been incredibly encouraging.

"One of the things we hear most often is that members have never experienced this combination of scale, equipment, training environments and amenities in one facility," says Collins. "There is a genuine sense of discovery. They realize very quickly that this isn't simply a bigger version of a traditional gym."

Perhaps more telling is what happens after they join.

"What has been interesting is watching members use more of the facility than they initially expected," he says.

A member who initially joins for the open gym may begin exploring HYBRID training, assessment, personal training or recovery. A HYROX athlete can discover that the same facility also meets their everyday training needs. Each additional interaction gives Flight House another opportunity to support the member within the same environment.

"That crossover is exactly what we hoped would happen," Collins says.

Flight House is still early in the life of its Boston location, and the company is careful about drawing conclusions around long-term retention. The business results, however, have been strong.

More than 1000 memberships were sold during the early portion of presale while much of the club remained under construction. Flight House sold more than 100 memberships on the first day of its formal presale launch alone, with a significant share of members selecting higher-tier options.

"To me, that demonstrates that consumers understand the value of a more complete fitness experience and are willing to invest in it," Collins says.

For operators considering their own next generation of facilities, Collins' advice begins well before equipment selection.

"The biggest piece of advice I would give another operator is to start with the experience you want to create, not with an equipment list," he says. "Ask yourself how you want a member to feel when they walk through the door, how you expect them to train, how those training habits may evolve and what will keep them engaged two or three years after joining."

He also recommends bringing equipment and technology partners into the process early. In a facility of Flight House's scale, electrical infrastructure, networking, flooring, equipment placement, sightlines and traffic flow ultimately contribute to the member experience.

The larger opportunity, he believes, is to design for where the consumer is going.

"We built Flight House around the belief that the winning gym of the future will combine the freedom and value of a great open gym with the coaching and community of boutique fitness, the technology of a modern performance facility and the amenities and recovery experience of a premium health club," Collins says. ●

MEANINGFUL EXPERIENCES ARE THE NEW SERVICE DRIVING ROI

How recovery hardware is redefining member engagement, retention and long-term value inside modern fitness facilities.



HOW RECOVERY HARDWARE is redefining member engagement, retention and long-term value inside modern fitness facilities.

In today's crowded fitness market, experience has become the most important deliverable. Members aren't just choosing facilities based on equipment or class schedules, they're choosing how a space makes them feel.

That shift has pushed recovery out of the sidelines and into the center of the member journey. What was once an optional add-on has become a defining part of how facilities drive engagement, retention and long-term value.

Human Touch has been in the business of experience for more than four decades. Known for blending wellness, design and intuitive technology, the company has watched recovery evolve from foam rollers and stretching corners into fully programmed, purpose-built spaces that now sit alongside strength, cardio and group training on the floor.

Human Touch® has been designing meaningful wellness experiences for more than four decades. Known for blending wellness, design and intuitive massage technology, the company has watched recovery move from the sidelines to the center of the member journey. Today, these purpose-built recovery spaces sit confidently alongside strength, cardio and group training as essential components of the fitness floor.

"Recovery has officially moved from optional amenity to core expectation," says Jacqui Gonzales, the company's director of commercial key accounts. "What started as stretch mats has evolved into intentionally designed recovery zones, integrating advanced massage solutions that bring precision, personalization and measurable impact to long-term health."

REFRAMING RECOVERY

Modern facilities increasingly view recovery as preventative care, performance optimization and stress relief rolled into one. And it's no longer reserved for elite athletes.

"Wellness is no longer a luxury," Gonzales explains. "Recovery is for everyday members managing busy lives, chronic stress and longevity, not just those training at a high level."

This reframing has real business implications. Recovery hardware directly supports the metrics operators care about most: dwell time, visit frequency and retention. When members know they can recover efficiently and comfortably, they stay longer, return more often and associate the facility with feeling better, not just working harder.

That emotional association is significant. Facilities that integrate recovery into the flow of the visit

> Recovery hardware is one of the most effective ways operators can deliver meaningful, memorable experiences that keep members coming back." —**Jacqui Gonzales**, Human Touch



create habits, not just sessions. Warm up, train, recover, repeat. Recovery becomes the bridge between effort and longevity.

"The most successful facilities don't treat recovery as an afterthought," Gonzales notes. "They integrate it into the experience so it becomes habitual."

As staffing challenges persist across the industry, operators are also looking for solutions that reduce operational complexity. Touchless, self-guided recovery hardware has become increasingly attractive because it delivers consistent experiences without additional labor, scheduling constraints or staff training demands. Massage chairs offer an efficient recovery solution that removes effort from the equation. They deliver structured, full-body recovery through intuitive, self-guided programs. Members simply sit down and allow the chair to do the work, supporting muscle relaxation and circulation while helping ensure recovery actually happens.

"Touchless recovery solutions like Human Touch chairs deliver predictable, repeatable experiences," Gonzales says. "That consistency improves ROI while allowing operators to monetize recovery through premium access, upgrades or bundled wellness memberships."

In other words, recovery hardware doesn't just fill space – it solves problems. It removes friction for staff and members alike while creating new revenue opportunities that don't rely on adding resources.

Another reason recovery hardware has gained traction so quickly is its versatility.

A single chair can support athletic recovery, stress relief for busy professionals, relaxation in spa and hospitality lounges or wellness programming in corporate and campus environments. That flexibility allows operators to maximize square footage while introducing recovery to members who may not engage with traditional gym offerings.

"Experience is the new service," Gonzales says. "Recovery hardware is one of the most effective ways operators can deliver meaningful, memorable experiences that keep members coming back."

RECOVERY AS A BUILT-IN MARKETING ASSET

In crowded markets, how a space looks and feels matters just as much as what it offers. Thoughtfully designed recovery zones elevate brand perception and create moments members want to share.

"Zero-gravity positioning, sleek silhouettes, ambient lighting and calm environments naturally translate into social content that feels aspirational rather than promotional," Gonzales explains.

When recovery spaces photograph well and feel intentional, they become organic marketing assets, reinforcing a facility's commitment to premium experiences and holistic wellness without additional ad spend.

And perhaps one of the most compelling roles recovery hardware plays is in making wellness more accessible.

For active agers, beginners, or members who feel intimidated by traditional gym environments, recovery spaces offer a low-barrier entry point. Human Touch chairs provide supportive, customizable experiences with multiple intensity levels and programs that meet people where they are.

"Recovery becomes a welcoming gateway into movement, rather than a reward reserved for advanced users," Gonzales says.

That's important because these populations are often the most likely to churn. By building confidence and comfort, recovery hardware becomes not just a wellness tool, but a powerful retention tool.

WHAT OPERATORS SHOULD BE ASKING

As we embark on trade show season, operators should be intentional about how they evaluate their recovery hardware.

Gonzales encourages facilities to ask:

- **How does this product perform in high-traffic environments?**
- **Does it combine multiple modalities such as massage, stretch, compression, heat, sound?**
- **Is the experience intuitive for first-time users?**
- **What are the maintenance, sanitation and staffing implications?**
- **How easily can it be monetized or integrated into existing membership models?**

"The best recovery hardware doesn't just occupy space," she says. "It enhances the member experience while supporting operational efficiency."

There's no doubt that recovery hardware will continue to evolve toward smarter, more integrated and more experiential solutions. As member expectations rise, operators should prioritize investments that are scalable, touchless and adaptable.

"Equipment, digital tools and demand will continue to change," Gonzales notes. "What matters is whether recovery solutions deliver measurable value today while staying relevant tomorrow."

As competition intensifies, the differentiator isn't always what members do inside a facility, it's the experience they associate with it. Recovery has become one of the clearest ways operators can shape that experience in a meaningful, repeatable way.

"When members connect your facility with feeling better, that's when loyalty really starts to build," Gonzales says. ●

From PureGym's Joy Stroll race to Fitness First's optional phone-muting tech to Tracy Anderson's new no-filming policy, operators are making moves as screen fatigue sets in.
by Courtney Rehfeldt



UK GYMS ARE MAKING UNPLUGGING A SELLING POINT. WILL THE US FOLLOW?

SHUTTERSTOCK

A WALK IN THE PARK may not fix everything, but it's a good start. PureGym, the U.K.'s low-cost gym giant, took its own commissioned research findings and ran with them — literally. ✡ After data revealed the average U.K. adult scrolls 1.7 miles a week on their phone, the brand decided the most logical response was to invite people to walk that exact distance outside. ✡ The result is Joy Stroll, a branded 1.7-mile guided walk held at Manchester's Whitworth Park that wrapped last week with sunshine, influencers and "Glowments" stationed along the route for healthy pick-me-ups. The fitness operator enlisted TV personality Chris Hughes for the event.



"We've all been there, getting lost in the scroll, but we realized it was time to change the narrative," Barney Harrison, PureGym's chief customer and commercial officer, wrote on LinkedIn. "At PureGym, our mission is to help everyone #FeelPureGymGood, and we believe that feeling starts with how you move your body and clear your mind."

The high-value, low-price (HVLP) operator posted £742 million (~$1 billion) in revenue in 2025 and has been aggressively expanding its U.S. footprint following its acquisition of Blink Fitness.

Putting the phone down may be difficult, but consumers appear ready to do something about it. Phone-free events grew 567% globally between 2024 and 2025, with attendance climbing 121%, according to Eventbrite, and more than half of Americans want to reduce their screen time, according to a YouGov poll. Meanwhile, even wearable giants are pivoting towards a more distraction-free experience.

PureGym isn't alone in reading the room.

Last month, fellow U.K. operator Fitness First rolled out a chainwide partnership with digital wellness platform Kip, giving members across all 26 clubs the option to mute distracting apps, such as social media or email, via tap-to-activate tags at club entry points.

Stateside, fitness giant Tracy Anderson, whose studio classes count Gwyneth Paltrow and Jennifer Lopez among devotees, recently made headlines after implementing a policy prohibiting non-members from filming in class. The move, Tracy Anderson Method CEO Steven Beltrani told People, was meant to minimize class disruptions and protect privacy, though the change sparked immediate debate among content creators who rely on gym footage for their feeds. ■

"Our mission is to help everyone #FeelPureGymGood, and we believe that feeling starts with how you move your body and clear your mind."

—**Barney Harrison**, PureGym

▲ **PureGym's Joy Stroll.**

▶ **Phone-free events grew 567% globally between 2024 and 2025.**



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BEYOND THE TOUCHSCREEN: RETHINKING THE GYM OF THE FUTURE

Technology fatigue is prompting fitness operators to take a closer look at what members actually use —and where their equipment dollars deliver the greatest return.



THE FITNESS EQUIPMENT industry has spent the past several years in an innovation race. Bigger screens. Connected consoles. Digital resistance. Apps, profiles, entertainment, data and personalized programming.

Much of that innovation has expanded what's possible inside a fitness facility. But as operators begin evaluating those investments over a full equipment lifecycle, other questions are gaining importance: How much of that technology are members actually using? What does it cost to maintain? And is the investment delivering enough value to justify the spend?

As Spirit Fitness expands its presence in the commercial market, it's bringing a perspective shaped by four decades of equipment manufacturing and an approach centered less on selling operators the most expensive option, and more on helping them determine what their facilities truly need.

What Corey Disler, Vice President at Spirit Fitness, and Brad Paulsrud, National Accounts Manager, are hearing from operators is straightforward: Give me equipment that works. Give me equipment that lasts. Give me equipment members understand immediately. And help me determine where technology is actually worth the investment.

Member behavior, Paulsrud says, can tell operators a great deal about where technology adds valueand where it may not.

"Most people walk into a gym with a finite amount of time—they may have 30, 45 or 60 minutes to train," he explains. "Many already have a Garmin or Apple Watch on their wrist, a phone in their hand and an app guiding some part of their fitness journey, so when they step onto a piece of cardio equipment, they hit Quick Start and use their own devices."

Disler has seen the same thing. "For every person who loves the technology, there are three people who put a towel over the console and do their own thing," he says.

That doesn't necessarily make these members less interested in technology. In many cases, the opposite is true. The most tech-engaged members may already have invested in an ecosystem of their own.

"In most cases, if someone wants tech, they will invest in what works for them and remain loyal to it," Paulsrud says.

For operators, that raises an important question about how many additional layers of technology the equipment itself needs to provide.

LOOKING BEYOND THE PURCHASE PRICE

That question becomes more consequential when operators consider how long commercial fitness equipment remains on the floor.

Disler says many clubs keep equipment for five to seven years.

> In most cases, if someone wants tech, they will invest in what works for them and remain loyal to it."—**Brad Paulsrud**, Spirit Fitness



A touchscreen, computer or electronically controlled component adds capabilities, but it can also add another potential maintenance expense during that lifecycle.

"Downtime matters", he says, "so do replacement costs, warranties and serviceability. And when only a small percentage of members regularly use certain features, operators have to determine whether that investment makes sense for their particular business."

Paulsrud says those calculations can influence the rest of the facility as well. Spending less on technology where it isn't essential may allow an operator to focus more on amenities like recovery and wellness or incorporate boutique concepts within the club.

THE RIGHT TECHNOLOGY IN THE RIGHT PLACE

Spirit's answer isn't to remove technology from the equation. Its own portfolio ranges from proven commercial equipment to highly connected cardio and digitally enabled strength.

The distinction is where each belongs.

Spirit's 900 Series, for example, is built around commercial durability and straightforward operation, giving users core workout metrics without requiring a more complex digital experience. For a high-volume operator looking to maximize equipment availability and stretch capital across the floor, that simplicity carries significant value.

At the other end of the spectrum, Spirit's 1000 Series pairs commercial performance with 21.5-inch touchscreen consoles, Bluetooth connectivity, screen mirroring and entertainment features. In a premium facility or a college recreation center serving a young, highly connected population, those capabilities may align directly with what members expect.

"You have to know who your target member is," Disler says. "If you're catering to younger bodybuilders, that has a very different look than a club operator trying to serve a diverse population."

Spirit's i-Strength line offers another example. Electronically controlled resistance enables training modes including eccentric, isokinetic and elastic band, creating applications for sports performance, rehabilitation and specialized training.

Disler says operators are also evaluating high-tech equipment based on if it can become part of a premium membership, specialized program or other revenue-generating offering. "That changes the business case," he says.

Disler believes there is absolutely a place for high-tech equipment. "The objective is to put it where it delivers something members will use, value or pay for."

SERVING THE MEMBER IN FRONT OF YOU

That distinction may become Weven more important as the population using fitness facilities broadens.

Paulsrud points to older adults, women, younger users and people beginning their first fitness journey as part of a changing gym population. Strength and longevity are bringing more people into resistance training as well, creating demand for equipment that can serve everyone from beginners to highly experienced lifters.

For some of those users, simplicity and accessibility are a much larger priority than technological sophistication.

The same thinking applies across the facility. Turf and HIIT areas require very little technology. A performance center may benefit enormously from it. A premium club charging $120 per month may need state-of-the-art equipment to deliver against member expectations.

Spirit's role, Disler says, is to listen first. "We're not here to try to sell you up," he says. "We focus a lot of attention on listening to the needs and addressing those needs instead of trying to sell a high-end product because it's the shiny penny."

WHEN THE TECHNOLOGY MOVES WITH THE MEMBER

The next evolution could make the distinction between equipment technology and personal technology even more interesting.

AI is beginning to create ways for members to receive increasingly sophisticated training guidance through the devices they already carry. A phone can potentially understand goals, build a workout, track performance and adapt recommendations over time.

Disler sees potential for that model to solve another challenge facing operators. A club filled with equipment from multiple manufacturers can easily end up with four or five separate technology ecosystems that don't communicate with one another.

The member's own device could eventually become the connective layer.

Instead of every machine requiring its own login and digital experience, AI-driven technology could move with the member as they move through the gym, while the equipment itself remains focused on delivering the training experience.

The next wave of fitness technology may ultimately be defined less by how much technology manufacturers can put onto a piece of equipment and more by how seamlessly technology can fit around the way people already train.

"Technology is going to continue to evolve, and we're going to continue to innovate," Disler says. "But at the end of the day, it has to make sense for the member, it has to make sense for the operator and it has to add real value to the experience." ●

IS HUMAN CONNECTION FITNESS' SECRET SAUCE?

As the industry embraces longevity, operators are discovering that human connection isn't just a retention strategy —it's an essential part of modern wellness. **by Kim Kisner**



SHUTTERSTOCK

THE FITNESS INDUSTRY has never been more focused on longevity. ✡ Operators are expanding recovery offerings, investing in strength training, embracing wellness and helping members understand key health markers like VO2 max and metabolic health. The focus has shifted beyond helping people look better to helping them live longer and live better. ✡ Yet one of the most powerful contributors to healthspan and longevity may not be a new recovery technology or training methodology. It's something the industry has been talking about for years, just through a very different lens. ✡ Human connection.



Decades of research have demonstrated the relationship between social connection and long-term health. Studies have linked loneliness and social isolation to increased risks of heart disease, depression, dementia and premature death. Some researchers have even suggested chronic social isolation may be as harmful to health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Today, social connection is increasingly recognized by healthcare researchers as a determinant of health and longevity.

"Scientifically, social connection leads to improved mental health, which is as central to whole health as exercise," Julie Anderla, vice president of global brand marketing at Anytime Fitness, told Athletech News. "The fitness industry is now starting to catch up."

For years, however, community has largely been viewed as a strategy for acquisition, retention and member engagement rather than as a contributor to wellness itself.

As longevity becomes the industry's defining priority, it's time to rethink community - not simply as a business strategy, but as a pillar of wellness in its own right.

HOW WE GOT HERE

Fitness has always had a social dimension. Long before boutique studios, recovery lounges and wellness clubs, people built relationships through neighborhood recreation centers, running clubs, team sports and local gyms.

As Jill Brand, head of brand at Pvolve, puts it, "Gyms and sports are intrinsically communal."

What's different today is the world surrounding those experiences.

"Modern life and increased focus on digital life is causing urban isolation, leaving people craving healthy, social environments," says Robbie Hammond, president and chief strategy officer at Therme Group.

> **"Scientifically, social connection leads to improved mental health, which is as central to whole health as exercise."** —**Julie Anderla**, Anytime Fitness

Brand believes the industry is now "connecting the dots" between fitness's communal roots and the role those relationships play in longevity.

Khal Rai, president of ABC Fitness, notes that digital wellness platforms, wearable devices and habit-tracking apps increasingly incorporate accountability partners, shared streaks and social challenges because people are more likely to sustain healthy habits when they feel connected to others.

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> **I think onboarding has to become less about giving someone a tour and more about helping them find where they fit."** — **Colleen Palomaa**, Vida



HOW OPERATORS ARE DESIGNING FOR HUMAN CONNECTION

If connection contributes to health, it can't be left to chance.

The industry's most forward-thinking operators are beginning to approach it with the same intentionality they bring to programming and coaching. They're designing spaces, experiences and everyday interactions that help members build relationships - not just better fitness habits.

Sometimes that starts with the smallest interactions.

"Belonging is rarely built through big gestures," says Anytime's Anderla. "It's built through a coach remembering that a member's knee has been bothering them, noticing when someone hasn't visited in several days or simply greeting people by name."

Those moments create accountability, but they also create something deeper: the feeling that someone notices when you're there - and when you're not.

"It can be the difference between throwing in the towel and showing up, for yourself and for someone else," she says.

Anytime Fitness is expanding group exercise space, adding AF HIIT and AF Strong classes and ensuring members have access to a coach.

That philosophy extends well beyond coaching, too.

At Vida Fitness, a Washington, D.C.-area gym chain, onboarding focuses on connecting members with the people and programs most likely to become part of their routine.

"I think onboarding has to become less about giving someone a tour and more about helping them find where they fit," says Colleen Palomaa, director of fitness at Vida.

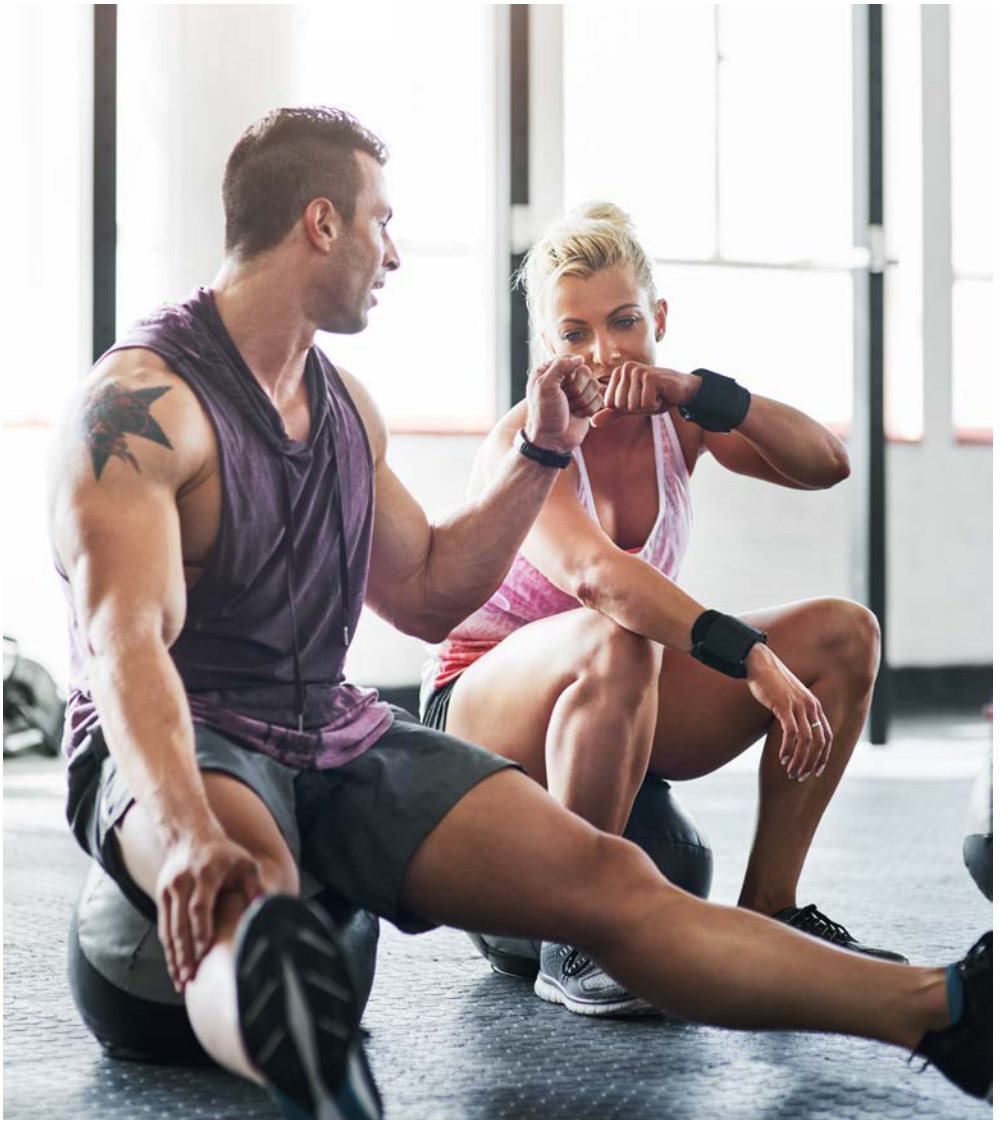
That process looks more like matchmaking than orientation. Staff make introductions, recommend instructors and create opportunities for conversation through post-class refreshments, workshops, local partnerships and community events.

Chad Shaw, chief strategy officer at San Diego-based Fit Clubs, believes that in addition to these things, operators should focus on removing the barriers that prevent relationships from forming in the first place.

"I would start by auditing the member journey for social friction," he says. "Where are people encouraged

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> **The goal isn't simply to predict churn, it's to identify opportunities for meaningful human intervention."** —**Khal Rai**, ABC Fitness



to stay, and where does the experience unintentionally push them out the door?"

Fit Club creates regular and signature events that bring members together outside traditional workouts, from the Fit Mission Beach Run Club to Yoga at the Shell to rooftop wellness events to Fit Formal - a evening with food, drinks and DJs. During the 2026 FIFA World Cup, Fit Club partnered with San Diego FC to host massive watch parties that transformed match viewing into a shared fitness and social experience.

Operators are also rethinking the physical environment. At Proper Hospitality, recovery lounges and rooftop gathering spaces encourage members to linger, while dinners, wellness panels and cultural programming create additional opportunities to connect.

"Community cannot be an add-on," said Jamie Mark, senior vice president of membership, partnerships and PR at Proper Hospitality. "It must be woven into every aspect of the experience, from design and programming to hospitality."

Therme Group similarly uses shared rituals and cultural programming to turn wellness into what Hammond calls a "collective experience."

Shaw says those experiences don't have to be large or expensive to be effective.

"Operators do not necessarily need a new facility or a festival," he says. "It could be a weekly recovery ritual, coffee after a Saturday class, recurring member introductions or a partnership that gives members something meaningful to do together."

WHERE TECH CAN HELP

Technology has an important role to play as well — not by replacing relationships, but by creating more opportunities for them.

ABC Fitness' latest Mid-Year Wellness Watch Report found that 67% of members identify community as their greatest source of motivation and accountability, reinforcing the growing importance of belonging in the wellness experience.

Rai says AI can handle routine administrative work and alert teams to declining attendance or engagement, giving staff more time to build relationships and intervene personally when members may need support.

"The goal isn't simply to predict churn," he explains. "It's to identify opportunities for meaningful human intervention."

At Fit Clubs, that philosophy has influenced the company's membership model. Rather than limiting members to a single location, the company moved to network-wide memberships, giving people more opportunities to build relationships across clubs and communities. Shaw also encourages operators to measure more than attendance when evaluating community initiatives, looking instead at behaviors such as referrals, repeat participation and cross-club engagement to understand whether deeper connections are forming.

Whether those experiences take place inside a large wellness destination or a neighborhood health club, Therme Group's Hammond believes they address something increasingly fundamental.

"It is a human need," he says. "I see social connection following the same path as sleep and nutrition. It will become a true backbone of wellness."

Pvolve sees that need reflected every day. Many members arrive during major life transitions - from pregnancy and postpartum to menopause and healthy aging - and describe finding more than an effective workout. They find a place where they feel understood.

According to Brand, members frequently say Pvolve feels "built for me." That sense of belonging is deeply personal, but it also reinforces a broader truth: people have more choices than ever about where to exercise. Increasingly, they're choosing places where they feel seen, supported and connected. ■

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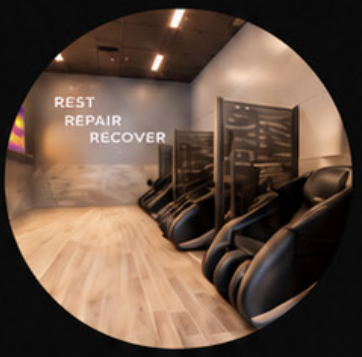
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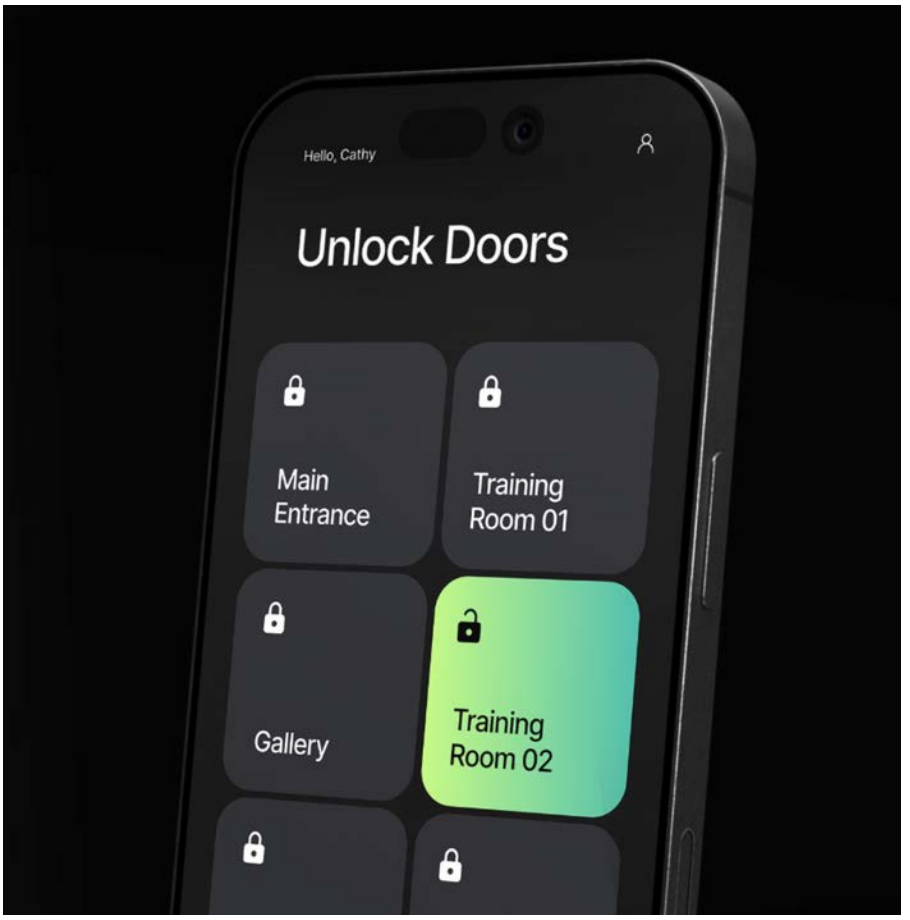
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WHY SMARTER PHYSICAL SECURITY INFRASTRUCTURE PAYS OFF FOR FITNESS OPERATORS

How investing in operational systems before there's a problem can reduce friction, support growth and unlock new opportunities for fitness operators.



FACILITY INFRASTRUCTURE is fundamental to how a fitness operation runs, yet access systems can remain in place and untouched for years for a simple reason: they still work. The doors open, members get in and replacing the technology may feel far less critical than other investments competing for attention.

But there can be a real cost to doing nothing.

Maximilian Schuetz, CEO and co-founder of access control and security platform Kisi, sees outdated infrastructure as a form of technical debt.

"An operator might have a system that technically still works, so replacing it doesn't feel urgent," Schuetz says. "But meanwhile they're adding locations, adding new software, creating workarounds, and building more and more manual processes around an outdated foundation."

Over time, maintaining those workarounds can require more staff, more time and more expense, while making the operation harder to scale.

For Schuetz, that raises a more fundamental question. "Can you actually reach the potential of the business with the infrastructure you have today?"

Because ultimately, he says, the price of outdated infrastructure can extend well beyond the system itself.

"Sometimes the biggest cost of legacy infrastructure isn't what you're spending on it, it's the growth it prevents you from achieving."

ACCESS AS PART OF THE PRODUCT

Access control has traditionally served a straightforward purpose: determine who can enter a facility. Today, connected facility infrastructure can play a much broader role in how fitness operators design and deliver their products.

Convenience is one piece of that evolution. Members accustomed to managing much of their lives from a phone expect the same ease when they arrive at the gym.

"If somebody only has 45 minutes between meetings to work out, they expect to arrive, pull out their phone, get in, and get on with their workout," Schuetz says.

The larger opportunity comes from connecting access directly to the membership itself.

Fitness brands are developing more varied membership models, with access to different locations, extended hours, recovery spaces, premium amenities or specific areas within a club. Modern

> Sometimes the biggest cost of legacy infrastructure isn't what you're spending on it, it's the growth it prevents you from achieving." —**Maximilian Schuetz**, Kisi



facility infrastructure allows those membership levels to translate into physical permissions.

"We've moved from access control simply asking, 'Can this person open this door?' to asking, 'What experience and level of access has this member purchased?'" Schuetz says. "That's a much more strategic role."

Kisi integrates with many of the CRM and membership platforms used by fitness operators, allowing access permissions to connect with the systems already managing the member relationship. A membership upgrade can trigger new permissions, while a cancellation can remove them without requiring staff to manually manage a separate access system.

That creates opportunities to extend hours, introduce new membership tiers and monetize premium areas or amenities while keeping the physical member journey connected to the business model behind it.

The potential return can add up quickly. Consider a gym with 600 members that sees membership grow by 20% after introducing 24/7 access. At an average monthly membership price of $50, those 120 additional members would generate $6,000 in recurring monthly revenue. Against a $199 monthly technology cost, that equates to a potential net gain of $5,801 per month, before factoring in the initial setup investment.



CHANGING THE STAFFING EQUATION

Connected infrastructure can also change how operators think about staffing.

Historically, the hours a fitness facility could remain open were closely tied to the hours someone could physically be there to manage entry. Modern access technology allows operators to separate accessible hours from fully staffed hours, giving members greater flexibility while changing the economics of extending operating hours.

For Schuetz, the goal is to use staff where their presence delivers the greatest value.

"Staff are incredibly valuable in fitness," he says. "They're building community, coaching members, selling memberships, and creating the experience that makes people want to come back."

The question is whether an employee needs to be at a facility at 5 a.m. primarily because someone has to open the door.

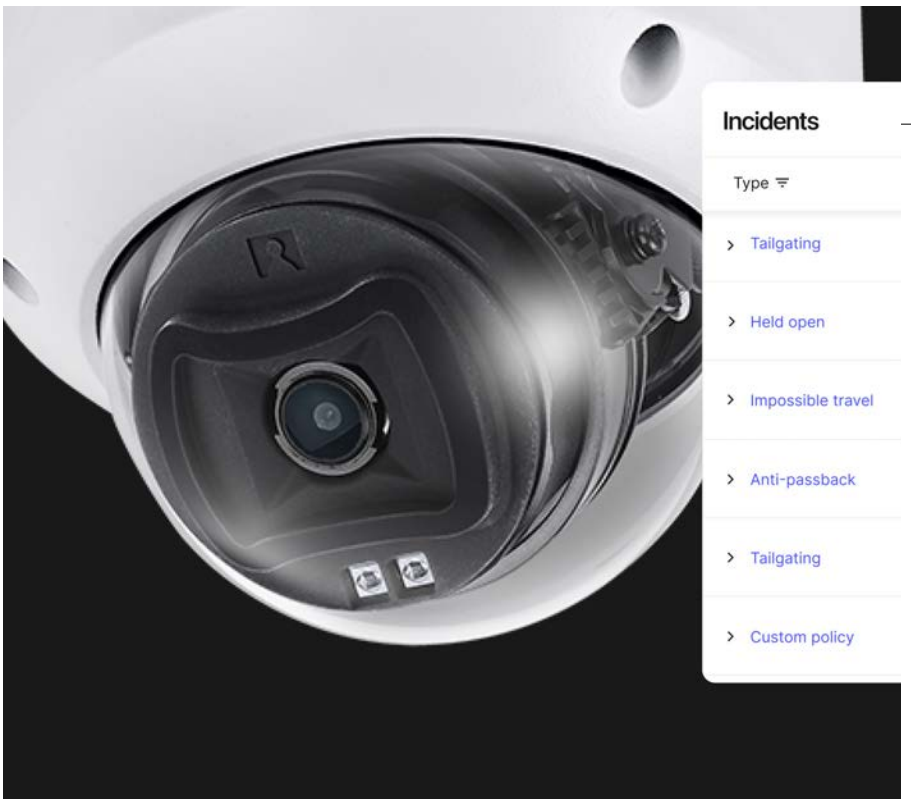
The same principle applies to day-to-day administration. Creating and removing credentials, replacing lost fobs and traveling to resolve access issues all consume staff time. Connecting access with the systems already running the business allows many of those processes to happen automatically or remotely.

"That becomes especially powerful for multi-location operators because you're managing the portfolio centrally instead of treating every facility as its own island," Schuetz says.

The result is less manual intervention and an operating model that becomes easier to replicate as the portfolio grows.

PROTECTING REVENUE AND MANAGING RISK

The same infrastructure that makes authorized access easier also gives operators greater control over unauthorized entry.



Tailgating and membership sharing create a clear source of revenue leakage. A single unauthorized entry may seem relatively minor, but repeated week after week, across multiple locations, the financial impact can add up quickly.

For example, a gym experiencing 18 unauthorized entries per week could be losing the equivalent of roughly $1,559 in monthly day-pass or membership revenue at $20 per visit. After a $129 monthly tailgating detection cost, the potential net impact would be approximately $1,430 per month.

Schuetz believes the conversation should extend beyond the lost membership revenue.

"The more important question is: Do you actually know who is inside your facility?" he says.

That becomes particularly relevant for operators offering extended hours or running partially staffed or unstaffed facilities.

"If something happens at 11 PM, you want to have confidence in your access records," he says. "You want to know who entered the facility, when they entered, and whether they were actually authorized to be there."

Tools such as tailgating detection and integrated cameras can give operators a clearer view of entry activity and help preserve an accurate record of who is using the facility. That information supports incident investigation and policy enforcement and can become important when an unauthorized visitor is injured or causes an issue.

"It's about maintaining trust in the identity layer of your facility - knowing that the people inside are actually supposed to be there," Schuetz says.

FROM ACCESS CONTROL TO FACILITY INTELLIGENCE

Connected infrastructure also creates another asset for operators: a clearer understanding of how members use the physical facility.

Fitness businesses already collect extensive digital information through membership systems, payments, bookings and class attendance. Access data adds a view into what happens inside the physical operation.

"I think this is one of the most exciting areas because physical spaces have historically been surprisingly difficult to understand," he says.

Operators can examine when members arrive, which locations experience the heaviest traffic, where peak periods fall and whether demand extends beyond current operating hours. Comparing patterns across a portfolio can reveal that two seemingly similar clubs are being used very differently.

Those insights can help inform staffing levels, operating hours, space planning, expansion decisions and membership offerings.

"Maybe the data tells you that there's enough demand to justify opening earlier," Schuetz says. "Maybe a location is consistently reaching capacity at certain times. Maybe one site is being used very differently from another."

For Schuetz, this represents a broader evolution in the role facility technology can play.

"We're moving from simply controlling who can enter a building to understanding how the building is actually being used," he says. "That's the difference between access control and what I'd call facility intelligence."

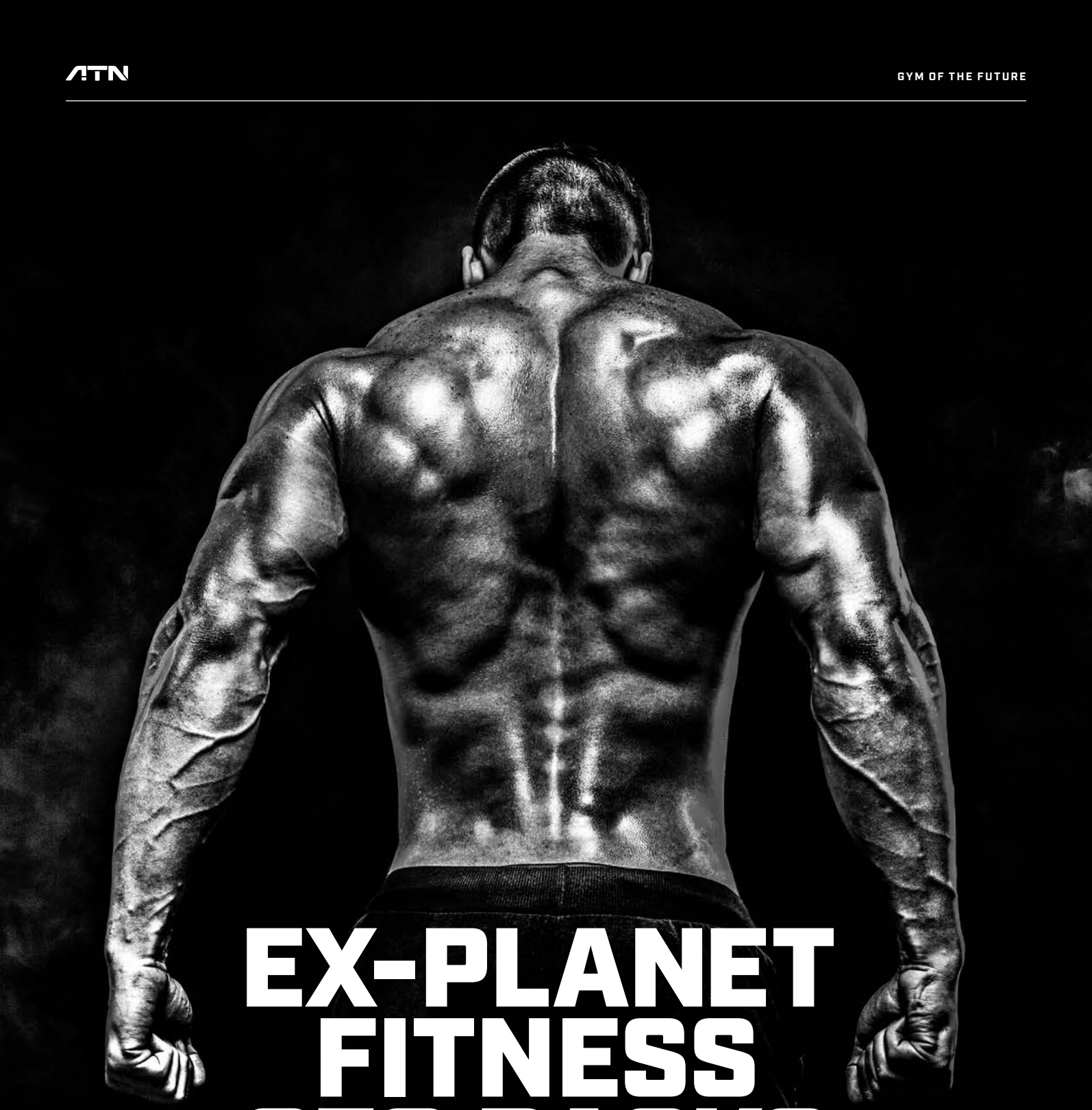
For operators evaluating facility technology, Schuetz recommends starting with the business they want to operate three, five or even 10 years from now.

Can the system scale from five locations to 50? Can it integrate with membership and booking platforms, automate permissions and be managed remotely? And will it connect with technologies the operator hasn't even adopted yet?

"No one knows exactly what their technology stack will look like five years from now," Schuetz says.

The goal is infrastructure flexible enough to support the business as it evolves, without requiring operators to rebuild the foundation every time they add a location, amenity, membership model or new technology.

"Software solves a problem you have today," Schuetz says. "Good infrastructure gives you options for the problems and opportunities you're going to have tomorrow." ●



EX-PLANET FITNESS CEO BACKS ABSOLUTE RECOMP

Chris Rondeau sees parallels between Absolute Recomp, a brash, Dallas-based strength training chain, and Planet Fitness. **by Courtney Rehfeldt**

SHUTTERSTOCK

NABIL SAEED HAS A QUALITY TEST for every gym he designs, and it's not member surveys or net promoter scores. ✡ It involves imagining what a priest would think, should one stumble into the premium, strength-only concept built for the committed lifter Saeed says the big boxes stopped designing for. ✡ "A priest should walk into our clubs and be like, 'Holy fuck, that is the craziest thing I've ever seen,'" said Saeed, the 28-year-old founder of Absolute Recomp (AR), a chain of five lively clubs in Texas' Dallas-Fort Worth area. ✡ He calls it the holy factor, and for those taking note, a mere "oh my god" flunks the test. That overused phrase? That's what you say when you walk into a cool coffee shop nowadays, he said. ✡ It's a test that has at least one notable convert: Chris Rondeau, the former longtime Planet Fitness CEO who joined the low-price gym giant a year after its founding and helped build into the largest gym chain in America.



He's now invested in Absolute Recomp as a partner, board member and chief growth officer, marking his first move since backing Brazilian fitness brand Panobianco late last year.

The move comes as Gen Z-ers like Saeed, the very generation the fitness industry is chasing, is now taking the reins, old enough to build what they want themselves. What they're creating is anything but stuffy; it's something no one in a suit could conjure on their behalf.

It certainly isn't an idea that can be developed in a boardroom with a couple of executives in an afternoon, Rondeau said.

"This is something that takes years and years of trial and error, refinement, building that culture," he said of Absolute Recomp.

KNOCKING DOWN WALLS

Saeed began training his first client as a high school sophomore, after the sudden death of his father in 2015. Training pulled him out of a black hole, he said. His first client happened to be an up-and-coming model who got picked up by Calvin Klein and Nautica. Saeed posted about it on Twitter, and the roster snowballed: one client became 15, then 50. By senior year, he signed his first lease on a 1,500-square-foot space subdivided by 11 walls.

He spent the next four years knocking them down, expanding to 4,000 square feet, then 6,000, then 8,000. When COVID hit, Saeed took the roughly $200,000 he had saved and jumped into equipment liquidation, then recycled the proceeds into the open-gym concept that opened around the turn of 2021 and became AR.

> **"We are maniacal about brand integrity and member experience."** —Tim Kurtz

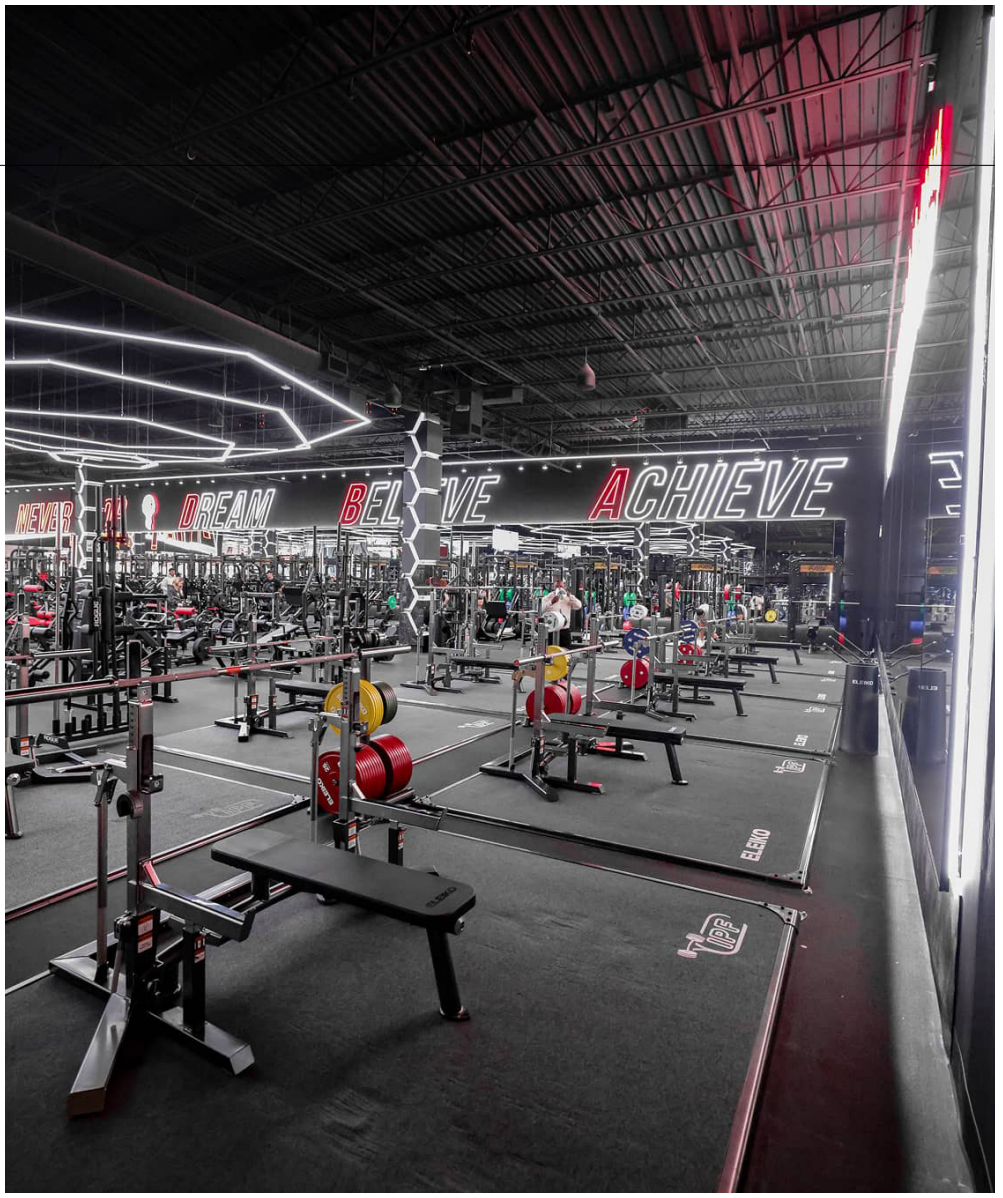
Saeed designs the clubs himself, a sort of callback to when he was 11 or 12 in Dubai, watching the city go vertical.

"At a young age, I knew that the craziest things that the brain could conceive are possible," he said.

What that means, in terms of design at least, are results that aren't easily replicated. It's more than just a vibe-lit, marble-clad gym.

"There's tons of those popping out everywhere," he said. "That's not what we are."

PREVIOUS : SHUTTER STOCK · ABSOLUTE RECOMP



A CHANCE MEETING

On the opening day of the new club, Saeed was working the floor when he walked up to a visitor touring with his son, shook his hand and asked what he did for a living.

The visitor was Tim Kurtz, an accomplished franchise operator from the Planet Fitness orbit, then in the process of exiting the brand post-COVID. Kurtz, a former competitive bodybuilder and powerlifter, had been hitting hardcore gyms with his son.

"This is the energy. This is what a club was like when I was a kid," Kurtz recalled telling his son. "This is what is missing in the market."

A friendship became a mentorship, then a partnership, as Saeed grew the business and eventually told Kurtz he believed the gym could become a national brand. Rondeau entered the picture separately, tipped off at a dinner by an equipment leasing contact who had seen the club's economics and encouraged him to check out AR.

When Rondeau finally walked through the doors, the fitness industry veteran said it brought to mind what Planet Fitness franchisees described upon first discovering the HVLP giant's big box clubs: "a place that they'd never seen exist."

"It was exactly how I felt," Rondeau said.

STRENGTH, WALL TO WALL

AR clubs run a minimum of 35,000 square feet, with leases in negotiation as large as 65,000, and equipment from Watson, Arsenal, Panatta, Rogers and New Tech. No pools or basketball courts, but there are specially designed posing rooms, showers and saunas. Memberships land between $65 and $80 a month.

"We have priced it to make sure that 18-to-21-year-old people can get into our brand and have a longer lifetime value, instead of having to wait till 28, 30 years old before they make enough money to spend $200 a month," Kurtz said.

The content creator-friendly clubs are open 24/7, 365 days a year, with two to three staffers overnight rather than a key-fob system. The membership has also shifted dramatically: what launched at roughly 70% male now runs 43% to 45% female, with women drawn to a floor stocked with 120 leg pieces and 30 glute and hip machines.

"We are maniacal about brand integrity and member experience," Kurtz said.

Day passes are available for $25, as well as the option for 5-day and 7-day passes, allowing people to travel all over to visit AR.

DISCIPLINE AT SCALE

Four AR clubs are on target to open this year, with hopes of roughly doubling that pace and adding 10 to 15 more the following year. Two joint ventures with franchisees are underway in Colorado and Illinois, but the brand is not hiring franchise salespeople and expects to remain primarily corporate-owned.

Nine times out of 10, future franchisees will be operators the trio has known for years, the team said.

Rondeau, who watched Planet Fitness wait two decades and roughly 1,500 U.S. stores before crossing into Canada, endorses the discipline. International ambitions can wait, as the white space at home is too large, he said.

The fitness business, he pointed out, started backwards, opening with hardcore temples like Gold's and World Gym when the market needed beginner-friendly clubs first.

"The level and propensity of Gen Z to work out far exceeds any other generation before ... they're craving to work out is far exceeding anything, even Millennials," Rondeau said.

"Gen Z was the smallest membership group of Planet Fitness until Covid hit, and now it's the largest in just a few short years," he added.

He sees AR as a correction the industry has been waiting on, back to a serious strength club – the kind a priest might swear about. ■

SHUTTERSTOCK

AI AGENTS ARE BREAKING FITNESS'S CAPACITY CEILING

ABC Fitness is betting on agentic AI to remove capacity constraints and help operators turn more demand into measurable business results.



FITNESS OPERATORS are leaving potential business on the table.

A 2026 secret-shop study of 105 fitness facilities found that just 31% of calls were answered by a live person, while 88% of leads received no follow-up within 72 hours. None of the gyms in the study were using AI.

For Anna Rodriguez, vice president of product AI, API and MCP at ABC Fitness, the findings point to a fundamental limitation in the traditional fitness sales and service model.

"In many gyms, the same person is expected to wear all the hats: greet members coming in, answer the phone, answer emails, answer texts, respond to leads, follow up with prospects, handle member questions, handle past dues and billing/membership tasks, and many other operational tasks," Rodriguez says. "Even great employees can't be everywhere at once."

That capacity constraint has long dictated how quickly and consistently fitness businesses can respond to prospects and members. If 10 leads arrive at once, the staff has 10 people to follow up with. If 100 arrive, the workload grows with them.

Agentic AI changes that equation. Unlike traditional automation built around predetermined actions or chatbots designed primarily to answer questions, an AI agent can understand what someone is trying to accomplish and work toward that outcome. It can determine an appropriate next step, take permitted actions across systems, continue engaging with a prospect or member, follow up and bring in an employee when needed.

ABC Fitness is taking a fitness-specific approach to that technology.

"We're building purpose-built agents for fitness," Rodriguez says. "They have clearly defined jobs, access only to the information and actions required for a given task and operate within security and business guardrails."

ABC AI Agents are powered by Replify, the agentic AI company ABC Fitness acquired in July. Replify's technology was built specifically for fitness and wellness operators and can handle high-volume interactions across voice, text, email and chat, including capturing and qualifying leads, booking tours, following up on missed calls and handling member requests. ABC Fitness is now integrating those capabilities into its broader fitness technology ecosystem.

> The biggest change is that the prospect and member journey no longer has to stop and wait for an employee to become available,"
> —**Anna Rodriguez**, ABC Fitness



REMOVING THE CAPACITY CONSTRAINT

Gold's Gym DC Metro offers an early example of what that can mean operationally.

The 20-location operator was dealing with missed calls, slow follow-up and leads slipping through the cracks while general managers balanced sales responsibilities with running their clubs. After implementing Replify, Gold's Gym reported nearly 10 times more leads captured during peak months. Its sales cycle also fell from roughly 30 days to three to five days.

"AI agents freed our general managers from their desks, gave prospects answers right away, and made our customer experience more consistent," Chris Prevatte, vice president of sales and operations at Gold's Gym DC Metro, said in the case study.

Rodriguez sees the results as an example of what happens when engagement is no longer limited by available staff time.

"Historically, the volume of outreach a gym could do was directly tied to how much time its staff had available," she says. "Sometimes you have more leads than the team can possibly follow up with, and sometimes the team has capacity but there simply isn't a new lead in front of them at that moment."

AI changes that longstanding equation for operators. Engagement capacity no longer has to rise and fall with available staff time. Whether 10 prospects inquire or 1,000, an agent can scale with demand without requiring a corresponding increase in workload.

"If you can engage someone while their interest is high, answer their questions and help them take the next step, you dramatically reduce the amount of momentum that gets lost between initial interest and a visit or sale," Rodriguez says.



DECIDING WHAT NEEDS ATTENTION

The larger opportunity goes beyond responding to leads faster.

Rodriguez sees agents taking on some of the orchestration that currently falls to operators and their teams: recognizing when the next step in a customer journey hasn't happened, acting when appropriate and identifying where an employee's attention could have the greatest impact.

That could be a prospect who never booked a tour, someone who toured three days ago but hasn't joined or a member who needs human support.

"The biggest change is that the prospect and member journey no longer has to stop and wait for an employee to become available," Rodriguez says.

It also changes how operators can deploy their teams. Rodriguez sees AI agents taking ownership of work defined by speed, repetition, scale and reliable follow-through, leaving employees with more capacity for interactions that require judgment, empathy and trust.

"One of the most valuable things AI can do is actually protect that experience," she says. "If the person at the front desk isn't constantly answering phones or working through follow-up lists, they can focus on the member standing in front of them."

MEASURING AI RESULTS

For operators evaluating AI agents, Rodriguez says the measurement should be tied to the job the agent is performing.

For sales, that could include speed-to-lead, contact rates, appointments booked, show rates, conversion, sales-cycle length and revenue. Service agents could be measured by resolution rates, customer satisfaction or missed calls recovered.

But Rodriguez points to another measure that can be easy to overlook: staff capacity.

"How many hours are you giving back to employees, and what are they able to do with that time instead?" she says.

The second half of that question is important. Saving employee time is one measure; understanding what that additional capacity produces for the business gives operators a clearer picture of the return.

"Ultimately, we shouldn't measure AI based on how many conversations it has," Rodriguez says. "We should measure whether it is improving the underlying business outcome the agent was designed to influence."

As agents gain more context, Rodriguez expects them to become useful across more of the customer and member journey, helping people discover services, complete tasks and stay engaged while surfacing opportunities that can be difficult for operators to identify across large amounts of member and operational data.

Ultimately, Rodriguez sees agents serving as a co-pilot for operators, helping determine where attention is needed instead of requiring teams to orchestrate every action across every prospect, member and location.

"Instead of operators having to constantly ask, 'What am I forgetting?' or 'Who should I follow up with today?'" she says, "the system can help identify and execute the next best actions." ●

AMERICA'S GYM BOOM HITS NEW HIGHS

The HFA's new U.S. Health & Fitness Consumer Report found that 81 million Americans belong to a gym, studio or other fitness facility, good for 26.1% of the population. **by Ani Freedman**



AMERICANS CONTINUE TO ENGAGE with fitness more than ever before, according to the Health & Fitness Association's newest consumer report. ✡ Per the report, memberships hit an all-time high in 2025, with 81 million Americans belonging to a gym, studio or other fitness facility — a penetration rate of 26.1%, up from the prior year's then-record total of 25%. ✡ The number of Americans who used a fitness facility last year climbed to an impressive 100 million when taking into account non-members who visited via day passes, guest visits and other flexible options.



Fitness facility attendance also hit a record level, with an estimated 7 billion total visits in 2025, passing the pre-pandemic peak in 2019. Growth in visits and memberships was seen across all generations, income brackets and genders.

Engagement numbers are surging as well. The number of gym-goers who didn't use their membership in 2025 fell to an all-time low, dropping from around 10% to 4.6%.

The report is based on HFA's long-running national tracking study that surveys approximately 18,000 US residents ages six and older annually.

"What this data makes clear is that fitness facilities can no longer be considered a niche amenity but part of the basic infrastructure that Americans rely on to manage their health, stress, and sense of community," said HFA vice president of research Anton Severin. "Even in an uncertain economy, people keep going to the gym because they see real value in what these spaces provide," he added.

GEN Z SURGES BUT BOOMERS LOVE THE GYM, TOO

Keeping up with the fitness and wellness lifestyle shift among younger demographics, Gen Z adults ages 18–24 had the highest membership penetration of any age group at 35.5%. That said, adults 65 and older were the fastest-growing age group, growing 8.6% year-over-year.

It's likely a good share of those memberships belong to high-value, low-price (HVLP) gyms like Crunch, Planet Fitness, PureGym and EoS Fitness. While consumer spending data reflects an across-the-board increase in fitness and wellness spending, according to private equity and investment banking leaders, HVLPs are benefitting the most, as members see a budget-friendly price that includes a growing number of amenities.

"What this data makes clear is that fitness facilities can no longer be considered a niche amenity but part of the basic infrastructure that Americans rely on to manage their health, stress, and sense of community." —**Anton Severin**, HFA

STRENGTH TRAINING, PICKLEBALL LEAD THE WAY

How members use those memberships is also changing, according to HFA. Free weight usage — dumbbells, barbells and kettlebells — grew faster than any other equipment category since 2021.

Other fitness modalities are seeing changes as well. Pickleball is unsurprisingly on the rise, with a 21.3% boost from 2024 to 7.6 million members, and nearly two-thirds saying they play weekly.

Low-impact workouts are continuing their explosive growth, as yoga remained the most widely practiced activity at 17.7 million people, while Pilates and Tai Chi continued climbing steadily. ■

PREVIOUS AND THIS PAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK

HOW VASA FITNESS MASTERED THE GYM SECTOR'S MOST IMPORTANT CATEGORY

The rapidly growing gym brand credits equipment provider Life Fitness/Hammer Strength with building out floors that center today's most important modality



VASA FITNESS, the rapidly growing high-value low-price (HVLP) gym operation, isn't skipping leg day.

In fact, over the past few years, the brand revamped several of its gyms with a primary focus on strength training, particularly for the lower body. The shift was an intentional strategy designed to provide consumers with outcomes that underpin both their long-term health and short-term aesthetic goals.

"Members are gravitating toward these strength areas as a home base and building their workouts around them," said Chris Griebe, chief operating officer at VASA Fitness. "This makes them not just an accessory exercise, but a core one."

To create that anchor, VASA turned to Life Fitness/Hammer Strength, a leading fitness equipment vendor.

"Life Fitness/Hammer Strength has the most reliable offering in terms of lower body strength products," said Gina Masciopinto, director of strategic accounts at Life Fitness/Hammer Strength. "We worked in tandem with VASA to drive towards a consultative outcome."

Along with stronger quads, glutes and calves, the collaboration also resulted in improved health results, more efficient gym environments and a better differentiator for VASA as it continues to expand.

A MODALITY YOU NEED TO NAIL

Lower body strength carries well beyond the squat rack, supporting everything from daily movement to general athletic skills. Masciopinto argues it leads to "higher gains" and "better overall performance."

Nevertheless, gym operators often mishandle it or fail to recognize its potential to deliver widespread, satisfying results.

"Lower body is the area that members most often skip or do wrong in a traditional floor with old, outdated equipment," Griebe said. "However, lower body equipment is the highest payoff muscle group for everyday functionality, injury resistance and frankly, it gets the aesthetic results members care about most right now."

This gap between vitality and execution largely encouraged VASA to partner with Life Fitness/Hammer Strength.

INSIDE THE REDESIGN

Modern VASA gyms now include a variety of Life Fitness/Hammer Strength lower-body strength machines, such as the V-Squat, Hack Squat, Ground Base Multi-

> The experience we're building is a floor that reads as one continuous performance environment that blends cardio, strength and recovery, but with the focus on pure strength. —**Chris Griebe**, VASA



Squat and the new Pendulum X-Squat. Elements of the Insignia, Hammer Plate-Loaded and Huge Power Play lines can also be found, as well as dedicated performance lifting areas which the brand calls "Strong."

"Traditional gym floors treat strength as part of the gym floor, not the core of the experience like VASA does," Griebe said.

"We wanted a space that signaled strength training as its core, not a side amenity."

VASA also added Life Fitness/Hammer Strength's HD Air bikes, which still challenge lower body muscle groups while bringing a cardio element to the table. Strength, however, remains the central pillar.

"VASA really focuses on enhancing the member journey as it pertains to strength and performance," Masciopinto added. "It's at the center of the experience. As you move through a VASA club, you are greeted with so many different options to choose from."



COHESIVE AND CONVENIENT

But even as Life Fitness/Hammer Strength added new pieces to VASA's floors, it was careful not to build a maze in the process. By putting such a sought-after concept like strength at the center and other modalities around the margins, Life Fitness/Hammer Strength created a free-flowing environment for members to move through.

"They don't have to move through our gym in silos," Griebe said. "The experience we're building is a floor that reads as one continuous performance environment that blends cardio, strength and recovery, but with the focus on pure strength. So, when members move from a Hammer Strength rack to an HD Bike, it feels like a natural progression rather than a trek across the club."

These proximity and flow-related perks are vital to long-term member retention, Griebe argues.

"Members want to experience classes where they can combine strength training, high-intensity cardio training and recovery all in one," he went on. "If these experiences live in disconnected corners of the club, it makes it difficult for members to navigate and we could lose them."

Life Fitness/Hammer Strength equipment makes advancement easier from a physical skills standpoint as well. By including a diverse range of equipment, Griebe insists VASA now has the capacity to meet consumers at a wider variety of fitness levels and help them progress. That's helpful in attracting and retaining gym-goers of all kinds.

"Life Fitness/Hammer Strength offer this diversity with their selectorized and plate-loaded strength equipment, free weights and functional performance equipment," he said. "It helps our members progress through their fitness journey and we're able to attract a diverse membership in all of our clubs. That philosophy guides us. It's accessible but genuinely effective. It's exactly why Hammer Strength/Life Fitness was the right partner. It let us build a floor that works not only for our first-time users, but former college athletes, all in the same hour."

REFLECTING ON THE FUTURE

VASA expects strength-focused floors that are simple to pass through, improve yourself on, and of course, use to hit those lower body muscles, to become even more crucial to operator success in the coming years.

"Strength and performance isn't a trend in the industry," Griebe said. "It is the industry now and Life Fitness/Hammer Strength understands that."

Griebe shared that all VASA clubs built in 2026 and beyond will have dedicated Strong areas and functional performance racks along with performance cardio amenities and HIIT classes.

"We are here to help bring the vision to life with the best equipment on the market," Masciopinto added. ●